

The main characteristics of One-Act Play

The One Act play is often thought to be a short form of the long play. But the question is not one of length. A One-Act Play is a separate literary form by itself. It is not a condensed three or five Act Play, nor can it be elaborated into a three Act play. The very nature and structure of the two are entirely different. A One-Act Play deals with a single dominant situation, and aims at producing a single effect, though the methods used may vary greatly from tragedy to face, according to the nature of the effect desired. As the play is short and the action takes place within a short period of time, greatest economy and concentration is required. Everything superfluous is to be strictly avoided. The play must be close knit and the greatest attention must be paid to its structure. This makes the One-Act Play a difficult form of art and much training and practice is required to master it. It is a highly artistic form and has immense possibilities for development.

Though short in form the One-Act Play can have as its theme a large number of varied subjects. In fact every subject between heaven and earth is fit for the One-Act Play. It, of course, deals with only one action to produce the maximum of effect. Some tense situation or some particular phase in the life of an individual is chosen and is depicted in an effective manner. All attention is concentrated on that particular moment and the story of the play hangs on it.

Various problems connected with the life of the individual are discussed. Thus various sort of things love, marriage, divorce, justice, crime, punishment, law, superstitions, customs and manners are all suitable themes for a One-Act Play. According to its theme the One-Act Play can be divided into different types as – realistic plays, problem plays, phantasies, costume plays, satire, romance, etc. In short, the playwright has a large and varied choice of subjects which can be discussed equally well in the One-Act Play.

The One-Act Play, like the longer drama, should have a **beginning**, a **middle** and an **end**. It may be divided into four stages: The **Exposition**. The **Conflict**, The **Climax** and The **Denouement**. All these stages may be distinctly marked as in the larger play, but more often than not they tend to over-lap in a One-Act Play.

The Exposition serves as an introduction to the play. The situation and the themes of the play are explained to the audience and the important characters are also introduced. The part of the story that has already happened and which it is necessary to know for an understanding of the play, is also told to the audience. But as the One-Act Play is very short, the dramatist cannot devote much time to this introduction-and explanation. Hence the exposition of a One-Act Play is usually brief.

The exposition is followed by **the conflict**. It is through the conflict that the action of the drama develops. The conflict means a struggle between two opposing forces. The conflict may take different forms. There may be a struggle between two opposite interests, ideas, persons, group of persons, or the hero and his fate or circumstances. There may also be an inner conflict between two opposite ideas or urges in the mind of the hero, who may not be able to decide what to do and so may suffer great agony of spirit as a consequence. The conflict is the very back-bone of the One-Act Play. Complications after complications arise and the readers are in constant suspense about the outcome of the conflict.

After the conflict comes **the climax**. It is the turning point of the drama. One of the two contending forces now gains supremacy over the others. It is now clear which of the two would win in the end. The climax is an important part of the One-Act Play and constitutes its moment of supreme interest.

The Denouement is the next and the final stage of the One-Act Play. The play now reaches its end. One of the two contending forces now definitely gets victory over the other and the action of the drama concludes. As the space at the disposal of the writer of One-Act Plays is limited, the denouement is very brief and often overlaps with climax. The plays come to an end just after the climax.

Dramatic unities

There are three dramatic unities which are observed in the One-Act Play as far as possible. The unities are – **the unity of time, unity of place and the unity of action**. If the drama is to be probable and natural, these three unities are to be observed by the dramatist. Of course, sometimes it is difficult to observe these unities, but effort is to be made to observe them as far as possible.

The characters in a One-Act Play are limited in number. The space at the disposal of the playwright is limited and if he introduces too many characters, it would result in overcrowding and lessen the effect of the drama. Of course, there is no hard and fast

rule as to the number of characters in a play. But generally there are not more than two or three principal characters.

Not only are the characters limited in number, there is also no full development of character. The dramatist has no time to present the characters through the different stages of their development. All the different aspects of a character are not presented. The attention is focused on only one or two salient aspects of character and they are brought out by placing the characters in different situations and circumstances.

Besides this, the characters in the modern One-Act Play are ordinary men and women. They are neither saints nor devils. They have all the faults and weaknesses, as well as all the virtues that ordinary human beings have. If they are otherwise, it would make the play unnatural, unrealistic and unconvincing.

Dialogue is of the greatest importance in the One-Act Play. As the drama is short, all superfluity is to be avoided. Absolute economy of means should be used. Every word is to be carefully chosen and sentences must be compact and condensed. Effort should be made to say, whatever is to be said, in the least possible words. Thus the language of the dialogue should be simple, brief and easy to understand. Long speeches and arguments and long sentences would be out of place and would lessen the charm and interest of the play.

Detailed stage-directions are invariably introduced by the dramatist in the One-Act Play. The space at the disposal of the playwright is limited and so he cannot supply us detailed information through a lengthy exposition or during the action of the play itself. This purpose is served by the stage directions. Moreover these stage directions, describing the minute details of the scene, give an air of realism to the drama.

Besides, the play is not meant only for acting but for reading as well. The reader can know of the entire scene through the stage direction and can, to a great extent, appreciate the real spirit of the drama. These stage directions make the play perfectly clear to the reader. They impart realism and verisimilitude to the One-Act Play.