Drama

A word derived from the Greek for acting. Drama from its earliest times to today retains this essential sense of performance in which actors assume roles, act, and speak. In theory, one could have a wordless drama, as in a mime or a dumb show, but the usual form employs characters and dialogue as well as action, and often music, song, and dance. Drama occurs across the media, on TV, radio, stage, film; combines with different genres, as in docudrama, which dramatizes real events; and can feature in the classroom as pedagogic strategy. Western tragic drama was traditionally preoccupied with great men and women (comedy more often representing the lower classes), but contemporary drama—for example, the “kitchen sink drama” of the mid 20th century—often represents the concerns of the marginalized person, the squalor and boredom of daily existence, and the realities of poverty and discrimination. In common parlance, drama is often synonymous with melodrama, denoting sensational events and heightened emotion—hence the epithet drama queen. Less pejoratively, drama refers to any vivid representation or event. Drama in many cultures is embedded in religious and political life, although in contemporary Western culture, it is largely regarded as entertainment for its own sake.

Sticking to the core meaning of drama as doing, Aristotle (in the Poetics) defines tragic drama as the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain size. The action represented cannot be trivial but must test free choice to its limits. In having magnitude, the action cannot consist of simply one event but must represent a unified chain of consequences ensuing from the protagonist’s deeds. By “imitation” (mimesis), Aristotle refers to the dramatist’s ability to show things as they should be rather than as they are in ordinary life. Although contemporary drama has long since challenged these conventions, they remain a part of the development of the theory of dramatic representation. For more information, see Aristotle (1996) in the bibliography.

See also
Representation (media studies), Theater

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