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The One-Act Play: History and Its Difference from Full-Length Plays	عنوان المحاضرة باللغة الانجليزية
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محتوى المحاضرة

The One-Act Play: History and Its Difference from Full-Length Plays

Introduction

The one-act play is a condensed dramatic form that presents a complete story in a single act, typically running between 10 and 40 minutes. Unlike the fulllength play, which is divided into multiple acts and scenes, the one-act play focuses on a single event, conflict, or theme. It demands efficiency in character development, plot structure, and thematic delivery. The one-act play is often underestimated in academic and theatrical circles. However, it offers unique challenges and opportunities for both writers and performers. According to Worthen (2011), one-act plays are not merely shorter versions of full plays; they are distinct artistic forms with their own rules and strengths.

Historical Development of the One-Act Play

The origins of the one-act play can be traced to ancient Greek satyr plays and medieval morality plays. These early short performances were used to entertain or instruct audiences in concise formats.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the one-act play became a serious literary form. Key moments in its development include:

- Anton Chekhov: His one-act works such as *The Bear* and *The Proposal* balanced humor with deep psychological insight.
- August Strindberg: Known for experimenting with expressionism in plays like *The Stronger*.
- American Realism: Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell elevated the one-act form in the U.S. with plays like *The Hairy Ape* and *Trifles*, respectively.

The rise of experimental theater in the 20th century also helped legitimize the one-act play as a platform for social critique, abstraction, and linguistic play (Brockett & Hildy, 2014).

Characteristics of the One-Act Play

The one-act play possesses several distinct features that set it apart from full-length drama:

1. **Unity of Action:** One-act plays typically revolve around a single conflict or theme.
2. **Limited Setting:** Most are set in one location, often without elaborate scenery.
3. **Few Characters:** Smaller casts allow for sharper focus and more intimate interaction.
4. **Tight Structure:** The exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution must unfold swiftly.
5. **Immediacy:** Due to time constraints, the play must engage the audience from the start.

These characteristics make the one-act play ideal for educational settings, festivals, and theaters with limited resources (Klaus, 2000).

Feature	One-Act Play	Full-Length Play
Structure	Single act	Multiple acts/scenes
Duration	10–40 minutes	60–180+ minutes
Conflict	One central	
Complexity		Multiple conflicts/subplots
Character Count	Few (2–5 usually) Usually one	Often 6 or more
Setting		Multiple locations possible
Thematic Scope	Focused on one idea	Broader and more layered
Audience Engagement	Immediate and brief buildup	Gradual development and emotional

In other words,

Full-length plays allow for deeper character arcs, elaborate subplots, and thematic layering, whereas one-act plays demand precision and focus. The brevity of one-acts makes them powerful in delivering intense emotional or moral messages in a limited timeframe.

Contemporary Usage

Today, the one-act play is widely used in:

- **Education:** High schools and universities often stage one-acts to train actors, directors, and playwrights.
- **Theater Festivals:** Events like The Samuel French Off-Off-Broadway Short Play Festival showcase one-act plays.
- **Social Commentary:** Short plays are often used in community and activist theater to spotlight specific issues like domestic violence, identity, or political oppression.

Playwrights such as David Mamet and Harold Pinter have successfully explored both short and full-length formats, showing that brevity does not limit dramatic power but enhances it when done effectively.

Conclusion

The one-act play is a distinct literary and theatrical form that should not be seen merely as a shorter version of the full-length play. Its history is rich, its constraints are artistically liberating, and its power lies in its ability to present intense, focused drama within a compact framework. Whether used in education, experimental theater, or mainstream performance, the one-act play continues to offer fresh opportunities for storytelling. Its difference from the full-length play lies not just in duration but in structure, pacing, and dramatic intensity.

References

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