

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department



Higher Studies/ M.A./ English Literature

Drama

Seneca

Compiled By:

Assist. Prof. Marwa Sami Hussein

2025-2026

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 and was virtual ruler with his friends of the Roman world between 54 and 62, during the first phase of the emperor Nero's reign was the fifth Roman emperor.

What are the characteristics of Seneca's drama?

Senecan tragedy, body of nine closet dramas (*i.e.*, plays intended to be read rather than performed), written in blank verse by the Roman Stoic* philosopher Seneca in the 1st century AD. Rediscovered by Italian humanists in the mid-16th century, they became the models for the revival of tragedy on the Renaissance stage. The two great, but very different, dramatic traditions of the age—French Neoclassical tragedy* and Elizabethan tragedy—both drew inspiration from Seneca. 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 Stoic 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:

1-The revenge plot (*The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*).

2-The ghost as a dramatic device.

3-The five-act structure.

4-Long rhetorical speeches and philosophical depth.

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.

Seneca (1st century CE)

Influences structure, themes, and devices

- Five-act format
- Revenge plots
- Ghosts and supernatural
- Moral/philosophical speeches
- Violence offstage

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

*Stoicism is an ancient Greek philosophy, founded around 300 BCE by Zeno of Citium, that emphasizes virtue, reason, and self-control to achieve a tranquil life by accepting what one cannot change and focusing on one's own actions and judgments. Key principles include the four cardinal virtues—wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance—and a belief that the universe is rationally ordered, allowing individuals to live virtuously and contribute to human affairs despite external circumstances

* French Neoclassical tragedy is a dramatic form from the 17th century, influenced by ancient Greek models and Aristotle's *Poetics*, characterized by strict adherence to the Three Unities (time, place, and action), verisimilitude (plausibility), and decorum (propriety). The plays often focus on the conflict between passion and reason and aim to evoke pity and fear in an audience while providing moral instruction. Key figures include Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, whose works defined the genre during France's Golden Age, a period when the French Academy played a significant role in standardizing dramatic rules.