



Tikrit University
College of education for Women
English Department

Subject: Drama

Stage: Second year

Title: One-Act-Play

Compiled by: Assist. Lect. Fatima Mohammed Abdul-Kareem

Email: Fkareem@tu.edu.iq

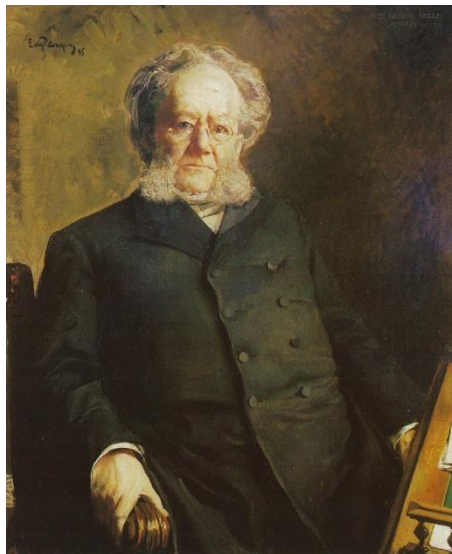
One-Act-Play

A one-act play is the short story of the theatrical world. It is not merely a truncated version of a full-length play, but a distinct, highly concentrated art form. Where a multi-act play has the luxury of time to build sprawling subplots and decades of character history, a one-act play must capture lightning in a bottle—delivering a complete, impactful narrative arc within a single, continuous stretch of time.

- **Historical Evolution**

While short theatrical performances existed in ancient times, the modern one-act play emerged in the **late 19th and early 20th centuries**. Originally, they served as "**curtain raisers**"—short, comedic pieces played before a longer drama to entertain latecomers—or as brief interludes in music halls. However, with the rise of the **Little Theatre Movement** in Europe and the United States (which favored intimate, experimental, and realistic drama over commercial spectacles), the one-act play was elevated to a serious literary genre. It became the perfect playground for avant-garde writers to experiment with realism, absurdism, and symbolism.

During the late 19th century, one-act plays started to become their own independent form of drama. The Norwegian dramatist (Henrik Ibsen) was the first to introduce one act play. Before him, one act plays were written and played in poetic language. But he was the first to use prose on his plays. In this way, he made the drama simple, real, and near to everyday life. This type of prosaic one act plays had been widely followed other dramatist, such as George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy.



- **Core Characteristics of a One-Act Play**

To understand the one-act play, it helps to look at its structure. Because of its brevity (usually running anywhere from 10 to 50 minutes), it relies on a strict economy of storytelling:

- **The Unities of Drama:** One-act plays often strictly adhere to the classical Aristotelian unities:
 - **Unity of Time:** The story unfolds in real-time or over a very brief span (rarely skipping days or weeks).
 - **Unity of Place:** The action occurs in a single location (a living room, a park bench, a kitchen).
 - **Unity of Action:** There is only one main plotline. Subplots are stripped away to keep the focus sharp.
- **Minimalist Cast:** You will rarely see a one-act play with a cast of dozens. Usually, it features two to four characters, allowing the audience to immediately grasp their relationships and conflicts.
- **Immediate Exposition:** There is no time for a slow build-up. The play usually starts *in media res* (in the middle of things), and the audience must catch up quickly through sharp dialogue.
- **The "Single Effect":** Much like Edgar Allan Poe's theory of the short story, a great one-act play aims to leave the audience with a single, overwhelming emotional impact or thematic realization.

- **Major Playwrights and Literary Works**

The history of the one-act play is populated by some of theater's greatest icons. Below is a breakdown of the most influential writers and their defining short masterpieces.

1. The Pioneers of Realism and Comedy

- **Anton Chekhov**
 - *The Proposal* (1889) & *The Bear* (1888): Before writing his tragicomic masterpieces like *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov perfected the art of the comedic one-act (which he called "vaudevilles"). These plays are brilliant, fast-paced farces satirizing the petty pride and romantic desperation of the Russian land-owning class.
- **August Strindberg**
 - *Miss Julie* (1888): Though it runs about 90 minutes, Strindberg wrote this intense, psychologically raw battle of the sexes and social classes to be performed in a single, uninterrupted act. It revolutionized naturalistic theater.

2. The Early American Masters

- **Susan Glaspell**

- *Trifles* (1916): Frequently cited as a masterpiece of feminist drama and early American realism. Based on a real murder case Glaspell covered as a reporter, the play contrasts male investigators overlooking crucial clues in a farmhouse kitchen with two women who quietly piece together the motive of an abused wife.

- **Eugene O'Neill**

- *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916): This play launched O'Neill's legendary career. Set in the cramped forecastle of a British tramp steamer, it captures the raw, melancholic reality of dying sailor Yank and his reflective conversation with his closest friend.

3. The Giants of the Absurd

- **Samuel Beckett**

- *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958): A profound, melancholic study of aging, memory, and regret. An elderly man sits alone in a room listening to tape recordings he made of himself decades prior, confronting his past selves.
- *Act Without Words I* (1956): A masterclass in physical theater, this is a completely silent, mime-based one-act play exploring the existential futility of human desire.

- **Edward Albee**

- *The Zoo Story* (1959): A tense, explosive encounter on a Central Park bench between Peter (a conservative, middle-class publisher) and Jerry (an isolated, unstable outcast). It remains a foundational work of American absurdist theater.

- **Harold Pinter**

- *The Dumb Waiter* (1957): Combining absurdist dread with dark comedy, this play follows two hitmen waiting in a basement for instructions on their next target, receiving increasingly bizarre food orders through a dumbwaiter.