In ancient Greece, actors wore masks. As drama has evolved through the ages, these two have come to symbolize the two major divisions of drama: tragedy and comedy.

The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.

—Horace Walpole (1717–1797), author
Focus Questions
What are the differences between tragedy and comedy?
What are some of the devices playwrights use to make people laugh?
What are the types of comedy?
What dramatic styles have influenced the theater in the twentieth century?

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>tragedy</th>
<th>farce</th>
<th>high comedy</th>
<th>melodrama</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pathos</td>
<td>screen scene</td>
<td>comedy of manners</td>
<td>play of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hamartia</td>
<td>aside</td>
<td>satire</td>
<td>theatrical conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>catharsis</td>
<td>burlesque</td>
<td>fantasy</td>
<td>representational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comedy</td>
<td>parody</td>
<td>romantic comedy</td>
<td>presentational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low comedy</td>
<td>caricature</td>
<td>sentimental comedy</td>
<td>allegory</td>
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You will need to be able to identify the varieties of drama in evaluating and studying plays. This knowledge will help you interpret roles and give you an overall understanding of the plays you watch and read.

The two most recognized varieties of drama are tragedy and comedy. Generally speaking, tragedies end in catastrophe—often the death of the tragic character. Comedies are usually lighthearted, with clever dialogue and amusing characters who are involved in funny situations. Plays that have qualities of both comedy and tragedy are called tragicomedies. Plays that do not fit the definition of tragedy but are serious in nature are simply called dramas.

Classification is further complicated by the many styles in which plays may be written. The most commonly recognized literary
styles are romanticism, realism, naturalism, symbolism, and expressionism. In addition, there are period styles determined by theater conventions of historical eras, such as the ritualistic formalism of the Greek theater, the madcap antics of the commedia dell’arte, and the frenetic activity in plays of the Restoration period.

The following pages will provide you with ideas and terms you can use to analyze types and styles of plays from Greek tragedy to present-day performance pieces.

Tragedy

Many of the great plays throughout history have been tragedies. In fact, tragedy is considered by many to be humanity’s highest literary achievement. Tragedies are sober, thoughtful plays that are based on profound human emotions and conflicts that do not change with time or place.

The focus of every tragedy is the protagonist. This character is a significant person who is engaged in a struggle but ultimately fails and is overcome by opposing forces. This struggle may be internal, that is, against forces within the tragic character. These forces may be virtues, such as a sense of duty, or weaknesses, such as too much pride. The struggle may be external, against forces outside the character. These forces may be divine or human authority or the pressures of society. Often the external forces are set into motion by a choice or error the character makes.

Whether the forces against which the tragic character struggles are internal or external, the tragic character has no control over them once the choice has been made or the action of the play has begun. The outcome appears to be predestined, and the audience sees that there is nothing the character can do to avoid it. This feature of tragedy is called inevitability: what will happen will happen. There is no way to prevent the protagonist’s tragic fall. In Romeo and Juliet, for example, the prologue of the play tells us that Romeo and Juliet are “star-crossed lovers.” Their fate is sealed, and there is nothing they can do to avoid the ultimate crisis.

The protagonist’s struggle and the inevitability of the outcome elicit the audience’s pity and compassion. The quality of the drama that arouses these feelings is called pathos. The audi-
ence’s emotions intensify the impact of the events leading to the outcome for the tragic character. By the time the tragedy ends, though, the pathos has been purged, and the audience feels a sense of release, known as **catharsis**.

The stature or significance of the protagonist changes with the times. When Shakespeare wrote his tragedies, monarchs were significant. Therefore, most of his protagonists were rulers, such as Macbeth, King Lear, and Julius Caesar. In more democratic times, a tragic character can be a seemingly common citizen. However common protagonists might seem, though, they possess something that either sets them apart from or elevates them above other people. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* appears ordinary, but he is elevated by his dreams, just as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is elevated by her hopes for a better life. Ken Harrison in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* is set apart by his accident and resulting paralysis.

**ARISTOTLE AND TRAGEDY**

The most enduring description of tragedy is found in the *Poetics* by Greek critic-philosopher Aristotle. According to Aristotle, the tragic protagonist is an average or better person who, during the course of the play, is brought from happiness to misery. Through this suffering, the protagonist usually acquires a sense of awareness—of truth, of self, or of others. At the same
time, the protagonist becomes alienated and isolated from society. The cause of the protagonist’s difficulties is usually an action (or lack of action) brought about by *hamartia* (hā´·mär·tē´·ə), a character weakness or error in judgment. The most common form of hamartia is *hubris* (hyō´·brīs), or excessive pride. The tragic character may be completely unable, however, to do anything about the hamartia.

While viewing a tragedy, the audience must be made to feel pity and fear. Aristotle felt that these audience reactions could be elicited in two ways: through spectacle or, preferably, through the structure and incidents of the play—the plot. In Aristotle’s list of the elements of a play (see Chapter 5), plot was the most important; he felt that the plot was “the soul of a tragedy.”

As the audience watches the tragic character progress toward his or her unhappy end, pity and fear increase. The pity, according to Aristotle, is for the protagonist, while the fear is for ourselves. We the audience know that we could easily have made the same error in judgment, and we would then have been forced to pay the same price. When a person of significance or stature, struggling against dynamic forces, finally falls, the resulting effect on the audience brings about a purging or cleansing that results in an emotional release called *catharsis* (kē·thär´·sıs).

Tragedy includes scenes of recognition and of reversal. Recognition usually occurs in one of two ways. The protagonist achieves an inner awareness or an insight into truth as a result of great personal suffering. Shakespeare’s characters King Lear and Othello both come to understand how tragically wrong they have been only after the deaths of Lear’s daughter and Othello’s wife. In another kind of recognition, the protagonist identifies a loved one, a relative, or a friend from a birthmark or scar or by some other means. Reversal takes the form of an ironic twist in which an action produces an effect opposite to what would at first seem likely.

### A MODERN DESCRIPTION OF TRAGEDY

One of the most interesting descriptions of tragedy since Aristotle’s is found in the following speech by the Chorus in Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*.

> Tragedy is clean, it is firm, it is flawless. It has nothing to do with melodrama—with wicked villains, persecuted maidens, avengers, gleams of hope, and eleventh-hour repentances. Death, in a melodrama, is really horrible because it is never inevitable. The dear old
father might so easily have been saved; the honest young man might so easily have brought in the police five minutes earlier.

In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and everyone’s destiny is known. That makes for tranquility. Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn’t any hope. You’re trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is to shout. Now don’t mistake me: I said “shout”: I did not say groan, whimper, complain. That, you cannot do. But you can shout aloud; you can get all those things said that you never thought you’d be able to say—or never even knew you had it in you to say. And you don’t say these things because it will do any good to say them: you know better than that. You say them for their own sake; you say them because you learn a lot from them.

In melodrama, you argue and struggle in the hope of escape. That is vulgar; it’s practical. But in tragedy, where there is no temptation to try to escape, argument is gratuitous: it’s kingly.

Pictured here is the chorus from Jean Anouilh’s Antigone. In Anouilh’s version of Sophocles’ classic play, Creon and his niece Antigone clash over which has priority: duty to family or duty to obey one’s king.
The word comedy is derived from the Greek words, komos and ode, meaning “revel song.” Comedies are usually societal and conciliatory: all the characters come together at the end of the play. Even the villains usually rejoin the group. While comedy often depends on circumstances unique to a particular time and place, the greatest and most enduring comedies have taken situations and characters with which most audiences can easily identify. These plays have had lasting appeal because audiences recognize the people and understand their predicaments.

There are many types of comedy. Some cause great belly laughs; some bring laughter to the point of tears; and some cause only inner smiles or chuckles. Comedy does not always make you laugh out loud, but most comedy will amuse, delight, or at least please you.

In comedy, the protagonist overcomes opposing forces or achieves desired goals or both. The protagonist is often a less-than-average person in some way. The comic protagonist may be an idealist, a romantic, an extreme pragmatist, a blunderer, a dreamer, or even a rogue.

Comedy, like all drama, is built around character, situations, and dialogue. A strange character bumbling along through life, like Elwood Dowd
in *Harvey*, provokes laughter. The pleasure-loving but cowardly Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the linguistically confused Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan’s *The Rivals* become funny in themselves. Comic situations consist of predicaments that seem insurmountable or improbable. Mistaken identities, rash promises, or a series of events in which everything seems to go wrong are typical comic situations. Trying to live one life in town and a different one in the country makes the situation in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* amusing.

### TRAGEDY VERSUS COMEDY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tragedy</th>
<th>Comedy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inevitable—there is no way to change or to stop the outcome</td>
<td>Predictably unpredictable—you can expect the unlikely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal theme and appeal</td>
<td>Often time and place oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Intellectual, mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist fails to achieve goals</td>
<td>Protagonist achieves goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist alienated from society</td>
<td>Protagonist often becomes leader of new society; even villain is usually accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist average or better</td>
<td>Protagonist less than average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist falls from leadership, losing respect, dreams, position</td>
<td>Protagonist achieves success, often as a result of own mistakes or shortcomings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Application ACTIVITIES

1. Read or watch a comic play or film. Explain how it fulfills the seven parts of the definition of comedy given in the chart above.

2. Does the historical period have more influence on the comedy in question 1 above or on the tragedy in question 3 from page 274? Why? Did you feel it was a specific portrayal of the place and time in which it was written? Write a report comparing and analyzing the effects that historical period and culture have on the comedy and tragedy you studied.
It is difficult to determine what makes people laugh. Sometimes we laugh at very strange things—the exaggerated, the grotesque, even the horrifying. Other times we laugh out of embarrassment, to save ourselves from tears, or sometimes, it seems, for no reason at all. Partly because of this unpredictable response, comic plays are more difficult to perform successfully than serious plays. What is funny today may not be funny tomorrow. What is humorous in New York City might not be amusing in London or St. Louis. It is possible, however, to identify seven common causes of laughter: exaggeration, incongruity, anticipation, ambiguity, recognition, protection, and relief.

Exaggeration  The most noticeable characteristic of comedy is probably exaggeration. Exaggeration can take several forms. It might take the form of overstatement. In *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, when Sakini takes a piece of gum from his mouth, carefully wraps it in a piece of paper, puts it away in a matchbook, and says, “Tootie-fruitie. . . . Most generous gift of American sergeant,” he is overstating the importance of the gift. Exaggeration can also be an understatement. When Sherlock Holmes says, “Elementary, my dear Watson,” he is understating the amount of effort required to solve the mystery in question.

Exaggeration may include physical characteristics—a bulbous nose or large teeth—and mannerisms—a strange walk or a twitching eye. It may also include mental characteristics, such as the almost-too-brilliant child prodigy or the incredibly dense person.

Another form of exaggeration stems from the “humors” of Shakespeare’s time. The humors (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm) were considered personality determiners that make people giggly, carefree, happy-go-lucky (blood); moody, philosophical, love-sick (black bile); and calm, serious, and reserved (yellow bile). Exaggeration also describes how an actor’s exaggerated facial features can help them get deeper into character.
Varieties of Drama

[black bile]; impatient, hotheaded, passionate (yellow bile); and dull, lazy, sluggish (phlegm). These personality types are such exaggerations of the normal that when they are well acted, audiences respond with laughter or tears.

**Incongruity** Anything that seems out of place, out of time, or out of character is an example of incongruity. For example, a modern reference in a play that is obviously set in the past often provokes laughter.

In theater, incongruity comes in many forms. It may be an unnatural action, such as a soldier who walks like a wind-up toy or actors who behave like cats. It is present in Gogol’s *The Inspector General* when government officials mistake a penniless traveler for a government inspector and treat him accordingly. Incongruity may be an unnatural sound—a piercing, brayish laugh, severely trilled r’s, or an undulating pitch that soars up and down—that makes an audience laugh. The incongruity might be a twist, a turn of events that changes the logical completion of a pattern, or it might be a reversal, when the tables are turned and the weak overcome the strong or the underdog triumphs. The irrelevant, often in the form of dialogue about an unimportant detail when something critical is at stake, is still another form of humorous incongruity.

**Anticipation** The key to many laughs is anticipation, or looking forward to a potential laugh. The old gag of the banana peel on the sidewalk is an excellent example of anticipation. The observer will start to laugh even before the clown takes the disastrous step.

Anticipation also plays a role in comedies of mistaken identity such as *She Stoops to Conquer*. Young Marlow has been told that the Hardcastle estate is an inn. When he arrives, he is greeted by Mr. Hardcastle, the father of the woman he is on his way to court. Marlow, however, assumes that Mr. Hardcastle is the innkeeper, and so Marlow orders him around as if he were a servant. This reversal of roles, along with the anticipation that the truth will eventually be known, is a source of laughter.
Several techniques are used to create anticipation. A common one is the **plant**—an idea, a line, or an action emphasized early in the play, sometimes called **foreshadowing**, and used later for a laugh. In order for the idea to provoke laughter, however, at least three exposures are required: one to plant, one to establish, and one to clinch. This is often called a **running gag**.

**Incompletion** is another technique that causes anticipation. A line or bit of action is started but never finished. The audience completes the thought with laughter.

The **anticlimax**, or letdown, is also based on anticipation. Excitement about something is built up to great proportions, and then, like a bursting bubble, there is nothing.

**Ambiguity** Double meaning, or **ambiguity**, is the heart of many humorous lines. Puns and word play depend on the audience’s recognizing the possible interpretations and almost always selecting the least likely one. Even names like Lydia Languish, Lady Teazle, and Sir Benjamin Backbite have a humorous ambiguity. Are they the names of people, descriptions of characters, or both?

**Recognition** Discovering hidden or obscure meanings is called **recognition**. An audience is often amused to recognize the difference between a character’s inner motivation and the apparent motivation. For example, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Lazer Wolf...
approaches Tevya with the intent of buying a cow. Tevya, however, thinks that Lazer Wolf wants to marry his oldest daughter. The audience finds the misunderstanding very funny; when Tevya recognizes his mistake, the audience is again amused.

We are also amused when we discover what is going to happen just before it actually does. The take—the mouth-agape freeze of farce—often brings down the house. The character sees or hears something that apparently does not sink in, takes a step or two, and then suddenly the meaning hits. Sometimes the meaning hits on several levels, causing double or even triple takes.

**Protection** One of the most important elements of comedy is the protection factor. Cruel, violent, grotesque, and abusive actions and events often cause laughter because the audience is protected by knowing that these things are not really happening or that they are not as damaging as they seem. The secret of humor in the cartoon in which the character runs off a cliff is the protection factor. The character falls a hundred feet to apparent doom but amazingly reappears in the next frame. The old slapstick of a pie in the face is another example, this causes considerable commotion but hurts no one. We can be truly amused when we are certain no one will really be injured and it is safe to accept the illusion as real.

**Relief** A good comedy builds up pressure and then releases it. This relief of pressure is humorous when the pent-up emotions are allowed to explode in a laugh.

A typical comic sequence might unfold like this: a comic character lights the fuse on a powder keg and places it in the path of an adversary (the plant). The fuse goes out at the last moment and the adversary passes by unharmed (anticlimax or letdown). The character approaches the powder keg to see what went wrong (anticipation). The powder keg blows up in the comic character’s face (incongruity). The comic character emerges ragged and soot-covered, but unharmed (protection and relief).

**Application**

**ACTIVITY**

Read or watch a comic play or film. As you watch, note which of these seven techniques the playwright uses to create humor. Which technique is the most effective?
Types of Comedy

From the study of comedy in ancient Greece come the classifications of Old, Middle, and New Comedy. Old Comedy was characterized by its scathing satirical attack on political events and figures. Middle Comedy evolved to focus more on social occurrences, which called for the incorporation of everyday speech. This classification still contained a satirical edge that differentiates it from New Comedy. Menander, the man credited with the origination of New Comedy, presented a sentimental view of life and tried to appeal to audiences’ intellect rather than base sense of humor.

The Old, Middle, and New Comedy classifications are used only for the comedies of ancient Greece. The general terms used to classify comedy from that time forward are low and high. Understanding the classification of a play will help you with the portrayal of your character or help you direct a play and remain true to the author’s intentions.

LOW COMEDY

The term low comedy is not intended to belittle this type of drama. Low comedy focuses on physical antics, such as appear in The Three Stooges. Silent films had to rely on visual physical humor to generate laughter. The situations and characters in low comedy are usually outlandish, and the play is usually exaggerated in style and performance.

The term slapstick is derived from an old stage prop consisting of two thin boards hinged together. The slapstick made a loud but harmless sound when applied to the backside of a performer.

CUE ▼

In A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, Mickey Rooney leads Roman soldiers on a merry chase.
**Farce** A comic technique often present in other types of plays, farce is one of the main types of low comedy. A farce is based on improbable characters and implausible coincidences and events.

Farces include practical jokes, clowning, and many physical indignities, such as ear pulling, shin kicking, and pie throwing. Farces usually include chase scenes—through gardens or houses, around furniture, or in and out of doors. *Charley's Aunt*, written in 1892 by Brandon Thomas, is an example of a full-length farce. It includes a hilarious chase scene through the Oxford Botanical Gardens.

Farces may also have screen scenes. In a *screen scene*, some of the actors hide—behind doors, inside closets, or behind bushes—from the other actors onstage. The concealed characters always overhear the onstage dialogue and may pop out to say something, talk to each other, or make *asides*—lines spoken directly to the audience.

Many comedies that are not classified as full-length farce still have elements of farce in them. Since the end of World War II, many authors have used farcical techniques to enhance the serious themes in their works. Examples of these plays include Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Eugène Ionesco’s *The Chairs*.

**Burlesque** Like farce, *burlesque* relies on physical comedy and exaggeration. They are usually less coherent than farces and much more exaggerated. Burlesque is a mockery of a broad topic, such as a style, societal view, or literary form, and the audience should have previous knowledge of the play’s subject, or they will not understand the entirety of its humor. For example, to fully understand the well-known burlesque *The Boyfriend* (1954), a viewer must know that the boy-meets-girl scenario was predominant in the musical theater of the 1920s. When burlesque came to the United States, it evolved into the bawdy variety show that the word *burlesque* often connotes. However, there is a marked difference between European burlesque, addressed here, and American burlesque.

**Parody** This type of comedy is a mockery of a certain person or work, incorporating a *caricature*, or exaggerated feature, of the subject. Parody, like burlesque, requires prior knowledge of the subject being ridiculed. It, too, includes physical comedy, but relies less on it than burlesque does. It is unusual to find an entire play that is a parody since the topic of ridicule is so limited. However, these works do exist; for example, the Mel Brooks’ movie *Spaceballs* is a parody of *Star Wars*. More commonly, parody is incorporated into a specific scene of a work.
HIGH COMEDY

Intellectual humor constitutes **high comedy**. When viewing high comedy, it is essential to pay close attention to the dialogue, because high comedy relies almost exclusively on witty dialogue, not physical action. As in parody and burlesque, there is a particular subject being ridiculed. The only difference is the way in which this ridicule is presented.

**Comedy of Manners**  Also called drawing room comedy because the main action of these plays take place in the drawing rooms of upper-class citizens, a **comedy of manners** usually mocks the pretenses of the upper class. Built on clever use of language, the wit of a comedy of manners includes puns, paradoxes, epigrams, and ironies. The dialogue is clever, often attacking socially-accepted standards of the day.

Comedy of manners was extremely popular during the Restoration period. Wycherly, Congreve, and Sheridan were all creators of this genre. Their plays are still produced today in theaters across the country.

**Satire** Like parody or burlesque, satire ridicules human folly, societal views, or individuals. Unlike a writer of parody or burlesque, a satirist usually has the goal of changing something for the better by ridiculing it. **Satire** is intellectual in its attack. You will find in satirical works a mockery using language rather than physical antics.

One of the foremost authors of this style was Ben Jonson, but satire has been around since the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw are well-known satirists, as are Noël Coward and Tom Stoppard.

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**Application Activity**

Read one of the comedies mentioned in this section. If the play is available on video, you may prefer to watch it. Consider how the play fits the category. Make a list of the characteristics that identify it as low or high comedy. Note any examples of the following: slapstick, chase scene, screen scene, parody, caricature, witty dialogue, satire.
Other Types of Drama

Many plays cannot be categorized as tragedy or comedy since they have elements of both pathos and humor in them. This type of play is more abundant than either pure tragedy or pure comedy. Examples include fantasy, romantic comedy, and melodrama, to name a few. The types have developed and changed throughout history, sometimes evolving into a style of writing in theater and fiction and sometimes evolving from literature. Some of these types of drama are still written today, but others were simply reactions to previous styles, and their popularity has not withstood the test of time. As you read about these different types of theater, you will realize that not all works can be categorized because many include elements from several genres.

Fantasy

Dealing with unreal characters, with dreams, and with imaginary times and places, fantasy usually occurs in a land of make-believe that is often inhabited by spirits who have supernatural powers, gods from another world, witches, and flawless heroes. Fantastical works often have a basis in reality, such as the movie *The Never-Ending Story* in which a boy is picked on and beaten by bullies but finds his escape in a story that features him as the hero. The use of fantasy within plays is not a new trend; even Shakespeare incorporated it in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, supplying his audience with both frightening and humorous characters. Some modern plays are also based on fantasy, such as *Peter Pan* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The legend of King Arthur is another popular topic in fantasy fiction.
**Romantic Comedy**  Written in the style of *romanticism*, which originated in the eighteenth century, *romantic comedies* feature plots focusing on love affairs between flawless heroes and virtuous heroines. These two characters are ideally suited for each other, and they are presented as too good to be true. Their love affair has its ups and downs but always ends happily. Romantic comedies, such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Lerner and Loewe's *Brigadoon*, are still presented today; however, very few are authored in this era.

**Sentimental Comedy**  Although classified as a comedy, this genre lacks humor. As a reaction to Restoration drama and the immorality present in it, *sentimental comedy* is marked by an emotional and ideal presentation of material, to the point of being *schmaltz*. In this type of play, the hero and heroine are so virtuous they seem to be caricatures, and the villain shows no redeeming values. The characters are flat, and the plot contrived, with virtue always prevailing. Richard Steele is the best-known writer of the sentimental comedy with his plays *The Tender Husband* and *The Conscious Lovers*. Due to their lack of substance, the popularity of sentimental comedies was short lived.

**Melodrama**  Originating in nineteenth-century England, *melodrama* is marked by its use of stock characters and implausible plots. Like sentimental comedy, melodrama presents a trite storyline where a virtuous maiden is threatened by an evil villain, but is rescued by a flawless hero. Every act of a melodrama concludes with a climax, leaving the audience, which was usually the illiterate commoners of nineteenth-century England, hanging on for the resolution. The sets were spectacular, and the staging of events such as earthquakes and shipwrecks was nearly always present.

Although melodrama is based on the structure of tragedy, it focuses more on the actions of the characters rather than on their motivations. It also lacks the sense of inevitability that is so necessary in tragedy. Melodrama presents a clear-cut view of morality, leaving no room to question the motivations of the villainous character, who must be motivated by evil intent, or the virtuous character, who in turn must be motivated by the search for right. It does, however, include the suffering of innocent, virtuous characters, as in tragedy, but these good characters always triumph in the end. The true form of melodrama exists only in nineteenth-century classics, such as *Marie Martin* and *The Streets of London*, but many melodramatic elements are present in the modern plays of O'Neill and many popular movies.
Play of Ideas  Sometimes called a problem play or a social drama, a play of ideas deals with a social problem, such as racism, classism, or sexism. This genre might also deal with questions of wrong and right, or numerous other philosophical arguments. The playwright usually presents a solution to the problem covered, or at least guides the characters in the right direction. For example, Athol Fugard, a white South African, voices in his plays a strong opposition to the South African government’s policy of racial segregation called apartheid. Many feel that his work was important in focusing opposition to apartheid, which was finally repealed in 1991. For example, in his play My Children! My Africa! he emphasizes the importance of love for and loyalty to Africa by pointing out the atrocities that famine and war have wrought. Fugard has also authored Blood Knot and Sizwe Banzi Is Dead.

Some other famous plays of ideas include Henrik Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People, which demonstrates how a man from a small town stands for
civic integrity against all other citizens; Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which attacks the selfishness of the elite; and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, which shows an African American family struggling to escape poverty.

**Psychological Drama**  As serious plays, *psychological dramas* are often penetrating and sometimes painful; the playwright battles the complexities of the human psyche and personal relationships. Eugene O’Neill wrote psychological as well as social drama. *Long Day’s Journey into Night* was a very personal play, in which O’Neill explores some of the difficulties of his own early life. Tennessee Williams was one of America’s great psychological dramatists. With *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and many other plays, he shows family and personal struggles. Marsha Norman in *Night, Mother* deals with a troubled woman and her relationship with her mother; in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Edward Albee explores human weakness and the torment people create when they are unable to accept weakness in those around them.

**The “Whodunit”**  The suspense in a “*whodunit*” of solving a crime or of a courtroom drama tremendously heightens dramatic effects and hooks audiences. Some popular “*whodunits*” are *Ten Little Indians*, and *The Mousetrap*.

**Allegory**  A play that teaches moral concepts through characters who personify abstract qualities and concepts, such as truth, justice, love, death, and humanity, can be considered an *allegory*. Allegory has been a popular form of storytelling throughout history. The classic example is *Everyman*. In this medieval play, Everyman is suddenly summoned to meet Death. He must appear before God for judgment on his life. In his desperate need, all his friends—Five Wits, Fellowship, Kindred, Discretion, Beauty, Strength, and Knowledge—fail him. Only his Good Deeds will go with him.

**SOME SPECIAL FORMS OF DRAMA**

**Children’s Theater**  A large part of contemporary theater is devoted to *children’s theater*—drama written, designed, and performed for children. Many high school drama groups produce at least one children’s play each season. Regional, civic, and professional theater groups often include children’s theater as part of their seasons. Some even run a separate children’s theater schedule. Many original scripts and new adaptations are available for production.

**Puppet Theater**  Puppets have long been a part of theater the world over. In recent years, however, children’s television programs have prompted a
new interest in puppets. Enormous puppets combined with masked actors in the American Repertory Theater production of Andrei Serban’s *King Stag* create powerful adult theater. For a special section on puppet theater, see page 328.

**Monodrama** A monodrama is a play written to be performed by a single actor. In *Before Breakfast*, an O’Neill tragedy, a nagging wife drives her husband into committing suicide offstage. In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Lily Tomlin created an enormous variety of characters in a series of monologues that were part comedy and part social criticism.

A popular form of monodrama is the impersonation of historical figures: Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain, Cornelia Otis Skinner as the wives of Henry VIII, Robert Morse as Truman Capote, among many.

In the last part of the twentieth century, performance art became increasingly popular. This form of monodrama often involves juxtaposing many different elements of theater in a novel way. Performance artists such as Laurie Anderson use video, multiple screens, megaphones, and music to create full-length, loosely constructed theater pieces.

**Application**

**ACTIVITY**

Using the following situation or one that you create, explain what would be emphasized if it were produced as a social drama or as a psychological drama. How might it be turned into a monodrama? How could it be adapted as a “whodunit” or suspense drama?

**Dramatic situation:** A couple has adopted and raised a baby. Now the child is ready to start the first grade. Suddenly the birth parents come forward with a legal reason for the child to be given back to them.
Styles of Drama

The term style refers to the way in which a play is written, produced, and acted. Dramatists choose the style of language and action they feel best expresses their ideas. Directors and scenic artists present plays in a style they feel suits the script. Classifying plays by style is sometimes difficult because playwrights and directors combine styles to create the effects they want.

Style relies heavily on theatrical conventions, such as setting and other visual elements, to convey particular interpretation. The director and designer may blend costume, scenery, and lighting to create an effect that is more abstract than realistic. Highly stylized productions have included characters dressed like the animals they resemble in spirit, characters wearing masks, and Shakespearean characters dressed in simple, uniform garments that are not tied to a particular time or place.

Most plays are representational, a style sometimes called “fourth-wall” theater. The play is performed as if the audience were watching the action through an imaginary fourth wall, one of the most common theatrical conventions. The presentational style, on the other hand, acknowledges that an audience is present. Characters may address the audience, and some action may even take place in the seating area, as in Wilder’s Our Town.

The term avant-garde applies to new and experimental styles of any art form. Many techniques accepted today as common theater practices were once considered avant-garde. In the United States, much of the new experimentation takes place off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway. While many avant-garde movements quickly disappear, a few become part of the continuing theater. Once a style is accepted, of course, it is no longer considered avant-garde.

THEATER STYLES AND TRENDS

The styles described below have all been a part of twentieth-century theater, even though some of them began hundreds of years before.

Romanticism  A literary and artistic movement that began in the eighteenth century, romanticism focuses on emotions and imagination. Romanticism became popular in the theater as a reaction to the strict neoclassicism that predominated in French theater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Romantic plays were elaborately staged and featured ideal characters. With love as the primary theme, romantic comedies became one of the favorite forms of romanticism. In fact, romantic comedies are one of the few works of this style that are still presented. Of course, many modern plays and movies contain elements of romanticism.
In the romantic play *Beauty and the Beast*, the beast symbolizes the human desire to be loved in spite of savage behaviors that from time to time make every human unlovable.
**Realism**  This dominant style of the twentieth century takes an opposite approach. **Realism** in plays presents life as it actually is—often unpleasant and unhappy, but not necessarily so. The characters talk and act as people in ordinary life do. The outcome of the play makes sense in the real world. Sets and scenery contribute to the real-life atmosphere. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen has been called the father of realism as well as the father of modern drama. He introduced realism in *A Doll’s House* in 1879.

**Naturalism**  The style called naturalism grew out of realism and out of the idea that human beings have little self-determination but act in response to forces of nature and society that are beyond their control. **Naturalism** is often sordid and shocking as it depicts life as it is with no holds barred.

**Symbolism**  In theater, symbolism is the use of one element—a character, a prop, or a piece of scenery—to represent something else. However, the dramatic movement **symbolism** began in the late nineteenth century in France as a reaction against realism. Dramatists began to use symbolic elements to represent emotions, ideals, and values. Early twentieth-century Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck is best known for his symbolist dramas. Other plays that display elements of symbolism include Ibsen’s later plays, such as *The Wild Duck*, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Sea Gull*, and the early plays of Yeats.

**Expressionism**  The characters and sets of **expressionism** tend to be distorted, oversimplified, and symbolic rather than realistic. The message of expressionism is often the uselessness of human hopes and dreams in the face of mechanistic forces. The movement began in Germany, and most of the notable expressionistic playwrights are German. The two best-known expressionists in Germany were Georg Kaiser (*From Morn to Midnight*) and Ernst Toller (*The Machine Wreckers*). American playwright Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones* are also examples of expressionism.

**Epic Theater**  First developed by Bertolt Brecht, **epic theater** is a journalistic, nonemotional style. It uses signs, projections, films, and loudspeakers to present events in an episodic form. The epic theater is a reaction against emotionalism and naturalism. Brecht’s plays, for example, do not necessarily involve the spectators in the problems and feelings of the characters, and entertaining is a secondary goal. Brecht’s plays set forth events in an objective episodic form, using broad aspects of human experience rather than individual relationships. Some of his best-known plays are *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *The Threepenny Opera*. 
Constructivism  One trend of the early twentieth century produced the style known as constructivism, or Socialist Realism. Originated by Russian playwright Vsevolod Meyerhold, constructivism was in direct contrast to realism. Productions in the constructivist style were not based on real life and were not staged on traditional picture-frame stages. Instead, backgrounds of mechanical skeletons on various levels were connected by arches, ramps, ladders, and platforms. On these, actors were trained to move with precise symbolic movements designed to take the place of spoken language. Although the acting style associated with constructivism is fading, similar sets and skeletal frameworks are still used occasionally to suggest location and feeling.

This production of *Metamorphosis*, a stage adaptation of Franz Kafka's famous short story, used constructivism to suggest an inhuman atmosphere. Here ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov portrays the protagonist, a victim of bourgeois society, who woke up one morning to find himself transformed into a cockroach.
Theater of the Absurd  The phrase *theater of the absurd* was coined by twentieth-century drama critic, Martin Esslin, to describe the playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s whose drama presented the belief in the absurdity of human life. French writer Albert Camus influenced the development of the theater of the absurd with his philosophical essay “The Myth of Sisyphus.” In this essay Camus suggests that human hopes and plans are ridiculous because the universe is a random place where things happen for no reason.

An absurdist world view leads playwrights to explore the theme of chaos. In *theater of the absurd*, language, a tool typically used to establish meaning, is proven unreliable. In absurdist plays, dialogue is usually meaningless or illogical, and, in some cases, absent altogether. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is one of the best-known plays in the absurdist style. Other important absurdist playwrights include Eugène Ionesco, Edward Albee, and Arthur Adamov.
The school of philosophy known as existentialism is closely linked with the theater of the absurd. According to existentialism, we begin our lives in a random world that only offers us possibilities. Faced with free choice, we define our existence through our decisions, our actions, and our relations with other beings. In No Exit by Jean-Paul Sartre, three characters who have never met are put into a room and told they cannot leave. With no one to interact with but one another, the characters slowly begin to discover who they are.

Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is a lesson in existential frustration. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no information outside of the fact that they were sent for. They spend the entire play trying to find out what they are supposed to do, but before they discover the answer, their time onstage is over.

**Theater of Involvement** The participation of members of the audience in the action of the performance characterizes the theater of involvement, also called participatory theater. Paradise Now was one of the first productions staged as an involvement play. Involvement has been successful in such productions as Cats, in which performers go into the audience and play directly to individuals, and in Tony n' Tina's Wedding, in which the audience is called on to participate as wedding guests.

**Theatricalism** The style known as theatricalism simply says, “This is the theater. Accept it for what is, as it is.” Theatricalism makes no pretense of reality because dramatic situations are not real situations. The cardboard moon, wooden-dowel swords, and the mute wall of The Fantasticks are illustrations of theatricalism.

**Total Theater** Total theater involves a fusion of all the performing arts into one presentation. Dance, mime, atmospheric music, and creative costuming and staging are combined with high-tech audiovisual special effects. Robert Wilson's Einstein on the Beach is an example.

**Application**

Choose one of the styles of theater mentioned in the previous pages, and trace its history from the beginning to the present. Include a thorough description of the style, cultural origins, and names of famous playwrights and philosophers associated with it. It would be helpful to view a play or a film written in that particular style. You might want to organize your information in the form of a time line, or you may find it more useful to trace the development on a map.
**Summary and Key Ideas**

Summarize the chapter by answering the following questions.

1. Compare the protagonist in a tragedy to the protagonist in a comedy.
2. What should an audience feel at the end of a tragedy?
3. List and describe seven causes of laughter.
4. Describe four types of drama that have characteristics of both comedy and tragedy.
5. Describe three styles of twentieth-century theater.

**Discussing Ideas**

1. What is the appeal of tragedy for an audience? What is meant by the “inevitability” of tragedy?
2. Discuss this statement: “Tragedy is universal; comedy is rooted in a particular time or place.” Cite examples of plays or movies you have seen that support this statement.
3. Would you classify most of the comedy shows that appear on television as high comedy, low comedy, or something else? Give examples.
4. What is the principal difference between representational and presentational drama?
5. What risks do playwrights take when they create experimental drama? What risks might the audience take when they attend an experimental drama?

**FOCUS ON Dramatic Texts**

*When you read a dramatic text, take time to think about the work’s overall structure.*

Then, think about the writer’s style, noting his or her expressive qualities and characteristic language. Finally, decide what genre, or category of literary work—such as comedy or tragedy—the work belongs to. Analyzing these features of text will help you learn the playwright’s purpose for writing.

*Analyzing Structure* All drama, whether live theater, film, or television, has the same basic structure. Choose a film or a television show that you’ve seen recently. In a one-page essay, outline the elements of the work’s dramatic structure—the presentation of the exposition, plot, characters, and theme. To gain a deeper appreciation of the work, figure out what genre the work belongs to and do some research to learn more about the genre’s history.

*Evaluating Texts* With a small group, select a play to read. After reading, get together to evaluate one of the following elements of the text: theme, setting, style, genre, or characterization. On your own, take time to reflect on the discussion. If your school was performing the play, how would such a discussion affect the play’s staging?
Performance Art  Choose a poem that you consider to have a special message for your peers, and use it as the basis for an experiment with this innovative style of drama. Begin by practicing reading the poem aloud in different ways, and consider singing, shouting, or whispering as part of your interpretation. Then add accompaniments to your reading, such as music and dance. You might even consider supplementing your performance art with elements of epic theater. For example, slides flashed on a screen behind you might help reinforce your words and theme. Present your drama to the class.

Stylization  With a group of classmates, choose a scene from a drama that is set in the past. The drama you choose should be something that most of the class will recognize, such as Julius Caesar or Cyrano de Bergerac. Rewrite the scene using modern language. Present your scene in stylized form, wearing jeans and T-shirts, formal wear, leotards, choir robes, or costumes of your choice, as long as they are not authentic to the period of the original play. Discuss with the class how this adaptation differs from the original. Which does the class prefer? Why?

History  Working alone, with a partner, or with a group, choose a theme from history, such as war, progress, intolerance, or great leadership, and create a show featuring readings and short scenes from a variety of sources. Aim for a mixture of drama, short story, essay, and poetry from different historical periods. As an alternative, choose an interesting person and create a one-person show that focuses on his or her life and what he or she achieved. Readings from Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank; Growing Up Puerto Rican edited by Paulette Cooper; My Lord What a Morning by Marian Anderson; Manchild in the Promised Land by Claude Brown; Native Son by Richard Wright; or Portrait of Myself by Margaret Bourke-White might provide inspiration.