



# LANGUAGE ARTS

STUDENT BOOK

▶ **11th Grade | Unit 7**

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# LANGUAGE ARTS 1107

## AMERICAN DRAMA

INTRODUCTION | 3

### 1. **THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA** **5**

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BRIEF HISTORY OF DRAMA | 6

DRAMA IN AMERICA | 7

SELF TEST 1 | 12

### 2. **THE ART OF DRAMA** **14**

---

DEFINITION OF DRAMA | 14

PURPOSE OF DRAMA | 15

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA | 16

STRUCTURE OF A PLAY | 18

COMPREHENSION BY READING A PLAY | 21

SELF TEST 2 | 24

### 3. **WILDER'S *OUR TOWN*** **27**

---

THORNTON WILDER | 27

*OUR TOWN* | 29

SELF TEST 3 | 40

### **GLOSSARY** **43**

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**LIFEPAC Test is located in the center of the booklet.** Please remove before starting the unit.

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# American Drama

## Introduction

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

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

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

## Objectives

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

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

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

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# 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA

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

## Section Objectives

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

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

## Vocabulary

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

**play**

**vernacular**

**Note:** All vocabulary words in this LIFEPAK appear in **boldface** print the first time they are used. If you are not sure of the meaning when you are reading, study the definitions given.



| Greek theater

## BRIEF HISTORY OF DRAMA

Drama is one of the oldest forms of literature; and, though its prehistoric origins have been lost to us, early drama probably grew out of primitive religious rites. The earliest written records of drama come from ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C., where actors performing in large open air amphitheaters presented **plays** based on the Greeks' pagan religions. All the actors were men wearing masks to represent various characters they portrayed. Although both tragedy and comedy were produced, only a few of the tragedies have survived to be studied today.

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

The church kept drama alive during the Middle Ages in Europe through the presentation of *mystery*, *morality*, and *miracle* plays, which were particularly popular during religious festivals and holidays. These three kinds of drama were religious in nature but dealt with slightly different subjects. The *mystery* plays were reenactments of Biblical stories, for example, the story of Noah or the birth of Christ.

*Morality* plays were, on the other hand, allegories in which the characters were not individuals, but representations of the virtues and vices of man (Greed, Envy, Good Deeds, and so on). The *miracle* play was always based on the life of one of the saints. These three types of plays, often crude and always simple because they were directed at an uneducated audience did however, keep alive the tradition of drama in the Western world.

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

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### Complete these statements.

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



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

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

## DRAMA IN AMERICA

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

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

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

**The period after the Revolution.** After 1783 there was a gradual lessening of prejudice against the theater, and a few scattered companies of actors began performing in the larger cities. Neither public support nor international copyright laws favored



| Scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

the development of a national drama. The theater did establish itself at this time, however, and began to build an audience and to develop an increasing number of native American actors, managers, and playwrights.



These early American plays can be divided into two distinct styles:

1. The romantic literary style—simply an imitation of foreign or classical historic drama and
2. The realistic **vernacular** style—usually a form of low comedy based on native American material, and stereotypes.

American drama of the romantic style was written chiefly for entertainment. Popular subjects included events and people from American history, the Indian, and the stage “Yankee.” The “Yankee” was a popular character type who displayed native American wit by outsmarting the more sophisticated foreigner.

No play of any real merit was written until George L. Aiken adapted Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the stage in 1852. Not only did he blend both romantic and realistic styles to provide an accurate summary of the taste of the day, but also he chose for his subject a contemporary issue of the times, slavery. His melodrama contains something for everyone, for Aiken successfully combined

the realistic vernacular of his lowerclass characters with the poetic language of his more noble ones.

**The period between 1865 and 1914.** This period from the Civil War until just after the turn of the century was really a time of depression for the American drama. Hundreds of plays were written and produced but none were worth remembering. These dramas were the products of an artificial style developed by playwrights who aimed only at commercial success. Three important trends born near the end of this period, deeply affected the drama written in this century:

1. A movement toward realism in the theater,
2. A desire to deal intelligently with serious problems as the subjects of plays, and
3. A definite leaning toward symbolism in playwriting.

All three of these trends became more important in the twentieth century as American drama came of age and took over the world stage.

**Complete these activities.**

**1.12** List four reasons American drama had a slow start.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_

**1.13** List the two styles of early American plays.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_

**1.14** Explain the literary merit of Aiken’s adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**1.15** List three trends in American drama which began during the period from 1865 to 1914.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

**The twentieth century, (1914–1940).** Theater, then, had grown along with the nation; but drama had not. Before this century all the plays produced in America were revivals of old romantic or classic favorites or new plays just like them. Playwrights, handcuffed by tradition, were unable to deal with contemporary problems; and thus the plays they wrote were dramatic entertainment, certainly, but not dramatic literature.

By 1900 Americans had become accustomed to the theater, had developed a body of competent actors, and had acquired the physical resources to present any kind of play. Two movements, the revival of dramatic literature in Europe at this time and the growth of the “little theater” in the United States, also aided the birth of this “new drama.”

The “new drama” produced a great variety of new forms of plays: the problem play, the naturalistic play, the expressionist play, and the folk drama were a few of the more successful types. Dramatic methods too underwent radical experimentation with the introduction of such techniques as allegory, fantasy, symbolism, and poetry into the structure of American plays. The new playwrights—Eugene O’Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, and others—also experimented with formerly untraditional subjects for their plays, including such ideas as the complexities of human life, the moral and social value of American life, and the economic and political problems of the modern world.

Eugene O’Neill, the first American playwright of major literary stature, employed startling forms and styles to dramatize his chief concern, which was to illustrate “the eternal predicament of man struggling for some understanding and some justification of himself in a universe always mysterious and often seemingly inimical.” Whereas the Christian finds his answers in the Bible, O’Neill and his contemporaries sought their answers in philosophy and psychology as well as in social and political doctrines. The 1930s was the heyday for the drama as social criticism in this country with such writers as Clifford Odets and



Lillian Hellman presenting enormously successful plays of this type.

All of this free experimentation with dramatic forms, styles, and methods produced a rich and rewarding variety of new plays—romantic tragedy, historical drama, fantastic comedy, even musical comedy. Three new schools or philosophies of playwriting grew out of this experimentation; and, though only one survived, all three played, and still play, a large part in American drama. These schools were realism, symbolism, and expressionism.

*Realism*, the most predominant movement among the modern playwrights, pictured ordinary men struggling against the unspectacular and unpleasant problems of everyday life and succeeding no better than real people do. Realism attempts to present life as it seems to actually be rather than life as one might wish it to be. The setting of a realistic play was not used to dazzle or impress the audience, but rather to reflect the ugliness, meanness, or triviality the realists believed existed in the lives of ordinary people. Such sets were then, drab, colorless, and often depressing.



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