

THE STRUCTURE OF DRAMA

The **play** is the central element of the art of theatre. It is brought to life by the actors; expressed through the media of color, light, and movement against a background of stage and scenery; and unified by the creative vision of the director.

A play has **four narrative essentials: exposition, plot, characters, and theme**. These four elements are communicated through the dialogue and action of a drama. The way the playwright arranges and presents these four narrative essentials is the structure of the play

Aristotle's Poetics...

An early attempt to identify the basic principles of playwriting came from the Greek philosopher and playwright **Aristotle** in the *Poetics*. He describes what he considers to be the key elements of a successful play. **He stresses that drama is an imitation of life**; that we learn through imitation, and that learning something is the greatest pleasure in life. Aristotle also points out that human happiness or misery takes the form of action. **He therefore identifies plot as the most important element of a play.**

Aristotle's Key Elements of a Play

- **Spectacle** (the visible part of a play)
- **Sound** (the audible part of a play, especially a poetic play)
- **Diction** (Language)
- **Reasoning** (the way speech is used to present all aspects of the play, including the production of emotions such as pity, terror, and anger)
- **Plot** (the action and events)

Aristotle maintained that **the action must have unity**: it must be complete in itself, **with a beginning, a middle, and an end**. Events must occur in logical order and must reach a plausible conclusion. The protagonists should be “average or better” persons who experience happiness or misery as a result of their reactions to the situations of the plot. The resolution of the action in a tragedy should purge the emotions of the audience through pity and fear and **reveal a universal truth about life**.

Aristotle's theories gradually became rules, and these have been applied through the years by many dramatists.

Narrative Essentials

Despite modern innovations and experimentation, the traditional structure of drama still dominates the theatrical scene.

Exposition

As soon as possible after a play begins, the audience must know what kind of play is being presented, where and when it is taking place, who the leading characters are, and in what situations and conflicts they find themselves. These facts constitute the literary setting. The process of making them apparent to the audience is the exposition. Playwrights know that exposition is necessary, but at the same time they realize information without action is often uninteresting. A skillfully written exposition is brief and unobtrusive. It tells the when, where, why, and who in a subtle way. The exposition also establishes the atmosphere and the mood of the play. Atmosphere is the environment of the play, largely created by staging and lighting. The various tempos of speech and movement can also attribute to the atmosphere. The atmosphere helps bring out the feelings that create the mood, or emotional feeling of the play. The characters setting, lighting, and dialogue all help bring out the mood. The mood of the play is subject to change or reversal as the play progresses.

The most important part of the exposition is the preliminary situation, sometimes called the antecedent action. This is a clearly defined explanation of events that have occurred in the lives of the leading characters before the action of the play begins. These events place them in the situation in which we find them at the beginning of the play.

Playwrights use various devices to handle to exposition of the preliminary situation. The most common technique is to have minor characters bring the audience up to date. More original methods are the use of prologues, telephone conversations, narrators, and ingenious scenic effects.

Plot:

The **plot** of the play is the series of events that take place before the audience. It is the **development** and **resolution** of a major conflict. There is usually a problem facing the protagonist. From that problem a conflict arise between the protagonist and the antagonist, the person or force opposing the protagonist. It might be a clash of will or wits. It might be a psychological struggle between phases of the protagonist's personality and the environment. It might be a battle between groups with ideological differences. Whether physical, mental, or emotional, the conflicting elements must give rise to suspense and to be resolved in one way or another.

Plot Structure: **1. Preliminary Situation**

2. Initial Incident

3. Rising Action

4. Climax

5. Falling Action

6. Conclusion

Resolution: Another term for the resolution of a play is **denouement**. The French for “untying the knot,” it addressed the untangling of complications in a play and the resolution of these complications. In the Poetics, Aristotle explains, “By complication I mean everything from the beginning of the story up to the point where the hero suffers a change of fortune; by denouement, everything from the latter point to the end.”

Situation: The situation is the predicament of problem the plot revolves around. Georges Polti, in his book The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations, proposes the following situations as the basis of all dramas.

The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations

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| 1. Supplication | 19. Slaying of a kinsman unrecognized |
| 2. Deliverance | 20. Self-sacrificing for an ideal |
| 3. Crime pursued by vengeance | 21. Self-sacrifice for kindred |
| 4. Vengeance taken for kindred upon kindred | 22. All sacrificed for a passion |
| 5. Pursuit | 23. Necessity of sacrificing loved ones |
| 6. Disaster | 24. Rivalry of superior and inferior |
| 7. Falling prey to cruelty or misfortune | 25. Adultery |
| 8. Revolt | 26. Crimes of love |
| 9. Daring enterprise | 27. Discovery of the dishonor of loved one |
| 10. Abduction | 28. Obstacles to love |
| 11. The enigma | 29. An enemy loved |
| 12. Obtaining | 30. Ambition |
| 13. Enmity of kinsmen | 31. Conflict with a god |
| 14. Rivalry of kinsmen | 32. Mistaken jealousy |
| 15. Murderous adultery | 33. Erroneous judgment |
| 16. Madness | 34. Remorse |
| 17. Fatal imprudence | 35. Recovery of a lost one |
| 18. Involuntary crimes of love | 36. Loss of loved ones |

Characters:

There are few things in the world as interesting as people. **The characters in a play should be people who can hold the audience's interest throughout the play. In a well-written play, even the most minor characters have interesting and unique personalities.** The characters in a play must be vivid and varied in personality, with their dominant traits made evident through their dialogue and actions. The characters' actions must suit their positions in life and their past experiences. The playwright also reveals characters by what they say to and about one another.

In writing the dialogue, the dramatist/ playwright must make a character speak as the audience would expect the women and men in the character's time, social class, community, and experience to speak. At the same time the playwright must advance the plot, motivate the actions of the characters, and place the characters in exciting and amusing situations.

At times, playwrights will use **soliloquies** to reveal character: **soliloquies are speeches in which actors talk alone-think aloud – about themselves and their motives or about other people and situations.** Soliloquies were accepted as a vital part of drama until realist plays became popular: in real life, people do not talk to themselves as often.

The most important phase of characterization is understanding your character's motivation. Every action must have a reason behind it, which in turn must be the result of both the character's personality and the situation of the moment. To define the character's motivation and personality, a playwright must continually ask the following questions of each character.

- What does this character need or want? **(objective)**
- Who or what stands in the way of the character's needs or wants? **(obstacles)**
- What conditions affect the character's thoughts, words, and actions?
- Why does this character say or do certain things?

Theme:

The theme is the basic idea of a play, which the author dramatizes through the conflicts of the characters. Sometimes the playwright states the theme in words spoken by a character, but often it is left to the interpretation of the audience or reader. Theme may be many ideas presented in a play, but do not mistake a minor truth for the main theme. **The theme of the play is the specific idea about life that gives unity and purpose to everything that happens.** Sometimes the writer states the theme right in the title, as in *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, *You Can't Take it With You*, and *She Stoops to Conquer*. At other times, the theme is actually stated in a key line, emphasized or expressed by the leading character as a personal philosophy of life, and then carried out in the situations resulting from this philosophy.

Do not confuse theme with moral: a moral is a lesson or a principle contained within a play or taught by a play. Although some plays make moral statements, many plays have no one particular moral. Instead they are written to show how a certain type of individual would react under certain circumstances or simply to portray an interesting phase of life.

Structure of Drama Review: Write each of the following questions and answer on your own paper.

- 1.) Name and define the four narrative essentials of a play. How are these narrative essentials communicated by the dramatist/playwright?
- 2.) Who first expressed the principles of traditional drama? What did he identify as the key elements of a play?
- 3.) How does mood differ from atmosphere?
- 4.) What are the five major parts of plot structure that follow the preliminary situation/action?
- 5.) Describe how characterization is revealed/developed.
- 6.) How does theme differ from a moral?