

## The Miracle Play or the Mystery Play

The term 'miracle' and 'mystery' are often interchanged and there lays a confusion when trying to know about them separately. However, it would be convenient to understand them together as both of the plays are based on the stories present in the Bible or based on the miraculous happenings in the lives of saints that led to their martyrdom.

The use of Biblical figures in plays was observed as early as 10th century and they were called as "tropes". The tropes gradually evolved taking into consideration several popular elements of the audience and by the 14th century the evolution of the drama was considerable. During this time, York and Chester cities witnessed the performance of developed plays in the form of "cycles". Fascinatingly, all the plays were written under anonymous authorship and the cycles were well-known based on the regions at which they were performed. Therefore, one would be familiar with Chester miracle plays, Wakefield miracle plays, etc. rather than knowing the playwright.

Some of the well-known and frequently used in miracle and mystery plays are Resurrection of Christ, Abraham and Isaac, Noah, Crucifixion, fall of man and the Last Judgement. Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas were the most desirable characters to show the greatness of Saints and martyrdom.

### **The Morality Play**

Morality plays of the medieval period revolved around the dramatization of allegories mainly based on the Christian life and the journey to seek salvation. Any drama of this kind would have a clash between virtues and vices. All of these characteristics were personified and the audience could actually see the virtues or vices trying to get better of each other.

This was a revolutionary improvement in the medieval drama and audience were liked the fresh ideas presented through these dramas. The most prevalent character seen is the personification of "vice" or the "devil", which made the audience, fall into a state of wonder. The use of these personifications continued even in the Elizabethan drama as one can see in Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus.

The finest examples of the morality plays are *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Everyman* and *Mankind*. They exhibit every element expected of a morality play. Plays like these were considered as links between the medieval drama and the Elizabethan drama.

### **The Interlude**

Interludes, as the name suggest came in between events to provide witty entertainment to the audience. Usually, they are very short and used the topics of politics or religious issues. But, this was done in a rather funny manner; therefore, they are considered as secular farces. They were performed by professional actors either between the acts of a long play or during a feast, where entertainment was required.

Thomas Heywood is the most prominent of the playwrights who contributed a great deal to the popularity of the Interludes. His works *The Four Ps* and *Johan Johan the Husband*, *Tyb His Wife*, and *Sir John the Priest* are considered as the best Interludes.

These major forms of drama during the medieval period influenced the later ages predominantly. Shakespeare, Marlowe, etc. were inspired by these plays and learnt to perfect the form of drama with their own ideas.

**Mystery plays** were stories taken from the Bible. Each play had four or five different scenes or acts. The priests and monks were the actors. Each scene or act was preformed at a different place in town and the people moved from one stage to the next to watch the play. The play usually ended outside the church so that the people would go to church and hear a sermon after watching the play.

**The Miracle play** was about the life or actions of a saint, usually about the actions that made that person a saint. One popular Miracle play was about Saint George and the dragon.

**Morality plays** were designed to teach people a lesson in how to live their life according to the rules of the church.

## Mystery Plays

### *History*

Mystery Plays originated in the Middle Ages, during the twelfth century, from the lack of interest from the churchgoers in the typical church services and their ignorance of the Latin language. This problem prompted the elaboration of certain services. It began with subtle changes to the services for religious holidays such as Easter and Good Friday, that involved bringing down the cross for all to see; and expanded to the Christmas service with the scene of Christ's birth in the manger. One of the first liturgical performances was *Quem Quaeritis* ("Whom Seek Ye") in 925 **Citation?** . As the theatricals became more popular they were moved out of the church to accommodate the growing audience. During the thirteenth century Mystery plays gained less support from religious figures due to their questionable religious **values, they** started to be performed in the vernacular and were starting to drift away from being performed in the church.

Once this happened and the performances were free from the church the strong religious themes started to disappear. In 1210 A.D. there was a ban of Mystery Plays by Pope Innocent III, which caused the plays began to performed in small town **guilds, this** act officially cut ties between the plays and the **church and they** were exclusively performed by town-guilds. With an ever growing audience to please, the town-guilds found that a perfect opportunity to showcase their works with the introduction of the Corpus Christi festival, in 1311, that takes place 57 days after Easter. The performances were grouped together and consisted of plays such as, Noah and the Flood, and The Creation of the World and the Fall of Adam. From these small groups came the four most prominent collections of mystery plays, the [York cycle](#) with 48 pageants, the [Towneley plays](#) with 32 pageants, the [Chester cycle](#) with 24 pageants, and the [Wakefield \(N-town\) plays](#) with 42 pageants. The term "Mystery" did not come from our term and the way it is used in present day. It was derived from the Latin word ministerium, meaning an association of clergy from different religious groups. This was the term used to describe the guilds which performed these plays, which is why is was used to name to describe the actual plays being performed. By the time of the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the Reformation, in England, the Mystery plays started to die down and were replaced in popularity by Morality plays.

### *Characteristics*

Mystery plays were dramatizations of both the Old and New Testament miracles.

Another popular topic was Christ and his crucifixion and resurrection. In the beginning of the popularity of Mystery plays the parts in the performance were played by clergymen and other members of the church. During their peak, Mystery plays were moved out of the church and performed on wagons and moved about the different towns. Due to the separation from the church the plays tended to have more of a sarcastic tone to them and sometimes even went as far as mocking priests and monks, the people who had a big part in the creation of the plays. Another change that came with the separation of the church was the switch from clergymen as performers to members of guilds and craftsmen. A huge aspect of Mystery plays was that they neglected to utilize the three unities; place, time, and action. Because of this the plays could represent any location or time and were not tied down by each story they were performing and could pose two time periods or locations together that are not cohesive. Also they did not limit their performances, they used technologies, such as trap doors and mechanisms to create the illusion of flying, to get the realest effect and please the audience.

One of the most widely known Mystery plays is *The Second Shepherd's Play*, which puts three shepherds at the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. It emphasizes the everyday life during the middle ages and juxtaposes the shepherd's story with that of Christ's, setting the secular and religious world side by side.

### **Some common Mystery Plays:**

- ~ Birth of Jesus
- ~ The Wise Men
- ~ Flight into Egypt
- ~ The Second Shepherd's Play

### **Miracle plays**

Miracle Plays, also called Saint's Plays, were plays dedicated to the lives of various saints, rather than Biblical events. Just like Mystery Plays the Miracle play originated to enhance the liturgical services, and were later separated from the church. They were switched to the English language, became less and less religious, and were performed in town festivals in the thirteenth century. Most Miracle plays are performed about either St. Nicholas or the Virgin Mary. The plays about St. Mary regularly involve her in the role of "deus ex machina" (god from the machine), there would usually be a problem that seems unsolvable and

the characters call on the Virgin Mary to help. They were performed in Plain-an-gwarry (Cornish Medieval amphitheatre). During the sixteenth century there was a ban on Miracle Plays by King Henry VIII, some were destroyed, and after they soon began to fade away in popularity.

## **Morality Plays**

### ***History***

Morality plays stemmed from Mystery and Miracle plays. It is the last in the trilogy of Vernacular drama. Typically, Morality plays tried to teach through a theatrical point of view. These plays were allegorical dramas that personified the moral values and abstract ideas to teach moral lessons. The plays were used to educate the masses on Christianity. It served better to learn when the information was presented in a theatrical fashion, as opposed to readings of the Bible. Moralities were popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth century in Medieval Europe as didactic, informative or educational, plays. “Quasi-professional groups of actors” (Britannica; Morality Play) generally performed these plays, building off of their public rapport. Morality plays are still around in the 21st century. Many schools still have their students perform these plays during the holiday’s as a school pageant. The most common and famous play is *Everyman*, an English version of the Dutch Play about the inevitability of death ( Britannic, Middle English). With the wealth gained from the Renaissance, the traveling theaters were not needed due to the building of permanent theaters and the emergence of professional actors. This new era put an end to the Medieval drama, but it served as a great beginning to what we call drama today.

### ***Characteristics***

Morality plays are the result of Christian symbolism. Due to their roots, they were quite serious in the beginning but as time wore on the seriousness began to give way, and they began to gain characteristics from popular farce. “They are the intermediate step between liturgical to professional secular drama” (Britannica), while still having elements of each. The characters within the play themselves personify different moral qualities depending on the moral that is being taught. They have a focus primarily on a hero ( Protagonist) whose inner weaknesses become the main conflict. Generally, the weaknesses are drawn out and antagonized by the Seven Deadly Sins (Antagonist) , that make the hero question not only himself but his standing with God. The Seven Deadly Sins for a point of reference are; Lust, Greed, Gluttony, Envy, Anger, Pride and Sloth. Each Sin represents a different aspect that, as the Bible states, God will not forgive you for.

Morality plays are based highly from a religious stand point in order to teach individuals about proper or true morals; right and wrong. To return back to the basic outline of a Morality play, the Hero then has the choice to take what he says to heart or strive for redemption and ask "The Four Daughters of God" (Mercy, Justice, Temperance, and Truth) to aid in his quest. The plays could more than likely be performed in under ninety minutes.

### **Some common Morality Plays:**

~ *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425)

~ *Hickscorner*

~ [\*Everyman\*](#)

<https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/mystery-and-morality-plays>.

<https://medievaleurope.mrdonn.org/plays.html>

<https://classicalartsuniverse.com/miracle-plays-morality-plays-interludes-medieval-drama/>