

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department

Third Year

Drama

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Senecan Drama

Seneca (born 4 BCE, Spain—died 65 CE, Rome [Italy]) was a Roman philosopher, statesman, orator, and tragedian. He was Rome's leading intellectual figure in the mid-1st century CE.

What are the characteristics of Seneca's drama?

Senecan plays intended to be read rather than performed, written in blank verse. They became the models for the revival of tragedy on the Renaissance stage. Seneca's dramas were Roman adaptations of Greek tragedies, and they had a huge influence on Renaissance playwrights — especially in England.

The main characteristics of Seneca's drama:

1-Based on Greek Tragedy

a-Seneca retold myths from Greek playwrights like Euripides and Sophocles, but with his own Roman flavor.

b-Themes often came from **revenge, fate, and moral conflict**.

2-Five-Act Structure

His plays were neatly divided into **five acts**, a structure later copied in Elizabethan drama (e.g., Shakespeare).

3-Long, Rhetorical Speeches

a-Characters often deliver **lengthy monologues** or soliloquies, analyzing emotions and moral dilemmas in detail.

b-More emphasis on *speech* than *action* — his plays were probably meant to be read, not staged.

4-Moral and Philosophical Tone

a-Reflects Seneca's philosophy — meditations on death, fate, self-control, and the destructiveness of passion.

b-Even violent events are often described rather than shown, followed by commentary.

5-Violence and Horror (Offstage)

a-Murders, suicides, ghosts, and supernatural revenge are common.

b-Bloodshed usually happens **offstage**, then reported by messengers.

6-Use of Chorus

Like Greek tragedies, Seneca uses a chorus to reflect on the action, give background, and provide moral lessons.

7-Supernatural and Revenge Themes

a-Ghosts appear to demand vengeance.

b-Strong sense of inevitability — fate traps the characters.

Influence on English Drama

Elizabethan playwrights (Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare) borrowed:

- The revenge plot (*The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*).
- The ghost as a dramatic device.
- The five-act structure.

- Long rhetorical speeches and philosophical depth.

A comparison of Seneca's drama vs. Elizabethan tragedy

Feature	Seneca's Drama (1st century CE)	Elizabethan Tragedy (16th–17th century)
Language Style	Highly rhetorical, full of long, philosophical speeches.	Still uses long speeches, but more natural dialogue mixed with action.
Structure	Strict five-act structure.	Often five acts, but more flexible with scene changes.
Action	Little physical action on stage; violence described by messengers.	Action shown on stage (e.g., sword fights, murders, duels).
Violence & Horror	Offstage killings, suicides, and blood — recounted, not seen.	Violence often on stage for dramatic effect (<i>Macbeth</i> , <i>Hamlet</i>).
Themes	Revenge, fate, the corrupting power of passion.	Revenge, ambition, political intrigue, fate — but also deep personal psychology.
Ghosts & Supernatural	Ghosts appear to incite revenge.	Borrowed heavily (<i>Hamlet's</i> ghost, witches in <i>Macbeth</i>).
Chorus	Moral commentary between acts.	Chorus rare, replaced by characters or prologues (<i>Henry V</i>).
Purpose	Philosophical reflection; often read more than performed.	Entertainment + moral insight; written to be staged.
Audience	Roman elite and scholars.	Broad public — from nobles to

Feature	Seneca's Drama (1st century CE)	Elizabethan Tragedy (16th–17th century) groundlings in theaters.
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The big difference between Seneca and Shakespeare is that Seneca's characters talk like philosophers addressing the universe, while Shakespeare's talk like human beings wrestling with themselves in the moment.

Medieval Moralities & Early Tudor Drama (1400s–1500s)

Adopt moral lessons and allegorical figures from morality plays, keep some Senecan tone

Thomas Norton & Thomas Sackville (*Gorboduc*, 1561)

Introduce blank verse tragedy in England using Senecan model

Thomas Kyd (*The Spanish Tragedy*, c. 1587)

Adds onstage action, blood, elaborate revenge plots; directly borrows ghost device from Seneca.

Christopher Marlowe (*Doctor Faustus*, *Tamburlaine*, 1587–1593)

Elevates blank verse to poetry, makes protagonists ambitious and larger-than-life, still keeps Senecan moral weight.

William Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, 1590s–1600s)

Blends Senecan devices (ghosts, revenge, moral reflection) with psychological realism, complex characters, and onstage spectacle.

*** CE stands for Common Era.**

It's a secular (non-religious) way of denoting years in the same system as AD (Anno Domini), which means "in the year of our Lord" in Latin.

- CE corresponds exactly to AD (e.g., 65 CE = AD 65).
- BCE means Before Common Era, and it corresponds exactly to BC (Before Christ).