Dramatic Terms

**Act**: A major division in a play. An act can be sub-divided into scenes. The five act structure was introduced in Roman times and became convention in Shakespeare's period.

**Antagonist**: A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play Antigone; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' Oedipus the King.

**Aristotle’s definition of Tragedy:** It is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude with incidents arousing pity and fear (catharsis), the protagonist, usually a man of importance, falls to disaster through a tragic flaw, a mistaken action or weakness within the character.

**Aside**: Words spoken by an actor directly to the audience, which are not "heard" by the other characters on stage during a play. In Shakespeare's Othello, Iago voices his inner thoughts a number of times as "asides" for the play's audience.

**Catastrophe**: The action at the end of a tragedy that initiates the denouement or falling action of a play. One example is the dueling scene in Act V of Hamlet in which Hamlet dies, along with Laertes, King Claudius, and Queen Gertrude.

**Catharsis**: The purging of the feelings of pity and fear that, according to Aristotle, occur in the audience of tragic drama. The audience experiences catharsis at the end of the play, following the catastrophe.

**Character**: An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

**Chorus**: a group of singers and dancers in Athenian drama participating in or commenting on the. In modern drama a chorus can be a character/narrator coming on stage and giving a prologue or explicit background information or themes.

**Climax**: The turning point of the action in the plot of a play and the point of greatest tension in the work. Example: The final duel between Laertes and Hamlet in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

**Comic relief**: The use of a comic scene to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. The comedy of scenes offering comic relief typically parallels the tragic action that the scenes interrupt. Comic relief is lacking in Greek tragedy, but occurs regularly in Shakespeare's tragedies.   
One example is the opening scene of Act V of Hamlet, in which a gravedigger banters with Hamlet.

**Conflict**: The conflict between two opposing forces in a play.

**Denouement/Resolution**: Literally the action of untying. A denouement (or resolution) is the final outcome of the main complication in a play. Usually the denouement occurs AFTER the climax (the turning point or "crisis"). It is sometimes referred to as the explanation or outcome of a drama that reveals all the secrets and misunderstandings connected to the plot.   
Example: In Shakespeare's Othello, the climax occurs when Othello kills his wife. The denouement occurs when Emilia, proves to Othello that his wife was in fact honest, true, and faithful to him.

**Deus Ex Machina**: When an external source resolves the entanglements of a play by supernatural intervention. The Latin phrase means, literally, "a god from the machine." The phrase refers to the use of artificial means to resolve the plot of a play.  
Examples: Many of Euripides' plays have gods coming to rescue the day. In Medea a dragondrawn chariot is sent by Apollo, the Sun-God, to rescue Medea who has just murdered her children. In Joe Orton's classic play, What the Butler Saw (1969) the deus ex machina comes in the form not of a god but of a policeman who saves the day.

**Dialogue**: The conversation of characters in a literary work. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

**Dramatic Irony**: A device in which a character holds a position or has an expectation reversed or fulfilled in a way that the character did not expect but that the audience or readers have anticipated because their knowledge of events or individuals is more complete than the character's.

**Epilogue**: An epilogue or epilog (from [Greek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek) ἐπίλογος *epílogos*, "conclusion" from ἐπί *epi*, "in addition" and λόγος *logos*, "word") is a piece of writing at the end of a work of literature, usually used to bring closure to the work.

**Falling Action**: This is when the events and complications begin to resolve themselves and tension is released. We learn whether the conflict has or been resolved or not.

**Flashback**: An interruption of a play's chronology (timeline) to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time-frame of the play's action.  
Examples: In Shakespeare's Othello, Othello recalls how he courted Desdemona.

**Flat Character**: Flat characters in a play are often, but not always, relatively simple minor characters. They tend to be presented though particular and limited traits; hence they become stereotypes. For example, the selfish son, the pure woman, the lazy child, the dumb blonde, etc. These characters do not change in the course of a play.

**Foil**: A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in Hamlet, is a foil for the main character; in Othello, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

**Fourth wall**: The imaginary wall of the box theater setting, supposedly removed to allow the audience to see the action. The fourth wall is especially common in contemporary plays.

**Hubris**: This negative term implies both arrogant, excessive self-pride or self-confidence, and a lack of some important perception or insight due to pride in one's abilities. This overwhelming pride inevitably leads to a downfall.  
Example: In Sophocles Oedipus, Oedipus' refusal to listen to anyone illustrates hubris. He believes he knows best - even better than the prophet Tiresias - and his refusal to listen leads to his downfall.

**Monologue**: A speech by a single character without another character's response.

**Morality play:** It is a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personifications of various moral attributes, who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil. In morality plays the hero represents “Mankind” OR “Every man”. It shows the difference between good and evil.

**Motivation**: The thought(s) or desire(s) that drives a character to actively pursue a want or need. This want or need is called the objective. A character generally has an overall objective or long-term goal in a drama but may change his or her objective, and hence motivation, from scene to scene when confronted with various obstacles.

**Plot**: The sequence of events that make up a story. According to Aristotle, "The plot must be 'a whole' with a beginning, middle, and end" A plot needs a motivating purpose to drive the story to its resolution, and a connection between these events.  
Example: "The king died and then the queen died." Here there is no plot. Although there are two events - one followed by the other - there is nothing to tie them together. In contrast, "The king died and then the queen died of grief," is an example of a plot because it shows one event (the king's death) being the cause of the next event (the queen's death). The plot draws the reader into the character's lives and helps the reader understand the choices that the  
characters make.

**Prologue**: a [part](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/part) that comes at the [beginning](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/beginning) of a [play](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/play), [story](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/story), or [long](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/long) [poem](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poem), often giving [information](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/information) about [events](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/event) that [happened](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/happen) before the [time](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/time) when the [play](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/play), [story](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/story), or [poem](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poem) [begins](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/begin)

**Protagonist**: The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's Metamorphosis, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

**Reversal or Peripeteia**: The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the  
protagonist- from failure to success or success to failure.   
Examples: Oedipus's and Othello's moments of enlightenment are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn.

**Rising Action**: An event, conflict or crisis or set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's plot leading up to the climax.   
Example: The result of Othello promoting Cassio rather than Iago sets in motion everything else that follows.

**Round Characters**: A round character is depicted with such psychological depth and detail that he or she seems like a "real" person. The round character contrasts with the flat character who serves a specific or minor literary function in a text, and who may be a stock character or simplified stereotype.

**Scene:** A traditional segment in a play. Scenes are used to indicate (1) a change in time (2) a change in location, (3) provides a jump from one subplot to another, (4) introduces new characters (5) rearrange the actors on the stage. Traditionally plays are composed of acts, broken down into scenes.

**Scenery**: The painted [scenes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scenes) or hangings and accessories used on a theater stage.

**Setting**: The time and place of the action of a literary, dramatic, or cinematic work.

**Soliloquy**: (from Latin *solo* "to oneself" + *loquor* "I talk") A speech in a play that is meant to be heard by the audience but not by other characters on the stage. It is a device often used in drama when a character speaks to himself or herself, relating thoughts and feelings. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is an example.

**Stage Direction**: A playwright's descriptive or interpretive comments that provide readers (and actors) with information about the dialogue, setting, and action of a play. Modern playwrights, including Ibsen, Shaw, Miller, and Williams tend to include substantial stage directions, while earlier playwrights typically used them more sparsely, implicitly, or not at all.

**Static Character:** A literary or dramatic character who undergoes little or no inner change; a character who does not grow or develop.

**Subplot**: A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of Hamlet.

**Tragic Flaw**: A weakness or limitation of character, resulting in the fall of the tragic hero. Othello's jealousy and too trusting nature is one example.

**Tragic Hero:** A privileged, exalted character of high repute, who, by virtue of a tragic flaw and fate, suffers a fall from glory into suffering. Sophocles' Oedipus is an example.

**Unity of time, place, and action ("The Unities"):** Limiting the time, place, and action of a play to a single spot and a single action over the period of 24 hours.

**A comedy**:  is a type of drama that is intended to amuse, usually with a happy ending. The central character of a comedy is usually an ordinary character who faces conflicts that arise from misunderstandings or mistaken identities but overcomes them, and the play ends with a happy resolution.

**Types of Comedy:**

**1. Comedy of Humours:** based on the belief that people’s actions are

governed by their dominant bodily humour (blood, phlegm, bile or

black bile), the focus is around an individual character or characters

overriding traits (humour) that dominates their personality, desires

and conduct.  
**2. Comedy of Manners:** Dramatic comedy that explores the lives and

behaviour of the middle and upper class in society, normally

involving moral values, and relationships between ladies and

gentlemen.

**3. Sentimental Comedy:** In Sentimental comedies middle-class

protagonists triumphantly overcome a series of moral trials.

**4. Tragicomedy:** Plays that combine both elements from Comedy and

Tragedy, usually the events are tragic and the end is happy.

**5. Romantic Comedy: a** play that deals with love in a light, humorous way.