



LIFE·PAC®

Language Arts

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LANGUAGE ARTS 1107

AMERICAN DRAMA

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AMERICAN DRAMA

Drama in America was slow in developing. In the colonial period drama was almost nonexistent. Today drama flourishes in many different forms. How was this development accomplished?

In this LIFE PAC® you will learn more about the development of American drama. First, you will review briefly the history of drama; then, you will study the five historical periods of development. The second section will explain what drama is and what elements comprise it. You will learn the general structure of a play and the proper way to read a play.

In the third section you will learn a little about Thornton Wilder and read his play, *Our Town*, applying the information and techniques you have learned.

OBJECTIVES

Read these objectives. The objectives tell you what you will be able to do when you have successfully completed this LIFE PAC.

When you have finished this LIFE PAC, you should be able to:

1. Explain the early history of drama.
2. Trace the development of drama in America.
3. Define drama.
4. Identify and explain the elements of drama.
5. Explain the general structure of a play.
6. Describe how to read a play.
7. Relate facts about Thornton Wilder.
8. Describe certain elements of drama in *Our Town*.
9. Identify certain dramatic devices and techniques used in *Our Town*.
10. Explain particular events or actions in *Our Town*.
11. Describe the various functions of the Stage Manager in *Our Town*.
12. Explain the conflicts and the theme expressed in *Our Town*.
13. Explain the universal appeal of *Our Town*.

Survey the LIFE PAC. Ask yourself some questions about this study. Write your questions here.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA

The history of drama is quite interesting. Drama has long been used to express man's experiences, feelings, and thoughts. In this section you will briefly review the early history of drama. The development of drama in America will be emphasized. You will study its beginnings in the colonial period, follow its advances in the period after the Revolution, notice the setbacks in the period between 1865 and 1914, discover the birth of the "new drama" in the twentieth century, and become acquainted with almost unlimited kinds of drama and methods of presentation in the theater today.

SECTION OBJECTIVES

Review these objectives. When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain the early history of drama.
2. Trace the development of drama in America.

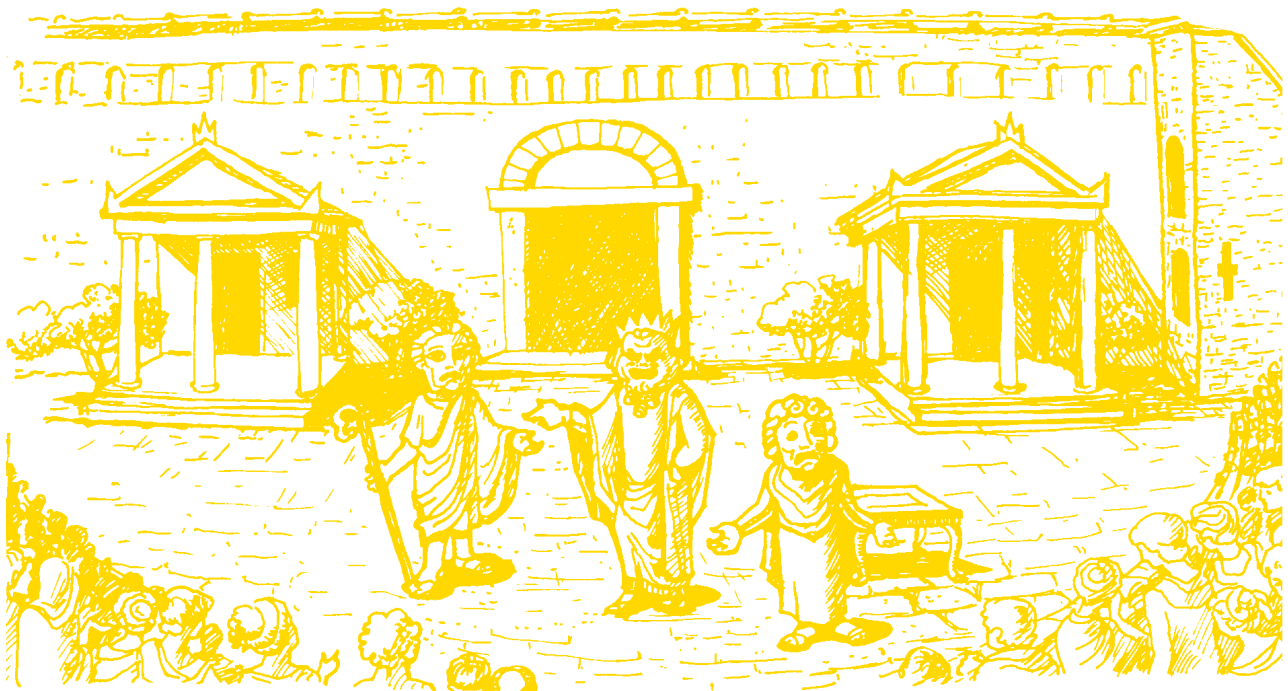
VOCABULARY

Study these words to enhance your learning success in this section.

play

vernacular

Note: All vocabulary words in this LIFEPAK appear in **boldface** print the first time they are used. If you are unsure of the meaning when you are reading, study the definitions given.



Greek Drama

BRIEF HISTORY OF DRAMA

Drama is one of the oldest forms of literature; and, though its prehistoric origins have been lost to us, early drama probably grew out of primitive religious rites. The earliest written records of drama come from ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C., where actors performing in large open air amphitheaters presented plays based on the Greeks' pagan reli-

gions. All the actors were men wearing masks to represent various characters they portrayed. Although both tragedy and comedy were produced, only a few of the tragedies have survived to be studied today.

The Roman drama that succeeded Greek plays three to five centuries later was based on secular, not religious, attitudes. Many of these plays exist in translation today because of the great revival of interest in the Roman classics by the scholars of the English Renaissance.

The church kept drama alive during the Middle Ages in Europe through the presentation of *mystery*, *morality*, and *miracle plays*, which were particularly popular during religious festivals and holidays. These three kinds of drama were religious in nature but dealt with slightly different subjects. The *mystery* plays were reenactments of Biblical stories, for example, the story of Noah or the birth of Christ. *Morality* plays were, on the other hand, allegories in which the characters were not individuals, but representations of the virtues and vices of man (Greed, Envy, Good Deeds, and so on). The *miracle* play was always based on the life of one of the saints. These three types of plays, often crude and always simple because they were directed at an uneducated audience did however, keep alive the tradition of drama in the Western world.

The Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England saw a great dramatic revival of the old Greek and Roman classics and a new interest in a native British drama. English playwrights seized their opportunity to combine the best of these two drama forms to create the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the best in English literature and possibly in the world. Chief among these playwrights was William Shakespeare, the most respected playwright of all times. The theater of this period was quite popular; and, though the actors were still all men, the masks had disappeared; and costumes, props, and sets had taken their place. During the Renaissance the theater did begin to come of age. Although drama had its ups and downs in the years that followed, it was at last firmly established as an acceptable and valuable form of literature.

Complete these statements.

- 1.1 Earliest written records of drama come from _____.
- 1.2 The earliest drama was probably related to _____.
- 1.3 Roman drama was more _____ in subject and tone.
- 1.4 By the Middle Ages drama was encouraged by the _____.
- 1.5 Three types of religious plays include a. _____, b. _____, and c. _____.
- 1.6 Drama, in the Renaissance, at last became _____.

Write *true* or *false* in the blank.

- 1.7 _____ Only men were allowed to act in the Grecian amphitheaters of the fifth century.
- 1.8 _____ Many Greek tragedies and comedies have survived to this day.
- 1.9 _____ Morality plays were reenactments of Biblical stories.
- 1.10 _____ Miracle plays were always based on the lives of saints.
- 1.11 _____ Masks had disappeared by Elizabethan times and women were allowed to act.

DRAMA IN AMERICA

For various reasons American drama was slow in developing. The history of American drama may be divided into five periods: the colonial period, the period after the Revolution, the period between 1865 and 1914, the early twentieth century (1914-1940), and the theater today.

The colonial period. The very strong Puritan influence prevailing in America in colonial times definitely did not favor the development of drama in this country. The Puritans, who had once managed to close the theaters in England for eighteen years, still regarded actors and acting as immoral and actually passed laws against public performances in many of the colonies. Also preventing the growth of early American drama were two factors: a lack of funds to finance theaters and the absence of any established audience to support such a theater. Another factor involved was the old, but still influential, prejudice regarding the theater as a part of the immoralities of king and court—a rather natural attitude in a young country with no love for any kind of monarchy.

Nevertheless, printed plays were allowed and did find their way into college libraries, such as those of Harvard and William and Mary. A few theaters arose in the South. Williamsburg, Virginia, supported a theater by 1716 and Charleston, South Carolina, had one by 1735. In the eighteenth century, prior to and during the Revolutionary War, some plays were publicly staged. These productions, however, were based on adaptations of classical or English works: no native drama was written at this time.

The period after the Revolution. After 1783 there was a gradual lessening of prejudice against the theater, and a few scattered companies of actors began performing in the larger cities. Neither public support nor international copyright laws favored the development of a national drama. The theater did establish itself at this time, however, and began to build an audience and to develop an increasing number of native American actors, managers, and playwrights.



Scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*