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Centuries of a phenomenal stage

English Drama from Renaissance to Victorian age

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Abstract

Drama has always been a universal language that addresses the human nature, and uses raw emotion to engage the audience, mind and soul. The following study aims to explore the evaluation that English Drama witnessed throughout four important eras of English literary history: Renaissance, Restoration, Romanticism, and Victorian.

The main concern of this research is to provide a detailed analysis of all aspects of English Drama, including plot, characters, and themes_ as well as its history and methods; and to introduce the different literary schools and dramatic types which were popular in those eras, relying on several respected literary and academic resources

It shall also highlight the most prominent figures of each era, alongside their major literary works. All mentioned works could set a perfect practical model on their genre and a useful tool to study it.

المستخلص

لطالما كان المسرح لغة عالمية تخاطب الطبيعة البشرية وتوظّف الشعور الخام لتُشرك الجمهور عقلاً وروحاً. تهدف الدراسة التالية إلى استكشاف التطور الذي شهدته الدراما الإنكليزية خلال أربع حقب هامّة من التاريخ الأدبي الإنكليزي، وهي حقب النهضة واستعادة الملكية والرومانتيكية والعصر الفكتوري.

إنّ الهدف الرئيس لهذا البحث هو تزويد تحليل مُفصّل عن جميع مظاهر المسرح، ومن ضمنها الحبكة والشخصيات والمواضيع؛ فضلاً عن تاريخه ونظريّاته، والتعريف بالمدارس الأدبية والأصناف الدراميّة المختلفة التي انتشرت في تلك الحقب، بالاعتماد على عدّة مصادر أدبيّة وأكاديميّة مرموقة.

كما سوف يُسلّط الضوء على أهم الشخصيات البارزة في كل حقبة، فضلاً عن أهم أعمالهم الأدبية. بإمكان جميع الأعمال المذكورة أن تُقدّم نموذجاً عملياً ممتازاً على صنفهم الأدبي وأداةً مفيدةً لدراسته.

1.1 Introduction

Literature- and drama in particular, encapsulates the emotions, consciousness, and the very existence of the human being, it reflects our experiences and ambitions; that is why throughout the centuries and all over the world, writers expressed their deepest thoughts and wildest feelings in similar ways. This concept presents an important question: Is drama a mirror to the human mind, or is it an active factor that affects society and its collective consciousness (Cary, 1985:390).

The term "drama" itself comes from the Greek language, and means "I do" or "I act". The origin of drama is deep-rooted in religion, it started as a means to simplify the stories of the Latin-written Bible, when clergymen portrayed these stories

creating what is called 'Miracle and Mystery plays" that were performed as a part of religious celebrations, such as Christmas or Easter (Wright & Traister, 1986:37).

It is without a doubt that Drama went through the most interesting path of change; from religious plays to festival circles, from a sophisticated dramatic age to a puritan complete censorship, drama always found new ways to engage the audience (Barbara L. Parker, 2009:279).

This research aims to work as your guide through the different types of characters, plots, themes and important figures of different literary schools, it will help you understand and explore the fascinating evolution of drama throughout four significant eras of English literature: Renaissance, Restoration, Romanticism, and Victorian.

2. Literature review

The history of English Renaissance theatre dates back to 1562 and is rather extensive. The event kicked off with a production of The Tragedie of Gorboduc (1561), a drama co-written by Thomas Norton (1532-1584) as well as Thomas Sackville (1536-1608). At this time, going to the theatre considered one of England's most popular activities, regardless of social standing. Prior to this, only the upper classes could afford to go to the theatre (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:249).

The reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603), who ruled England from 1558 to 1603, is often considered the apogee of the English Renaissance in theatre. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was a patron of the arts as well as was said to have had a flare for the theatrical in her own right. She oversaw a period of tremendous growth for the theatre industry throughout her rule.

Several theatres sprung up in London (and other locations) and professional theatre groups formed. Rich patrons, including the Queen, underwrote the operations of several of these businesses. Because of this shift, theatre groups no longer needed to tour extensively to break even. This freed them up to focus on creating compelling theatrical productions. Playwrights and performers had even more freedom to create the works they envisioned as the theatrical industry flourished and grew less dependent on spectators.

2.1 Renaissance (1485-1649)

The Renaissance came as a cultural reaction to the "dark" Middle Ages which spread over Europe for centuries; a reaction that was led by some of the most astounding thinkers and authors of the time. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, literature was "reborn" out of the rich classical literary heritage of Greek and Latin Drama. The Renaissance began in Italy and soon spread out to France and all of Europe, rising with the society through art, literature, and philosophy; and bridging the gap between the Middle Ages and the modern-day civilization (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:79).

The Renaissance ended with the Counter-Formation movement, when the Catholic Church censored artists in response to the Protestant Formation_ but not without leaving a golden mark in English literature; and particularly: drama (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:538).

Drama flourished during the Renaissance, from the flat amateur Medieval Drama, presented by clergymen, into a sophisticated form of art presented by real actors in real acting companies. Renaissance literature was highly influenced by the Classical Theater and tried to imitate its techniques and adjust them in a way that

would suit the thought and perspective of the Renaissance audience (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:549).

Nature was once again an important theme of English Drama, which provided the playwrights with the "perfect" setting for their scenes; though nature appeared to be domesticated by man. The Renaissance presented a drama in which God is no longer in the center, instead, it centered man and focused on communicating human feelings and thought. Humanism was an important theme at the time, comedy and history plays as well, but the major theme was tragedy (Hunter, 1973:123).

2.2 Tragedy

Tragedy thrived as one of the most popular genres during the Renaissance. Playwrights followed the Aristotelian five-act structure, in which the conflict keeps rising until it reaches the climax and ends in Act five. Renaissance Tragedy never settled for a single straightforward conflict, rather reflected the struggles of the protagonist and characters in several plots and sub-plots that covered all aspects of the protagonist's life (DiehL, 1980:27).

Therefore, a typical Renaissance Tragedy would show external conflicts that dealt with affairs of the state such as wars and alliances; but would also express internal conflicts which consist of the protagonist's fears and insecurities. The main conflict is only solved through death or sacrifice; as in *Romeo and Juliet* for instance (Travitsky, 1990:171).

In terms of characters, Renaissance Tragedies adopted the *Aristotelian* "tragic hero" who combined both the noble and flawed characteristics. A tragic hero is a noble character that is, in most cases, royal or aristocratic; and who is weighted by his

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responsibilities to both his country and family. The tragic hero is a strong, well-spoken character in a high rank that often has the role of a leader; nevertheless, the tragic hero is still shown as a human being burdened by a fatal flaw that will lead to his downfall (Stallybrass, 1987:127).

This personality flaw, according to *Aristotle*, left a feeling of pity in the audience, that the tragic hero is someone they can understand and relate to. Some of the most infamous flaws in Renaissance tragedy are *Romeo*'s reckless passion, *Hamlet's* indecisiveness, and *Dr. Faustus's* greedy ambition; which bring us to the most prominent figures of Renaissance Drama: *Shakespeare* and *Marlowe*, whose works left an outstanding literary legacy we are still enjoying and studying to this very day, centuries after it was first published and performed (Huth, 2014: 169).

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), is still regarded as the greatest English writer- and dramatist in particular. He had the ability to reflect our deepest thoughts and fears, and shape the range of complicated human emotions into a living character (Kernan, 1974:25).

Even though *Shakespeare* published numerous successful comedies and history plays, still he is mostly known for his Tragedies: *Hamlet, Othello*, and *Macbeth*_ to name a few. *Shakespeare* followed the *Aristotelian* model of the five-actand the noble tragic hero who eventually falls into a gruesome death either by an external pressure, like fate, or by his own flaws (Smith, 1978).

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), and despite his short dramatic career, was the most famous and successful playwright of his generation and was regarded as *Shakespeare's* most important predecessors. *Marlowe* is highly noted for his contribution to the "dramatic blank verse" in English drama, which "enabled

playwrights to vary the kind of language spoken by their characters, and hence to allow the audience to hear different patterns of language for different purposes". (Stallybrass, 1987:121).

Between truth and imagination, *Marlowe* wrote some astonishing Tragedies, *"Tragedies with superhuman heroes who stretch the limits of human life in several ways"*. A fine example of this would be *Doctor Faustus (1588)*, which is considered "the first Christian tragedy", since the play has a Christian setting in which the protagonist gives in to the temptation.

In *Doctor Faustus,* the protagonist deals with supernatural events, and instead of speaking to other characters or to the audience, he speaks to his soul, to hell and even to the devil himself . Another prominent example of tragedy is *Thomas Kyd*'s *"The Spanish Tragedy"* that is a great source of the spirit of the Renaissance (Pincombe, 2010:12).

2.3 RESTORATION (1660 – 1689)

It is the time when the monarchy was restored in England, with *Charles I's* son was invited to return from his exile in France, and then he was crowned as King *Charles II.* The spirit of the Restoration was one of reason and peace; people only wanted to live a simple life and avoid another war, and this was reflected in their literature (Hopkins, 2016:146).

By the beginning of the Civil War, the long parliament ordered the closure of all the puritans closed all theaters for eighteen long years. When the monarchy was restored, drama was once again encouraged; and even though there were only two public licensed theaters: the Theater Royal and the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theater", but

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this was considered as a victory of the Restoration and an important achievement (Sara Munson Deats, 2009:375).

Comedy was a significant characteristic of Restoration's drama, but it was not the result of shallow limited thinking; on the contrary, realism was a major means which writers used to expose the vices and flaws of society. Comedy of manners was sometimes known as the Restoration comedy, because it helped define the literary spirit of the era (Barbara L. Parker, 2009:279).

Women had a strong voice in the Restoration community, and female characters were played by women for the first time in English drama, which was yet another revolutionary aspect of the Restoration drama. *Margaret Hughes* was the first woman to appear on the English stage, playing the part of *Desdemona* in *Shakespeare's Othello*. Before that, female roles were still played by young boys as was the case since religious plays (DiMatteo, 2008:1411).

2.4 Comedy of Manners

This dramatic genre dealt with the faults of the contemporary society and social class through comedy. It started by criticizing the morals of the men and women who returned with *Charles II* from France, and hence its name was originated as the *comedy of manners*. In this genre, a character is either foolish and gullible, or else they would be amoral and exploitative. Through themes of trickery and deceit, comedy of manners criticized society's foundations, including economy, family, and the marriage institution (Dailey, 2022:126).

Comedy of manners tackled controversial topics like adultery and using sexuality in order to achieve a social rank. *"Gossip and rumors, hypocritical nature*

and false pretensions of the people were common subjects of the comedy of manners. Areas such as marriage, love, adultery, fortune hunting were also portrayed in these plays ". (Clark, 2004:312).

You need to have a good background on the society of the Restoration for you to understand and enjoy watching a comedy of manners play; otherwise, certain scenes may appear to be illogical or out of place for you as a modern age reader (Nardizzi, 2016:195).

William Congreve's *'The Way of the World'* criticized the corrupted marriage institution of the Restoration, that was built on hypocrisy rather than love. *'The way of the World'* discussed themes of greed, deception, and the double standards of the privileged class in a clever way that made this play a pure masterpiece (Bueler, 1984:123). Other important comedy of manners are *'Marriage a la Mode'* _ *John Dryden, 'The country Wife' _ William Wycherley, and 'She stops to conquer' _ Oliver Goldsmith* (Dailey, 2022:136).

3. Satire

Satire was the literary *weapon* that Restoration writers needed to criticize the errors of their society and to express themselves in a humorous manner. Using satire, writers addressed complicated social issues, such as gender roles, social class, and inequality (Sivefors, 2019:201). The following elements contributed to the creation of a typical Restoration satire:

- Exaggeration: a writer could exaggerate a single personality trait in a specific work of art, a character that is faulted and can be ridiculed; or they can go on and exaggerate an entire theme or even the whole

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setting of that work. Exaggeration makes it easy for the readers/audience to understand the purpose of the satire in a fun and engaging way (Ryzhik, 2017:223).

- Reversal: it is a technique in which the playwright subverts the event to provoke the reader/audience's sense of judgment. This helps the writer to express his thoughts by contrasting the two extremes of a real situation. The perfect example of satirical reversal is *"Noughts and crosses"* when *Malorie Blackman "described an alternative history in which white people were enslaved by the Africans"*; *Malorie* puts races on the opposite side of history, and leaves the readers to their imagination and reason (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:16).

- Parody is used to imitate the work of a certain writer or the style of a literary school; not out of admiration, but rather to highlight their weaknesses and make fun of them (Barbara L. Parker, 2009:280).

William Congreve's "Love for Love" is a great example of a satirical Restoration drama that reflects economic worries according to social class.

Thus, comedy of manners and satire turned Restoration drama into precisely how it needed to be: a social drama which dealt with all the wrongs of their time, but also entertained them and flattered their witty sense of humor (Dailey, 2022:128).

4. Romanticism (1789-1832)

Romanticism is an intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. It is sometimes described as the age of revolutions, since it began with the French Revolution in 1789. Romanticism adopted the Revolution spirit of *"Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity"*, and was the time of hope and change_

WilliamWordsworth wrote: *"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive"*. (Sara Munson Deats, 2009:377).

This hope was soon shattered once the period of *Napoléon* started and brought war against France. Nevertheless, Romanticism survived just enough time for it to be reflected in all forms of literature and to leave a mark in it (Martiny, 2011:113).

Romanticism literature was subjective and spontaneous, it madean emphasis on individualism, it even celebrated isolation and found beauty within it. Emotion was highly valued over reason and the rational perspective of life. Women were idealized in Romantic Literature; which means they were pure, beautiful, and loved with nothing to expect from (Nardizzi, 2016:117).

It is fair to admit that Romantic Drama may be "too idealistic" and sort of dim compared to the glory of other literary genres of the age; still, many great plays were performed and cannot be overlooked, such as *Lord Byron's 'Manfred and Cain'*, and *Coleridge's 'Remorse"*. Playwrights included in their plays the two characteristics that most identified Romantic literature: imagination and celebration of nature (Pincombe, 2010:117).

4.1 Imagination

Romantics often described imagination as "our ultimate shaping", it is the creative power that defined their art and their view of the world, a power they were keen to explore and take to the limits through art and literature. It gave them the ability to transcend reality and create a reality of their own, one to satisfy their beauty standards (Ryzhik, 2017:147).

The romantics had a great faith in imagination and favored it over reason, *William Wordsworth* stated that *"It is also the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it"* (Sara Munson Deats, 2009:378).

Romantics gave imagination a significant role in creating ideas and shaping their world. Imagination provoked emotions and was seen as a form of intelligence, since emotion was the main element of an engaging Romantic work of literature (Sivefors, 2019:218).

4.2 Celebration of Nature

Romantics believed that the key to all their problems was in going back to nature, being the pure spiritual source of renewal and hope. This was partly a result of the industrial progress that was taking place in England and caused more and more people to be distanced from nature, so they looked for it in forms of art and literature (Smith, 1978: 132).

Nature was associated with raw emotions and wild imagination; thus, the theme of nature was always present in Romantic literature, either by long walks in the woods or a serene landscape of majestic mountains. It was the source of the writer's inspiration, as well as of their characters' feelings and experiences (Stallybrass, 1987:137).

Romantics used nature to represent divinity, since they viewed God and the natural world as one and the same; that is why they were fascinated by their ability to imitate_ and somehow recreate it. Nature portrayed the sublime beauty, but also the mysterious unknown that could be evil and dangerous (Travitsky, 1990:188).

5. Victorian Age (1832-1900)

This was the age of Queen Victoria, who reined England (1837 – 1901), and although Britain became the richest manufacturing country in the world, but society drowned in chaos and inequality. The population grew fast which affected the economic status of the working class, Britain lost its first war in forty years, and there were many protests against the monarchy; still, Queen Victoria defied all this mess and became the symbol of Britain, leading it into a state of democracy and development (Goetz, 2020:463).

The Victorian Age was an age of extremes; the working class was extremely poor and suffered terrible life conditions both socially and economically, whereas the middle class became very wealthy, and the social class system got more complicated. Victorian writers worked on portraying the double standards of this age through their literature, they exposed the problematic social life they had to endure under the glorious surface of success and achievement. *"The end of the century looked back at the Victorian Age and did not particularly like what it saw: compromise, double standards, the bad treatment of the poor, very slow progress towards democracy,"* (Steveker, 2009:428).

As expected, Victorian literature handled class in most of its themes; to please the status-conscious audience and to express the thoughts of the writers themselves. Readers were curious and obsessed about the details of other people's lives; therefore, they were highly interested in works that described characters of different social classes than their own. Nevertheless, Victorian literature tackled other important topics such as love, religion, and even science, influenced by the revolutionary ideas of *Darwin's 'Origin of Species'*. (Ardolino & Traister, 1985:539).

Realism was introduced into Victorian Drama with the works of *George Bernard Shaw* in the 1890s. His plays were politically and socially controversial, but reflected reality in a unique way. Other prominent playwrights of the age were *Oscar Wilde* and *Sir Arthur Wing Pinero*. But the two major marks in Victorian literature were Melodrama and social problems plays (Barbara L. Parker, 2009:280).

5.1 Melodrama

Melodrama was invented by *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* in early 1760s; it uses exaggeration and stereotypes to appeal to the audience. Melodrama is opposed to serious drama in the sense that it's sensational rather than intellectual, and it addresses the audience's emotions, not mind (de. S. Pinto, Maclure, & Watt, 1966:665).

Melodrama uses special plot, stock characters, and spectacular staging to make the audience engage in the play, *"Very clear and loud vocal delivery is needed in a melodrama, facing out to the audience, combined with large gestures and exaggerated facial expressions"*(Shingler,2006: 64).

Stock characters are stereotypical characters found in every Melodrama:

- The hero: a moral, brave young man who fights to save people from injustice_ in short, a 'Knight in shining armor' (Bell, 2018:113)
- The heroine: a maiden who is kind, innocent, and most importantly: in danger. She is the classical 'damsel in distress' (Bueler, 1984:76).
- The villain: the corrupt rich man who is the main rival of the hero. In most cases, the villain is the danger that the heroine suffers from.
- Other stock characters are the aging parents, faithful servant, and idiotic assistant.

Melodrama uses stock characters for an important reason, which is to give more time and attention to the plot of the play. This way, the audience can easily recognize the characters and focus more of the ongoing events (Sklar, 2012:159). The Melodrama plot has three main parts:

- Provoking action: the incident that provokes the villain to disturb the sweet life of the characters.

- Pangs: the chain of painful events that the hero and heroine suffer from as a result of the villain's evil deeds (Dailey, 2022:243).

- The penalty: the part when the villain gets his/her punishment and leaves the audience with a happy ending (de. S. Pinto, Maclure, & Watt, 1966:215).

These elements are popular in fairy tales, which makes using them in Melodrama quite reasonable, considering it is a genre that triggers the audience's emotions in all its kinds. Overall, the Melodrama was an interesting genre that gave people the opportunity to enjoy a stereotypical "fair" world, away from all the social injustice around them (DiMatteo, 2008:477).

5.2 Social Problems Plays

As the name suggests, the 'problem play' is the drama of social criticism, it presents a problematic question through realistic dialogues. This was the playwrights' way of declaring their refusal of the problematic reality around them. *"The drama which was directly inspired by the social ferment of the time could be effective only if it adopted a realistic form or medium, because problem drama required a high level of craftsmanship and dramaturgic skill"*. (Taylor, 2002:14).

The problem-play was a much needed genre in a society as ruined as the Victorian one, social issues needed to be addressed in a straightforward manner in order for them to be solved, at least through literature (Kernan, 1974:223).

CONCLUSION

The previous chapters investigated centuries of English drama in all its cultural and literary aspects, going from themes and structure to characters and plot; and how writers throughout time expressed their view of the world in similar manners.

This research covers the works of the prominent figures of each Age, all of them linked together by a collective human consciousness. It shows us how man had always been obsessed with emotion and relationships, and how drama sculpted people's view of the world around them.

Theatre is the form of art we all need, theater draws the audience away from its thoughts beliefs, it draws the individual from himself; then sew them together again. For some, life may never be the same again. In life we always say 'thus far and no further', in theatre we say 'thus far and further still, my sanity demands it'.

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