Have you ever gone to the theater or a movie and felt as if life were unfolding before you? Dramas that realistically portray events have a way of hitting a nerve. American playwrights, in particular, are known for writing dramas that reveal the truth of our everyday experience, and sometimes our not-so-everyday experience.

The Rise of American Drama

Though drama is one of the oldest forms of literature, it was one of the last of the literary genres to develop in the United States. The Puritans in New England regarded theatrical performances as frivolous, so few plays were staged in the 1600s. During the 18th and 19th centuries, drama gradually became an accepted form of entertainment. However, most of the plays performed in the United States were imported from Europe or were adapted from novels.

In 1920 the Broadway production of Eugene O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon* marked a turning point in presenting true-to-life characters who were struggling to understand their lives. Building on O’Neill’s achievement, American playwrights Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller created dramas in the 1930s and 1940s that met with critical and popular success. Following World War II, American dramatists Edward Albee and Lorraine Hansberry made significant contributions to the theater. Arthur Miller’s 1953 *The Crucible* (page 134) is an example of a modern drama that portrays events from Puritan times.

Conventions of Drama

The two main types of drama are tragedy and comedy. A tragedy recounts the downfall of a main character, and a comedy is light and humorous in tone, usually ending happily. Many dramas combine elements of both. In addition, most dramas follow similar conventions, or rules, in how they are presented. An understanding of basic dramatic conventions can help you imagine the performance as you read.

**Plot and Structure**

The plot in drama, as in fiction, introduces events and character interactions that produce a conflict, or struggle between opposing forces. The conflict builds as the action intensifies throughout the play’s acts and scenes, finally reaching a peak and then resolution. Each scene serves as a building block in the stages of the plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.
TYPES OF CHARACTERS

Drama has many of the same types of characters that are found in fiction. The protagonist is the central character of the play. This character is at the center of the conflict and often undergoes radical changes during the course of the play. The antagonist often opposes the protagonist, giving rise to the central conflict of the play. Some plays also include a foil, a minor character who provides a striking contrast to another character. Interplay among these characters heightens the dramatic tension as the play develops. The names of all a play’s characters are listed in the cast of characters at the beginning of the play.

SPEECH DEVICES

In drama, the playwright develops the story line through the characters’ actions and dialogue. Virtually everything of consequence—from the plot details to the character revelations—flows from dialogue, or conversation between characters. Other speech devices used by playwrights include

- monologue: a long speech spoken by a single character to the audience or another character
- soliloquy: a reflective speech in which a character speaks his or her private thoughts aloud, unheard by other characters
- aside: a short speech or comment that is delivered by a character to the audience but is not heard by other characters who are present

STAGE AND SETTING

Stage directions are the italicized instructions in a play. The playwright includes the stage directions in order to describe the setting, props, lighting, scenery, sound effects, and costumes. Stage directions also describe the entrances and exits of characters and how the characters look, speak, and react to events or to others. These stage directions from The Crucible describe the stage set at the beginning of Act Four.

(A cell in Salem jail, that fall.)
(At the back is a high barred window; near it, a great, heavy door. Along the walls are two benches.)
(The place is in darkness but for the moonlight seeping through the bars. It appears empty. Presently footsteps are heard coming down a corridor beyond the wall, keys rattle, and the door swings open. Marshal Herrick enters with a lantern.)

—Arthur Miller, The Crucible

Close Read

Why is the description of the cell important to this scene? What effect does it have on the mood the scene evokes?