UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ONE-ACT PLAYS

Structure
1.0 Objectives
1.1 Introduction
1.2 The Parts of a Play
   1.2.1 Plot
   1.2.2 Dramatic Rhythm
   1.2.3 Action
   1.2.4 Conflict
   1.2.5 Characterisation
   1.2.6 Dialogue
   1.2.7 Structure
1.3 A Brief History of One-Act Plays
1.4 Glossary
1.5 Suggested Reading
1.6 Summing Up
1.7 Answers to Self-Check Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of your study of this unit, you will be able to
• define a One-Act Play
• state the constituent parts of a play.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What is a one-act play?
Plainly stated, it is a play in one-act. This simple definition conveys all that is to be said about one-act plays. Let us analyse this bald statement.

a) It is a play—that is, it is meant to be performed or enacted.

b) It is a short play (of one act) as distinct from a long play (of three or five acts).

c) What is an Act?

An act is a distinct main section of a play. This implies that a one-act play deals with one single, dominant dramatic situation. Therefore, a one-act play is not a condensation of a long play (which consists of a series of situations, where each situation arises out of what had preceded it). On a similar logic, we can also say that a one-act play cannot be elongated into a 3-Act or a 5-Act play.

d) A one-act play is short. A short play requires a short span of time to act it out. So to produce the maximum effect, a one-act play calls for the greatest artistic unity and economy. The playwright has to say what he wants to say in less time than what the full length play requires. Precision, economy of words and action, tight structure and pruning of extraneous or superfluous details are the chief merits of a one-act play.

e) This implies that the attention of the audience has to be at once seized and held out. It is analogous to a 100 mts sprint. A swift take-off and a sustained maintenance of that speed are essential for a win in this short distance race. Similarly from curtain rise to curtain fall, the tempo has to be maintained in a one-act play.

1.2 THE PARTS OF A PLAY

1.2.1 Plot

As pointed out in 1.1, one-act play cannot accommodate multiple plots or situations. The
selection of the material for the plot has to limit itself to a single interesting episode. It can be from everyday life or from history or from an incident out of a story or a novel. If you read the plays prescribed for this course, you will observe that the plots are not necessarily complete stories, but they are either incidents from everyday happening or events taken out of a novel. For instance:

**THE BISHOP'S CANDLESTICKS** is an adaptation of the story of the encounter between a convict and a bishop from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*.

**THE MONKEY'S PAW** is a horror play which is also an adaptation from a short story by W.W. Jacobs.

**REFUND** is a satire on the anomalies of the modern educational system.

**HOW HE LIED TO HER HUSBAND** makes an original play out of the hackneyed situation involving a husband, wife and lover.

**THE DEAR DEPARTED** is a very amusing little play which makes good fun of the petty-mindedness and complacency of a middle class family.

**FUMED OAK** is remarkable as an effective and satirical comedy on human relationships with strings attached.

**HELLO OUT THERE** is a moving short play on the hypocrisies of a society that fails to understand the call of one human being to another out there.

The plots of one-act plays are simple and easily comprehensible. The basic plot formula is that of a beginning, a middle and an end, where the end is distinctly different from the beginning. This is what lends to a play its dramatic quality.

### 1.2.2 Dramatic Rhythm

What do we mean by 'dramatic'? The term is not used in the colloquial sense of being 'sensational' or 'shocking'. In drama, it is used in the sense of effecting a marked change at the end from what was in the beginning.

The basic rhythmical pattern associated with drama involves building up of tension and its release. The dramatic element thus is an important constituent part of a play. In the absence of the dramatic rhythm, the play loses its vitality. There will be no tempo and the play becomes tedious and monotonous.

### 1.2.3 Action

The change in the end—what is technically known as 'happening'—constitutes the core of the play. Something is happening in the play continuously to effect this change. In other words, the play is seen to move from the beginning to the end. This forward advance is brought about by **Action**. The term 'action' should not be confused with 'acting' where the players, enact the play on the stage. Action is **Dramatic Action** which helps the plot to move forwards. While plot gives an account of the event taking place, action is the propelling (moving) force of the event. From beginning to end, there is action in a play. Remember that you are witnessing action on the stage. There is no action before the play begins nor is there any action after the play ends. That is, action is coterminous with the play. So long as the play is on, there is action. In other words, action takes place always in the present. For the audience it is 'here' and 'now'. Even if action narrates (or deals with) the past, that narration takes place only in the present before our eyes. This action in the present presses the play into the future and the situation undergoes a change.

Thus action helps the play to progress or to evolve from beginning to end. Action need not necessarily involve physical movement, but it includes shifts in the attitude of the characters, change in their emotions, a sudden discovery of truth and development of an idea or thought or argument (whereby the dramatist directs our perceptions).

**Self-Check Exercise 1**

Write a brief note on plot, dramatic rhythm, and action with respect to one-act plays.
1.2.4 Conflict

The essence of drama is conflict. The central figure (hero) in a play is called the protagonist. The middle term agon in Greek means struggle or conflict in which an individual is engaged. (It can be a single individual or a group.) The conflict can be of two kinds—the outer and the inner.

Outer conflict takes place between two men or two groups of men; or between man and society; or between man and a superior force like fate or gods or demonic powers.

Inner conflict takes place within the mind or self of an individual. You can easily understand as to why it is easier to present outer conflict on stage than inner conflict.

Conflict gives rise to action in drama. This action culminates in a marked change at the end of the play.

1.2.5 Characterisation

Conflict and action can take place only through characters. Drama originally in Greek meant 'to do', 'to act' or 'to play'. This definition is still valid. Both conflict and action centre round characters. Characters or dramatis personae have to initiate action that will give rise to conflict in a play. Recall what we discussed in 1.2.4 about the protagonist. From that discussion you must have learnt that in any kind of a play—whether it is a full length play or a one-act play, characterisation is of great importance. A play is good depending on the depth of its characterisation. It is not easy to penetrate into a character in a one-act play to the extent that can be done in a longer play.

We shall now discuss the essential requisites for good characterisation in a one-act play. They are:

1) Characterisation should be based on careful and sympathetic observation of people and life in general. More important is that the characters in a one-act play should be human. There is not sufficient time or space to present a larger than life portrayal in this form of drama. The characters cannot be faultless like angels nor fiendish like the demons.

2) Since a one-act play deals with one single situation, characterisation has to be within that limit, for it has to evolve within the framework of that single dramatic event. Whatever the characters do or say in relation to that particular event cannot be very different from what could have transpired before or what is likely to follow. In short, there should be no inconsistency in characterisation. Consistency of characterisation is the cardinal principle in a play to lend credibility to the event presented. This assertion upon consistency in characterisation, taken in conjunction with our definition of the dramatic gives rise to the question as to how to reconcile the two—i.e., how to effect a change without compromising on consistency? Even if there is a change at the end in the characters' attitude or behaviour, care should be taken to show evidence of such possibilities from the beginning. The motives and circumstances that work the change in the characters must be carefully and convincingly shown.

1.2.6 Dialogue

Dialogue in drama is the principal medium by which the play moves and characters reveal themselves. The story is deduced from the conversations among the characters. Dialogues are of two kinds—prose dialogues and verse dialogues. The most important thing is that the dialogues should be clear and crisp in a one-act play where the shortness of time and limited plot scope do not allow lengthy speeches. In a short play a succession of speeches of unequal length may retard action and produce monotony for the viewers. Lines should not be complex for the actor to render them with ease and effectiveness and enable the audience to get to the root of the play in quick succession. The dramatist puts the dialogue to good use. If there are just two characters, a verbal duel between the two is as good as a duet. It can also prove an alternative to a straight fight by working out rituals of domination and submission. The effectiveness of one-act play primarily depends on the verbal exchange between the characters.

1.2.7 Structure

The structure of a one-act play is basically linear with a beginning, a middle and an end.
There is no question of division as it is a play in one-act. If there is scenic division, that is indicated by the arrival of a new character on the stage. The change that takes place is often marked by a change in the lighting. There can be no breaks in a short play and the tempo has to be sustained.

Within this basic structure of a beginning, a middle and an end, the play should contain (i) exposition (ii) complication (iii) climax and (iv) denouement.

Exposition explains the situation, introduces the characters and tells us of action prior to the situation on hand.

Complication makes it difficult for a resolution of the situation. It introduces fresh factors that heighten the tension and suspense. At the climax the play reaches the height of intensity. The emotions are pitched to the highest levels and it marks the beginning of culmination.

Denouement is the final unwinding of the plot soon after the climax. In many one-act plays the two come together.

The speeches and action of the play relate to these four aspects of structure.

1.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF ONE-ACT PLAYS

The one-act play is by no means a 20th century invention. What needs to be stressed is that 90% of English one-act plays have been written during the last 50 years.

The origin of one-act plays can be traced to the satyr plays of the Greeks of the 4th century B.C. which were intended to provide relief at the end of the performance of serious tragedies. The modern one-act plays and the Greek satyr plays share a common trait—both can be enjoyed without too much of expense of effort or of time.

In the Middle ages (in the 14th and the 15th centuries), there were short plays which dealt with Christian subjects and scriptural themes. These were called the medieval miracle and mystery plays. There was also another of a similar category called the Morality play, of which the outstanding examples was Everyman. Written in the 15th century, Everyman, fits in well with the one-act plays of modern times.

The 16th century saw the rise and glory of great English drama. The Elizabethan drama was written for professional actors and professional theatre. But in the second half of the 16th century short interludes were written to be performed between two long miracle or mystery plays or between the courses of a banquet. These were truly one-act plays requiring just a few actors and capable of being performed in less than half an hour's time.

In the 18th century Fielding's Tom Thumb and Sheridan's The Critic deserve to be mentioned in any account of one-act plays.

From the above account it is evident that one-act play is not unique to the 20th century, but since the end of the First World War, there has been a proliferation of this kind in the English theatre world. Two reasons can be attributed for this large output of one-act plays—the rise of the amateur drama and the demands of radio and television. The selections in your course are from the 20th century writings.

1.4 GLOSSARY

Superfluous: more than is needed
Extraneous: not related
Anomalous: different in some way from what is normal; irregular
Coterminous: having a common boundary
Duet: a musical composition for two performers
Denouement: the unravelling of a plot

Banquet: elaborate meal, usu. for a special event, at which speeches are made

Amateur: One who is not a professional; who engages in art or sport purely for pleasure.

Self-Check Exercise 2
1) Write short notes on the following with respect to one-act plays;
   a) Conflict   b) Characterisation   c) Dialogue   d) Structure

2) Write a note on the history of one-act plays.
1.5 SUGGESTED READING


1.6 SUMMING UP

In this unit, we have given you a brief introduction to One-Act plays. You have learnt about:
- the distinction between a One-Act play and a long play
- the different parts of a One-Act play and
- a brief history of One-Act plays.

1.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-Check Exercise 1
Read Sub-sections 1.2.1-1.2.3 carefully and attempt all answers.

Self-Check Exercise 2
1) Refer Sub-sections 1.2.4 to 1.2.7
2) Read Section 2.3