

## **Contemporary Literature**

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### **Mod-01 Lec-01 Introduction to Drama**

Good afternoon. So, today's class is all about drama in the beginning and we are basically going to focus on theater in ancient Greece and ancient Rome. So, you might recall that we have already done a play by Sophocles, Oedipus, and this is an extension of that class particularly the play. The Greek tragedies and also the Roman tragedies. So, drama in Greece as we have already seen in Oedipus, you remember that the very opening scene in Oedipus, it begins with a group of people remember they are sitting with a wreath. So, drama in Greece began with the observation of religious ceremonies. So, that was a theatrical convention that plays would begin by invoking gods.

So, there would be a group of people and the technical term for that group on the stage was chorus. Chorus, not in the way we know today, but they were like we will see what chorus was all about. So, chorus would act as worshipers at the altar of the Greek gods and they would begin the play by chanting religious songs and devotional songs in unison. So, the play a traditional play a traditionally structured play would begin.

So, the chorus would come on the stage and they would start singing the song the devotional songs and then gradually one character one person from that group would separate and start addressing the remaining group the remaining people the rest of the group. So, and then he would introduce the play in this way. So, one they would come together and then one there would be a break up one person would come forward and start conversing with the rest of the group. So, once the single actor establish the context the dramatic situation then it would be followed by the appearance of the other leading actors not the chorus now other actors who were actually the principle dramatis personae you know what is dramatis personae the principle actors characters of the play. Then these actors would begin a formal dialogue and the attention of the spectators would be fixed on them and not on the chorus, but plays would the drama a traditional drama would always begin with the introduction or with the appearance of a chorus.

And most of these dramas as we have been talking about when we were discussing Oedipus another Greek plays they were of tragic nature they were very few comedies and tragedies were associated regarded as you have already seen Aristotle's definition do you remember what is Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Anyway, so tragedy was

supposed to be the highest form of poetry highest form of any performance. So, comedy anyway was not taken into account at all although the comedies which were written were there, but they were extremely few and far between. Then tragedy emerged out of religious observance basically it was considered like you know a kind of a devotional play as you have seen Oedipus what is Oedipus all about I will keep coming back to Oedipus because that the only Greek play we have done, but if I say that the tragedy was an observance of you know religious practices of those times then how would you consider Oedipus as a religious play what is it about does not it invoke gods throughout the play do not you have that. You have the Delphic Oracle, you have Zeus, you have the temple of Apollo and you also have the underlying theme of man versus destiny and what is the outcome that human being can never overcome what he is destined for.

So, that was the religious element of conventional Greek tragedy. So, most of the time you know these tragic plays they were restricted to the legendary themes. So, it was not as if Oedipus was completely an original play. The legend of Oedipus was already there and most dramatists would base their plays on an already existing legend or myth and they would build upon it. And another feature of these plays was that they would be held usually during the religious festivities in ancient Greece.

So, that was also a chance for the common people of the Greek city state to come and attend the theater. So, it was also a kind of ceremony, it was also a kind of communal gathering for people, but as I was saying the basis of all these plays and drama and theater they were deeply religious. Now, coming to chorus, so chorus what was chorus? Chorus as we were talking about was a group of people and they would invariably wear masks, all Greek actors, all Greek actors who were present on stage they would invariably wear a mask. So, and the chorus would wear a mask as well, they would begin the play by singing or chanting verses while performing dance like movements on the stage and these dance performances were extremely unrehearsed, quite spontaneous. It was not like a very rehearsed or extremely professional kind of dance that would take place, they would dance very spontaneously because the focus was not on the dance.

The group would make its entrance by coming through the sideways. So, a typical Greek theater, I will give you the diagram also of a typical Greek theater. So, they would come the chorus, the group of actors they would come marching on the stage and they would gather or assemble on a place called the orchestra on the stage. And when all the members of the chorus had entered the orchestra, they arranged themselves in rectangular formation on stage and begin their choral song. Their song and dance would always be to the accompaniment of a flute.

So, in the place of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the major activity or the major role of a

chorus would be to comment on the proceedings of the play. So, if you remember, if you go back to your Oedipus, you would remember that there was a leader of a chorus, there was a chorus and by and large, their function was to comment on the happenings, on the proceedings of the play. So, they did not have a role to enact, they did not have a major role to play. They were not, the chorus did not act as a vehicle of the plot. Major actors in Oedipus for example, are Jocasta you have Oedipus, you have Creon you have Tiresias, but chorus would comment on the proceedings of the play that was the function of a chorus.

And another function was they also expressed the then contemporary traditions, values and attitudes. So, they would comment for example, in between two acts or two scenes, the chorus would come forward and they would start talking about the then contemporary, then prevalent moral attitudes, religious traditions and social beliefs of the Greek people. So, that was another function of the chorus. And Greek, they are famous for having the chorus, for having or enacting two kinds of movements, perhaps you should know them. One is a Strophe and one is Antistrophe.

Are you familiar with these terms? What happens? They are there in a very much in Oedipus, what happens? It is a movement. Good. So, Strophe movement was right to left and this was vice versa, left to right. So, while commenting on the proceedings of the play, while discussing the moral attitudes and traditions of the day, the chorus would make a movement, Strophe and Antistrophe. And so, this is the Greek chorus.

Now, what happens in the Elizabethan period? I know I am just taking quite a bit of leap, but if you remember Elizabethan chorus, what happens to the chorus in the Elizabethan time? Did we have the same kind of chorus even in tragedies? No. Maybe one is single choric character. Good. So, instead of having a group of actors acting as chorus, we would have one single choric actor whose job again was to comment on the proceedings of the play and this tradition has remained so. So, in modern contemporary drama, we do not find too many chorus take you know being present.

What we find is a single choric character even in the modern contemporary drama. For example, in American drama, you have Eugene O'Neill. You are familiar with the name and he has written a play called morning becomes Electra and the character of set in morning becomes Electra is a choric character. The character of Alfieri in Arthur Miller's which play? We have done that. Alfieri is a lawyer who comments on the happenings of the play.

He is also a major important character in the play. Which play was it? A view from the bridge. A view from the bridge. Alfieri the lawyer, he is a choric character who is an

actor as well. He performs the function of a chorus.

This is a traditional Greek chorus. You can say group of people and all wearing masks. So, the Greek theatre, let us get back to the Greek theatre and the physical structure. So, in the beginning, the theatre consisted of a sloping hillside where the audience, the members of the audience would be accommodated and it had a level track marked by a circle where the actors would perform the play. So, it was all on a sloping hillside.

Then later improvements included a semi circle of stone seats which became an auditorium and also a space for the audience to sit. So, this is what it looked like. See, this area which was meant for the audience to sit, it was called the theatre on. This is a theatre on where the audience would sit, semi circular building and this area is called paradise. Here as we were talking about the actors and the chorus would march stately through the passage and come and take their places on stage.

In between, there was this place called orchestra. Orchestra was the space for the actors and the chorus to sit, to enact the play. So, this was the acting space, orchestra and this was called scheme. From this word, we have our modern term called scene. So, scene was nothing but a back drop to the stage.

This was, so imagine that you are the audience sitting here and this is what you would see at the background to whatever was happening on stage. So, four important parts, theatre on, paradise, orchestra on and scene. So, orchestra was the dancing place, paradise as I was talking about, it was one of the gangways on which chorus and actors made their entrances from either side of the orchestra and scene, the word from which we get our modern word scene was originally a flat roofed stage building and it was used as a scenic background. Now coming to the actors in a typical Greek theatre. So, actors would use exaggerated gestures, you know the term that theatrical acting that is over the top kind of acting, it originated from the Greek theatre where the people, where the actors would speak extremely loudly and acting style was all very exaggerated and they also wore large stylized facial masks and these masks were generally made of linen.

Another feature of these masks was that they had a variety of masks resembling emotions of characters. So, they would have a happy mask, they would have a sad mask, a tragic mask. So, all these things because you just imagine that a Greek theatre would accommodate how many people, how many people were there? It was not like a small class of 2025. How many people? Just take a rough estimate, 1000? You would not need a facial mask even for 1000. The theatre of dynasties that is the word it was known as, it could accommodate 15,000 people and generally the total number of audience would be between 10 and 15,000 and in just imagine because there was no other source

of entertainment.

So, on a day, on a typical day of religious observance when it was the day of everybody from the Greek city state would turn up to the theatre. It was not for entertainment. You must also remember that they did not look to theatre for entertainment the way theatre is regarded as today. Why did they go to theatre at all? It was, theatre was nothing but a kind of a reinforcement of the religious beliefs. So, they attended theatre in extreme awe and devotion.

It was not a means or source of entertainment for them and along with their masks, they would also wear the costumes that would represent their character type. So, you know the term is stereotype. This is the origin of the word and they also change that. So, during the course of the play, they would change their masks several times because see these exaggerated and stylized and very big masks, they should be seen to the last person sitting in the last row. Therefore, the necessity of having a large mask representing the emotion of the character.

And this is another important thing. The actors wore high boots called and the term is a cothensness to give them added height. This is a typical cothensness and it would have high heels. So, usually the actor who would play Oedipus would wear cothensness because the king, you know, if you remember your definition of an ideal tragic hero, a man of noble birth of course and a high stature, you cannot have a short person.

That was the belief. So, it has, a hero has to have height. So, that was the idea. So, kothornoi to give an extra height to the characters and this is a very typical example of facial mask. Now, it may look quite funny to you now, but this is what they wore during those days. So, you can see a funny, a happy mask, a happy face and a sad face.

From Greece, we will move on to Rome and the Roman theater. So, the Roman theater never approached the heights of the Greek theater. The Romans always had predicament for spectacle and for exaggeration much more than the Greeks and they had little interest in serious dramatic endeavors. They were drawn towards sensationalism and spectacle and the earliest Roman plays were nothing but mere translations of the Greek plays. So, we have a Greek Oedipus for example and we have a Roman Oedipus as well, but much more over the top.

I mean, I remember when we were doing Oedipus, most of you felt that it is quite melodramatic. So, you can well imagine what Roman Oedipus would have been. And Seneca, if you remember Seneca, this is the most famous, most representative Roman playwright Seneca and his works are known as Senecan tragedies. So, Seneca is the most

well-known Roman playwright and in all he wrote nine tragedies, most of which are extremely gloomy, extremely lurid and extremely gory and violent. They are also noted for their inflated rhetoric and you have done a little bit of Elizabethan stage also.

So, can you comment on the impact of Seneca on the Renaissance tragedies or the Elizabethan tragedies? Many of the Elizabethan tragedies were based on the original plays by Seneca. So, therefore, that excessive element of violence and bloodshed in them. So, they were, most of them could trace their origins to plays by Seneca. This is Seneca as, this is a sculpture of Seneca. And then, we will come to the decline of drama in ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

So, as we were talking about, the Romans had a preference for spectacle and bloodshed and with the decline of the Roman empire, the interest in theatre also waned. And this was replaced, theatre was replaced by pantomimes and pantomimes remained extremely popular till the fourth century AD. And then, the mime tradition prevailed and for a very long period of time, the mime provided the theatrical continuity between the ancient world of theatre and the medieval. And there is a group of scholars who believe that the contemporary Commedia dell'Art, it owes its origin to pantomime and mime traditions of Rome, but this proposition has not been sufficiently proved. Any questions? So, because we have ended our talk about the ancient Greek and Roman theatre, would you like to comment? We have done a play by Sophocles, if you remember, that is Oedipus.

Do you remember the other two plays of that trilogy? Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus. So, I am just, I will read you a passage from Antigone, which is a choral passage. So, a Strophe and an Antistrophe, just a little bit. So, chorus sings here, Blessed are they whose days have not tasted of evil, for when a house hath once been shaken from heaven, there the curse fails nevermore, passing from life to life of the race, even as when the surge is driven over the darkness of the deep by the fierce breath of a Thracian sea winds. It rolls up the black sand from the depths, and there is a sullen roar from the wind-wegst headlands and that front the blows of the storm.

And then there is Antistrophe, I see that from olden times the sorrows in the house of the lepticles are heaped upon the sorrows of the dead, and generation is not freed by generation, but some god strikes them down and the race hath no deliverance. Can you comment on this? This is from Antigone and this is, what is Antigone? This is the last in the Oedipus trilogy. So, whatever you heard, could you just interpret roughly? What is being talked about? The chorus is commenting on something, on what? House of the house of the lepticles. What is that tragedy? They are doomed by their own people, they are finally doomed.

So, that is Antigone. So, Antigone sort of concludes the enormous the magnitude of tragedy, the enormous tragedy that has befallen this particular dynasty. So, the chorus says, the chorus is commenting that their tragic fate is not yet over, it continues because the dynasty itself is doomed. And also remember the invocation, the repeated reference to the gods and all those things. Any questions or comments you would like to make so far? Then we will move on to, see we have finished the ancient period. We will move on to the English drama in during the medieval times, 10th century and so.

So, any idea what was the fate of drama, what was the fate of theatre during the medieval period? We are talking about this kind of an interim period between the ancient Greek theatre and also the modern Elizabethan period. So, in between we had the medieval theatre, what was happening? Good. Did you hear what she said? Yeah. What? That the church had a major say in the theatre, in the drama of the medieval times. So, it was more or less because church was not just a house of god, it was many more things.

So, people would look towards the church for shelter, for also treatment, for also education and gradually the church also got interested in theatre. So, the earlier plays were basically religious in nature and the term that is used is liturgy and the derivation is liturgical. So, drama was liturgical in nature, extremely religious in nature. This is one of the very well known examples from a typical liturgical play, I will read it out to you. The women, the morning women, Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified heavenly one to whom answerth the angel.

What Christians seek the living with the dead? The lord is risen as to his own he said. Remember how he speak in Galilee that he must die, but after he should see three days being passed his Easter victory. This is just a very small example of a typical liturgical play that would be performed in the medieval English churches. Are you familiar with the terms mysteries and miracles? What were these? Yes, Aneesha.

Miracle plays were basically based on a biblical character. Good. Both mysteries and miracle plays were based on two things. One was the Biblical stories, Biblical illusions. Secondly, on the lives of the martyrdom of saints.

So, the lives of saints and stories from the bible. So, that was the mysteries and the miracles. And some well known mysteries were the title itself would suggest a lot. The sacrifice of Isaac and the mystery of the holy sacrament. So, these were the these were extremely popular mysteries and miracles that the English church showed. And again associated with this is another kind of play, moralities.

Now what could moralities be? Good. Yeah. Directed plays. Directed plays. Yeah, more or less. So, what could be an idealized life? What could be an ideal Christian life? And that was what it was all about. Any examples of moralities? I am sure you have done something in one of your earlier courses, moralities.

See the characters were types. So, you would have a common man and common man being confronted with sins, the sinning ways of life. So, you will have the seven deadly personification of the seven deadly sins. For example, yes sloth. Yeah, for example, anger. So, these attributes, these sins would be personified as actors and an average man and every man.

So, there was a morality play, an extremely well known morality play titled every man. Perhaps you are aware of that. Every man anonymously written. So, the authorship is unknown. I will read you a passage from every man which is every man is every man.

You know your typical average man and how during the course of his life, he comes into contact with sins and then how he overcomes worldly temptations and then he is enlightened. So, it is like an idealized kind of life which every man has to lead. So, here every man says gentle knowledge. What do you it call? Knowledge, it is a garment of sorrow from pain it will you borrow.

Contraction, it is that getteth forgiveness. It pleases god passing well. Good deeds. So, good deeds is another character.

Knowledge is one. Good deeds is another. Every man will you wear it for your heel? Every man now blessed by jesus may reason for now have I on true contrition and let us go now without tearing. Good deeds have we clear our reckoning. Good deeds indeed I have it here. Every man then I trust we need not fear.

Now friends let us not part in twain. Knowledge, nay every man that we will not certain. Good deeds yet must thou lead with thee three persons of great might. Every man who should they be? Good deeds discretion and strength they hide and thy beauty may not abide behind. Also you must call to mind your five wits as for you for your counselors.

Good deeds you must have them ready at all hours. Every man how shall I get them hither? Knowledge you must call them all together and they will hear your incontinent. So, what is the idea behind a play like this? The first few lines they should tell you man come every man who is born on this earth. He is quite susceptible to sins, but it is through contrition through regret that he seeks god's forgiveness.



So, that is the moral. Therefore, the name moralities. So, these were the kinds of plays or this was the kind of drama that was in existence during the middle ages. Any questions? Do we have such any kind of plays or any kind of drama along the same lines as mysteries, moralities and miracles nowadays? Yes, Venisha. In modern contemporary drama unless and until you are talking about extremely preachy or extremely didactic sort of play. These plays these plays have survived in their original form. So, there is still enacted, there is still read for academic knowledge, for historical knowledge, but they have by and large they have not they did not have a far reaching influence on modern contemporary drama because you know the contemporary drama we have people like Pinter and we have people like Stoppard and we have people like Sam Shepard.

So, mysteries, miracles and moralities perhaps you know as forms of a didacticism as form of preaching some good things of life perhaps they do exist, but they did not have an influence on the contemporary drama. Thank you so much, then. Thank you.