

Exploring Drama

Elements of Drama

A drama, or play, is a story written to be performed by actors. It features **characters** facing a **conflict**, or struggle, that propels the sequence of events called the **plot**. The conflict reaches a **climax**, the point of greatest tension, and is then resolved. The **dialogue**, or speeches of the characters, tells the story, and not, as in fiction, the voice of a narrator.

These elements are specific to drama:

- **Acts and scenes** are the basic units of drama. A drama may consist of one or more acts, each of which may contain any number of scenes.
- The author of a play, called the **playwright**, provides the **script**, or text, of a play. The script contains both dialogue and stage directions.
- **Stage directions** tell how the work is to be performed, or staged. Providing details about sets, lighting, sound effects, props, costumes, and acting, directions are often printed in italics and set off in brackets. Some playwrights use abbreviations to provide additional direction about where on- or offstage a speech may be delivered. These include O.S. for offstage; D.S. for downstage, or close to the audience; and U.S. for upstage, or far from the audience.
- **Sets** are the constructions indicating where the drama takes place. A set may include painted backdrops, wooden frames, and other elements.
- **Props** are movable objects, like swords or pens, that actors use onstage.

All the elements of drama combine in performance to produce the vivid illusion of reality known as **dramatic effect**. Through this effect, the dramatist explores a **theme**, or insight into life.



Drama coach.

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Types of Drama and Dramatic Speech

The ancient Greeks, who developed drama, created two types of plays:

- A **tragedy** shows the downfall or death of the **tragic hero**, or main character. In ancient Greek drama, the hero was an outstanding person brought low by a **tragic flaw**, a mistaken action or defect in character. In modern tragedy, the hero can be an ordinary person destroyed by an evil force in society. Greek tragedy included a **chorus**, a group of performers who commented on the action. William Shakespeare sometimes used a single actor to perform the role of the chorus.
- A **comedy** has a happy ending, usually after an amusing series of predicaments. While tragedy emphasizes human greatness, comedy stresses the weaknesses of ordinary people or of society itself.

For both kinds of drama, you sometimes need to understand the **historical context**, the background of the era in which the play is set or written. In addition to dialogue involving conversations between two or more characters, dramatists use these types of **dramatic speech**:

- A **monologue** is a long, uninterrupted speech delivered by a character to other characters who are onstage but remain silent.
- A **soliloquy** is a speech in which a character alone on stage reveals private thoughts and feelings that the audience is allowed to overhear.
- An **aside** is a brief remark in which a character expresses private thoughts to the audience rather than to other characters.

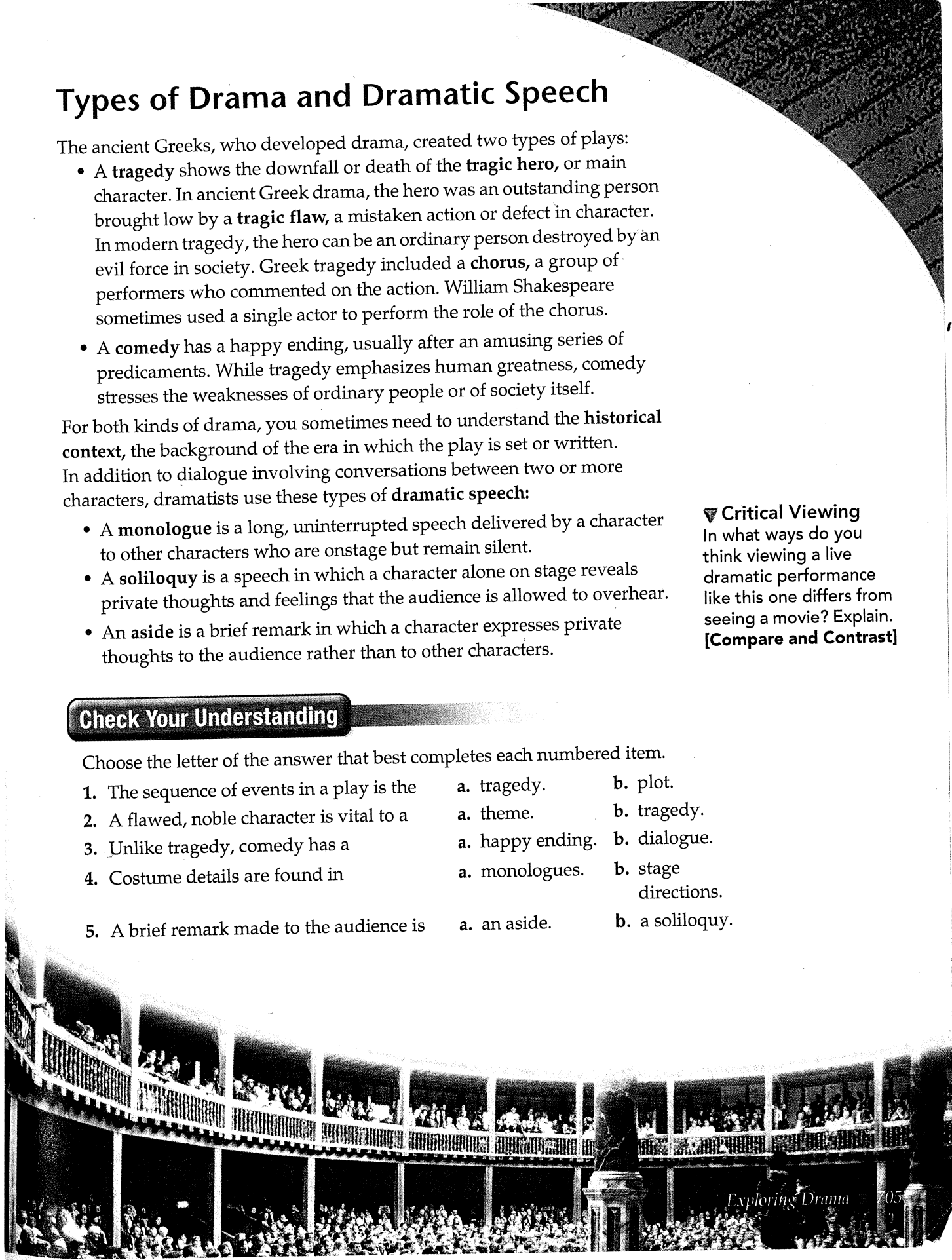
▼ Critical Viewing

In what ways do you think viewing a live dramatic performance like this one differs from seeing a movie? Explain. **[Compare and Contrast]**

Check Your Understanding

Choose the letter of the answer that best completes each numbered item.

1. The sequence of events in a play is the
a. tragedy. b. plot.
2. A flawed, noble character is vital to a
a. theme. b. tragedy.
3. Unlike tragedy, comedy has a
a. happy ending. b. dialogue.
4. Costume details are found in
a. monologues. b. stage directions.
5. A brief remark made to the audience is
a. an aside. b. a soliloquy.



The Shakespearean Theater

Romeo and Juliet

Of all the love stories ever written, that of *Romeo and Juliet* is the most famous. To many people, Shakespeare's tragic lovers represent the essence of romantic love. When Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, he was a young man, and the play is a young man's play about young love.

The Theater in Shakespeare's Day

Romeo and Juliet, like most of Shakespeare's plays, was produced in a public theater. Public theaters were built around roofless courtyards without artificial light. Performances, therefore, were given only during daylight hours. Surrounding the courtyard were three levels of galleries with benches on which wealthier playgoers sat. Less wealthy spectators, called groundlings, stood and watched a play from the courtyard, which was called the pit.

Most of Shakespeare's plays were performed in the Globe theater. No one is certain exactly what the Globe looked like, though Shakespeare tells us it was round or octagonal. We know that it was open to the sky and held between 2,500 and 3,000 people. Scholars disagree about its actual dimensions and size. The discovery of its foundation in 1989 was exciting because the excavation has revealed clues about the plays, the actors, and the audience. The tiny part of the foundation initially uncovered yielded a great number of hazelnut shells. Hazelnuts were Elizabethan popcorn; people munched on them all during the performance.

The stage was a platform that extended into the pit. Actors entered and left the stage from doors located behind the platform. The portion of the galleries behind and above the stage was used primarily as dressing and

▼ **Critical Viewing**
Which attribute of the Globe is emphasized in this painting?
[Analyze]



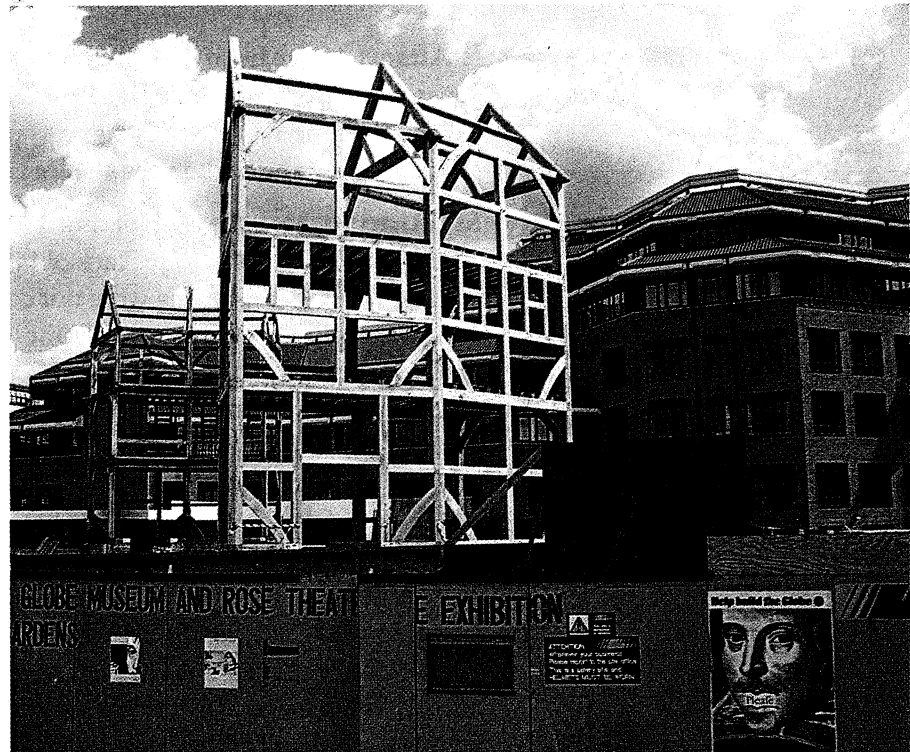
storage rooms. The second-level gallery right above the stage, however, was used as an upper stage. It would have been here that the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* was enacted.

There was no scenery in the theaters of Shakespeare's day. Settings were indicated by references in the dialogue. As a result, one scene could follow another in rapid succession. The actors wore elaborate clothing. It was, in fact, typical Elizabethan clothing, not costuming. Thus, the plays produced in Shakespeare's day were fast-paced, colorful productions. Usually, a play lasted two hours.

One other difference between Shakespeare's theater and today's is that acting companies in the sixteenth century were made up only of men and boys. Women did not perform on the stage. This was not considered proper for a woman. As a general rule, boys of eleven, twelve, or thirteen—before their voices changed—performed the female roles.

The Globe Today

Building a replica of Shakespeare's Globe was the dream of American actor Sam Wanamaker. After long years of fund-raising and construction, the theater opened in London to its first full season on June 8, 1997, with a production of *Henry V*. Like the earlier Globe, this one is made of wood, with a thatched roof and lime plaster covering the walls. The stage and the galleries are covered, but the "bear pit," where the modern-day groundlings stand, is open to the skies, exposing the spectators to the weather.



▲ Critical Viewing

Which part of the replica of the Globe theater do you think is being built in this picture? [Analyze]

CHARACTERS

CHORUS

ESCALUS, Prince of Verona

PARIS, a young count, kinsman to the Prince

MONTAGUE

CAPULET

AN OLD MAN, of the Capulet family

ROMEO, son to Montague

MERCUTIO, kinsman to the Prince and
friend to Romeo

BENVOLIO, nephew to Montague and
friend to Romeo

TYBALT, nephew to Lady Capulet

FRIAR LAWRENCE, Franciscan

FRIAR JOHN, Franciscan

BALTHASAR, servant to Romeo

SAMPSON, servant to Capulet

GREGORY, servant to Capulet

PETER, servant to Juliet's nurse

ABRAM, servant to Montague

AN APOTHECARY

THREE MUSICIANS

AN OFFICER

LADY MONTAGUE, wife to Montague

LADY CAPULET, wife to Capulet

JULIET, daughter to Capulet

NURSE TO JULIET

CITIZENS OF VERONA, Gentlemen and
Gentlewomen of both houses, Maskers,
Torchbearers, Pages, Guards,
Watchmen, Servants, and Attendants