**Hama Lakhdar University**

**Faculty of Arts and Foreign Languages**

**Department of English**

**1st Year Master**

Contemporary British Literature

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**Course Title:** History of British Drama

**History of British Drama**

The following is a brief overview on the development of English drama.

**1.The Middle Age Drama**

British drama rooted in the Middle Ages. It started in the form of dialogue in the 6thCentury between the two sides of choir who alternately responded to each other. Along with the dialogue, the dramatic action was developed as a means of learning the principles of Christian truth.

From the 10th Century, there were alternating songs combined with some kind of theoretical staging, the German and the French contributed in the rise of the Christian drama. For example, **‘ The Regularis Concordia’** was composed during the reign of Edgar ( 959-975). It contained rules for divine service in English monasteries[[1]](#footnote-2).

**1.1. The Miracle Plays**

From the 13thCentury to the 15th Century miracle plays were performed in the church. They were simple plays based on the Bible stories including the creation of the world, Noah and the flood, the birth of Christ[[2]](#footnote-3), they were usually performed in the feast days such as Christmas, Easter, and Corpus Christian Days ; The language was always Latin[[3]](#footnote-4) .

**1.2. The Morality Plays**

Out of the miracle play, the morality play emerged. It is intended to inculcate some useful lessons of religion, morality or science. So instead of the Bible characters such as Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham...etc , the writers of moralities gave such names to their characters as: mercy, mischief, conscience, folly, strength, knowledge, good deeds, ‘ **Everyman**’ is the finest of moralities[[4]](#footnote-5).

In this context, it is important to mention that it took in England more than two hundred years (or until 1250) for the changes to be made from the little dialogue that was simply a part of the liturgy to Bible scenes which were regularly presented for the public instruction as an entertainment. Also, the performance location was changed from the church to the church yard , then to the street and the market places or convenient spaces. Furthermore, the control of the plays passed from the church to the municipal authorities. These organizations were associated of men engaged in the same craft, or they were able to assist financially in the production of performances[[5]](#footnote-6).

The spirit of the Middle Ages had its effect on the English drama. Ideals of courtesy, loyalty and faith were spread and prevailed, and the religious men like St. Augustine, Bernard and Thomas Aquinas spread the teachings of a world that is not seen. In addition, there was the appearance of debates which were popular like: the body and the soul, Christian and Jew, good man and the devil...etc (ibid).

**1.3.The Interlude:**

It was a short performance slipped into a play to enlighten the audience after a solemn scene; A famous interlude which was interesting was **‘The Play of the Weather’**(ibid).

**2. Elizabethan Drama ( Renaissance) / The 16th Century**

Renaissance drama took its name from the era which was called the renaissance era.

It is important to note that renaissance basically means rebirth or revival. It refers to the flowering of the arts starting in Italy and spread throughout Europe in the late 14th Century. It reached England around 1500, and lasted about 100 years. It was facilitated by two factors: the printing press, and England’s stable political and social climate[[6]](#footnote-7).

The Elizabethan era refers to the period in history of **Queen Elizabeth** reign **( 1558-1603).** This era was depicted by historians as **the golden ageof English history**. It saw the flowering of poetry, music and literature. It was an age of exploration and expansion abroad. The Elizabethan era contrasts sharply with the previous and following reigns. It was a brief period of internal peace[[7]](#footnote-8). This period was characterized by a revival of classical literature. English playwrights came into contact with Greek and Latin drama. As a result, they learnt about style and structure. Improvements also were seen in manners and customs[[8]](#footnote-9).

**2.1. Three Elements featured the Elizabethan drama[[9]](#footnote-10):**

**\* First**, the humanistic or classical impulse which was foreign and purely scholarly plays that were performed in universities and schools, these plays were written in Latin and English.

**\* Second**, the romantic impulse which was derived from Italian sources.

**\* Third,** the impulse towards realism.

Of course , such tendencies can not be always clearly delimited.

This period witnessed the appearance of tragedy, and came particularly in the middle of the 16thCentury. **‘ Grammar Gurton’s Needle’** (1562) was the first English comedy drama , and **‘ Gorboduc’**(1562) was the first English tragedy**[[10]](#footnote-11).**

**2.2. The Renaissance Drama ( the Late of the 14th Century- The Early of the 15th Century)**

**Prominent Figures[[11]](#footnote-12):**

**a-Christopher Marlow**

He was one amongst the prominent dramatists that witnessed that era. He was featured by his creativity, he published three great tragedies: **Tamburlaine the Great**, **The Jew of Malta**, and **the Tragical History of Doctor Faustus**. He influenced Shakespeare.

**b- William Shakespeare**:

He was the heir of all who proceeded him. He wrote comedies, tragedies, poems.

**c- Ben Johnson, George Chapman, Thomas Deezer, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, Thomas Heywood, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, John Ford...**

**2.2.1.The Closing of the Theatres**

From almost **1596 to 1642** theatres were closed because drama exhibited marks of decadence. Incest was a dominant theme or motive. This paved the ground for the sober puritans to oppose them which led to the official closing of play houses. The theatres were closed for 18 years[[12]](#footnote-13).

**3.The Restoration Drama/ The 17th Century**

Throughout 1642 and 1649 the political unrest spread politicians between those who supported King **Charles I** and those who opposed his rule. Politicians were unhappy with the ruling of **Charles I.** He was put on trial and beheaded for treason in 1649. He was succeeded by his eldest son **Charles II** as King of Scotland from 1649 to 1651. A military general named **Oliver Cromwell** became Lord Protector of England in 1653, he defeated **the King Charles II**during the invasion of England in 1651, making **Charles II** a fugitive who eventually escaped to France . Cromwell died in 1658 and his son Richard became Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. He was not an authoritative leader, so the parliament invited **Charles II** to come back to the English throne in 1660, thus restoring the monarchy in England.After **Charles II** died in 1658, his brother **James** assumed the Kingship. His reign was similar as his father: religious instability, absolute sovereignty, divine right of kings, so he was removed from the throne during the glorious revolution[[13]](#footnote-14).

**3.1.Restoration Literature/Drama**

**( Charles: 1660-1685)**

In this period theatres reopened and drama revitalized and experienced new impulses. While the Elizabethan drama was national, the restoration drama was describes as being artificial, imitative. There was the employment of women as actors. A new moral tone featured the restoration drama, it was the sympathy of the audience in favour of the wrong doer, and was this due to the French influence. Also different forces contributed to the appearance of a new form : ‘**the Heroic Drama ‘** plays became more chivalric , the hero is always a warrior[[14]](#footnote-15).

**3.2. Prominent Figures of the Restoration Drama**

**-William D’Avenant( 1606- 1665):**

He is regarded as a representative of the heroic play, and his play ‘**The Siege of Rhodes’** was his first heroic play. In addition to other figures as **John Dryden ( 1603-1700),** along with others who celebrated the heroic drama who acknowledged their indebtedness to **William D'Avenant** (ibid)..

In addition, a new form of comedy appeared, it was called **‘ Society Comedy’**, its founder was Sir **George Etherege ( 1634- 1691).** This new form was developed by **William Congreve** and later carried by**Richard Brinsley Sheridan (ibid).**

Other representatives of Comedy Society: **William Wycherley ( 1640- 1715)**, **Thomas Shadwell ( 1642-1692)**, **Sir Samuel Tuke**, **Edward Ravenscroft ( 1645- 1707), Nathaniel Lee in tragedy ( 1653- 1692**) with **John Banks** and **Thomas Otway.**

\*In the period ( **1690- 1700)** , **Charles II** was dead, **James II** in exile and a Whig and **William of Orange** came to the throne. Some taste for heroic plays or society comedy might still prevail, but another form of drama came into existence: a drama with **democratic tendencies** (ibid).

**3.3.The Reforming Drama ( The Democratic Drama)**

There was a call for a reform of the drama; a need to a moral reform for drama at this period, drama was described by scholar **Jeremy Collier** as being immodest, profane and abusive, also it misrepresented the clergy, and the characters were made vicious.

The government took side with him, also **Dryden** admitted his conventions . Therefore, censorship began to be exercised, actors were prosecuted of using profane language of the admission of women wearing masks.

**3.4.Some of the Representative Dramatists of Moralist Drama:**

**-Mrs.Centlivre (1667-1723).**

**-William Congreve ( 1670-1729).**

**-John Vanbrugh ( 1664-1729).**

**-George Farquhar ( 1678-1707).**

**-Richard Steele ( 1672- 1729).**

**-Colley Cibber ( 1671- 1757).**

**-Joseph Addison ( 1672-1719).**

**-Nicholas Rowe ( 1647- 1718 in tragedy).**

**All these were in the first half of the 18th Century.(ibid).**

**4. Eighteenth Century British Drama**

The mid eighteenth century was featured by **sentimentalism,** though many forces existed in the British drama ( i.e, Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, ideas of democracy and liberalism......etc) which had their effect on British drama.. (ibid)

As it was also **the age of criticism and theorizing**, there was the study of the Elizabethans, **Rowe’s** editing of Shakespeare and Dennis’ criticism who set standards for the coming dramatists,and **Robert Dodesley’s** Collection of Old Plays **( 1744).**

At this age , **Voltaire** was an eminent critic important to the English plays/ stage. He was the man who brought to England a new emphasis on classical dramatic theory or practice.

Two other known English men were influenced by the French tragedy **Edward Young** and **James Thomson** (ibid).

**4.1. Major Forms of Drama**

**\*Pantomime:**

A form of entertainment known on the English stage. It was credited to **John Rich** who made the form popular **( a kind of a silent performance).**

**\*Ballad- Opera:**

It was introduced by **John Gay** with his play ‘**the Beggar’s Opera’** . This new form of drama had emphasis on songs, burlesques of Italian opera. It became popular too.

**\*Domestic Tragedy:**

The domestic tendencies of the day or something of the influence of Ballad-Opera found further expressions in the work of **George Lillo** who is a representative of sentimentalism or domestic tragedy. He had influences on the English tragedy and its language.

**\*Burlesque:**

**Henry Fielding** is remembered in drama of his burlesques with his outstanding tragedy ‘ **The Tragedy of Tragedies’.** Also, constructively he gave comedy a place on the stage; He produced the satire on the political methods.

**\*Adaptation:**

**David Garrick** had adaptations from numerous sources, like him we can mention **William Whitehead.**

**\*Romanticism:** Rpresented by **John Home.**

**\*Pure Comedy**

Represented through **Samuel Foote and George Colman.**

**\*Sentimentalism:**

Sentimentalism rose to its height with **Hugh Kelty** and **Richard Cumberland.**

In 1737, the **Licensing Act** was passed during **Fielding career** and this brought limits on the metropolitan theatres, and brought plays prologues and epilogues under direct legal authority.

The sentimentalism drama was strongly represented by **Richard Brinsley Sheridan.** (ibid).

**5.Nineteenth Century Drama**

Until early 19th century, theatres were under control. So this is why they spoke of **‘illegitimate’** play houses.

In addition to the spirit of romanticism, a new species of drama came into existence It is the **Melodrama**. It is featured as follows: supplementing the dialogues by a larger amount of dumb-show and the accomplishment of both dialogue and the dumb-show by descriptive orchestral music, songs, sensations, and mechanical devices (ibid).

**\*Closet Drama:**

The writing of drama was low in the first quarter of the 19th century because of the **Licensing Act** of 1737.

The closet drama appeared by writers who wrote drama without the thought of them being produced on the stage, for the purpose to reach a wider audience, with **Charles Wells** and **Thomas Lovell Beddoes.**

Other poetic plays which belonged to closet drama plays by **Richard Henry Horne.** (ibid).

**\*Other Closet Dramatists:**

**James Sheridan Knowles, Edward Bulwer, Robert Browning, Alfred, LordTennyson.**

By the mid 19th century, romanticism was passing.

In 1843, the **Theatre Regulation Act** was passed legalizing the 'illegitimate’ playhouses; Thus, new theatres came into existence; the domestic play seemed to suit the popular taste.

Comedy, melodrama, adaptation, featured the period with: **Isaac Pocock**, **Douglas William Jerrold**, **John Baldwin Buckstone**, **Charles Reade.**

**\*Dion Boucicault** was largely a transitional figure. He was a turning point between the purely theatrical drama of the first half of the 19th century and the more naturalistic drama.

In addition to **Thomas William Robertson** who made adaptation of French drama and farces. He brought a realistic method of revelation of life. With his drama, he brought new themes, new commercial class, the power of the press and other themes of social unrest. In addition to the dramatist **William S. Gilbert.**

By the end of the Victorian era, the French Revolution (about 1870) influenced the British drama. It was an age of pessimism due to materialism. Romanticism was dead and replaced by aestheticism. Prose writers **Thomas Penson De Quincey**, **Edgar Allan Poe** and **Walter Horatio Pater** also had their influence on British drama with their ideas and styles like decadence and divorce between art and morality, there was shift to science and decadence (ibid).

Also the social impulse featured British drama due to the influence by French writers as **Hugo.**

Therefore, decadent principle that emphasized surface beauty and style, and realism into naturalism all affected drama at the end of the 19th century.

**5.1. Distinguished Dramatists**

**Oscar Wilde**, **Arthur Wing Pinero**, **Henry Arthur Jones**, **James Matthew Barrie**, **John Galsworthy**, **Stephen Phillips**,**Harley Granville Barker**, **William Bulter Yeats**, **John Millignton Synge.**

**5.2. Current Tendencies**

Melodrama and the dramatization of popular fiction, a new emphasis on old morality plays represented by **Everyman,** and plays based on the stories from the Bible, all featured the 19th era (ibid).

**6.Twentieth Century British Drama**

It started in Ireland with **W.B.Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M.Synge** who introduced it to Britain.

Plays were **political**, **satirical,** and **rebellious.**

* **Political**: Reflecting the unrest workers against the state.
* **Philosophical**:Delivering the who and the why of human life and existence.
* **Revolutionary**: Exploring themes of colonization and loss of territory.
* **Socialism,** women movements and industrialization had also their impact on the 20th century drama, resulting into plays lamenting the alienation of the human in increasingly materialistic world (ibid).

**6.1.Eminent Figures**

**-George Bernard Shaw.**

**-Harley Granville Barker.**

**-W. Somerset Maugham.**

**-John Galsworthy.**

**6.2. New Forms/ Trends**

**\* Realism and Myth**

Due to the influence of **Sigmund Freud** and **Carl Jung** myths were incorporated into plays, thus poetic form of realism was created.

**\* Poetic Realism**

Most of it focused on the portrayal of Irish peasant life. Poetic realism was used by **W.B.Yeats**, **John Millington Synge** and **Lady Gregory.**

**\*Women**

A shift from the reperesentation of submissive powerless woman to an empowered, emancipated woman. Female characters portray the author’s masculine attitude about women and their place in society.

**\* Political Theatre and War**

The political theatre is used to express one’s political views. Propaganda played a big role in political theatre, whether it is in support or opposition of political schemes. Theatres played a major role in influencing the public.

**6.3.Types of Modern Drama[[15]](#footnote-16)**

**\*Realism**

As a way to build and mirror up society.

**\*Social Realism**

This realism had political conscience behind it because the world was in depression (in 1930). This is represented by **G.B.Shaw.**

**\*Avant-Garde Theatre**

It uses Symbols, images, legends, myths, fantasies, and dreams.

**\*Absurdist Drama**

Plays which emphasized the absurdity of human condition. It was written between **1940 and 1960.**

\***Symbolism/ Aesthetism**

In England, symbolism was also known as aestheticism. **Dreams and fantasies were common plots.** It is a very stylized form of drama.

**\* Surrealism**

It was represented by the mystical **Samuel Beckett**. There was more emphasis on the action than the word, it is featured by surprise and the unexpected comparisons.

**\*Expressionism**

Characters are not named. They speak short and direct sentences as they also speak long, lyrical expanses. It spends more time on lamenting the present and warning against the future. Spiritual awaking and episodic structures were its fairly common features.

**\*Epic Theatre**

It is based on Greek epic poetry. It was created by **Bertolt Brecht** who **rejected** realism.

It is featured by: Harsh lighting, blank stages, placards announcing changes of scenes, bands playing music on stage, long and discomforting pauses.

**7. Postmodern Theatre**

It emerged as a reaction to modernist theatre in the mid 20th Century.

Most postmodern productions centred on highlighting the fallibility of definite truth, instead encouraging the audience to reach their own individual understanding.

Essentially, thus, postmodern theatre raises questions rather than attempting to answer them[[16]](#footnote-17).

**7.1.Some of Its Features**

-There is a rejection of ‘High’ and ‘Low’ art.

-A challenge of the accepted norms of seeing and representing the world.

-The Pastiche.

-The narrative needs to be complete but can not be spoken, paradoxical and imagistic. A movement away from linearity.

-Characters are fragmented.

-The audience is included in meaning-making in the play.

**7.2. Representative Dramatists:**

**-Tom Stoppard**

**-Caryl Churchill**

**-Nina Raine**

**-Debbie Tucker Green**

**-Bola Agbaje.**

**-Lucy Prebble.**

**-Roy Williams.**

**-TerryLynn Johnson.**

**-Joe Penhall.**

**-John Osborne.**

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