American Drama

Have you ever gone to the theater or a movie and felt as if life were unfolding before you? Dramas that realistically portray events have a way of hitting a nerve. American playwrights, in particular, are known for writing dramas that reveal the truth of our everyday experience, and sometimes our not-so-everyday experience.

The Rise of American Drama

Though drama is one of the oldest forms of literature, it was one of the last of the literary genres to develop in the United States. The Puritans in New England regarded theatrical performances as frivolous, so few plays were staged in the 1600s. During the 18th and 19th centuries, drama gradually became an accepted form of entertainment. However, most of the plays performed in the United States were imported from Europe or were adapted from novels.

In 1920 the Broadway production of Eugene O’Neill’s Beyond the Horizon marked a turning point in presenting true-to-life characters who were struggling to understand their lives. Building on O’Neill’s achievement, American playwrights Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller created dramas in the 1930s and 1940s that met with critical and popular success. Following World War II, American dramatists Edward Albee and Lorraine Hansberry made significant contributions to the theater. Arthur Miller’s 1953 The Crucible (page 134) is an example of a modern drama that portrays events from Puritan times.

Conventions of Drama

The two main types of drama are tragedy and comedy. A tragedy recounts the downfall of a main character, and a comedy is light and humorous in tone, usually ending happily. Many dramas combine elements of both. In addition, most dramas follow similar conventions, or rules, in how they are presented. An understanding of basic dramatic conventions can help you imagine the performance as you read.

**Plot and Structure**

The plot in drama, as in fiction, introduces events and character interactions that produce a conflict, or struggle between opposing forces. The conflict builds as the action intensifies throughout the play’s acts and scenes, finally reaching a peak and then resolution. Each scene serves as a building block in the stages of the plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.