

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.

Aristotle's definition of Tragedy: It is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain degree 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. 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 normally likes 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 chats with Hamlet.

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

Denouement/Resolution: Literally the action of downfall. 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 Machine: When an external source resolves the confusions of a play by supernatural interference. 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 dragon drawn chariot is sent by Apollo, the Sun-God, to rescue Medea who has just murdered her children.

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 means conclusion. It 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 in the past 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 characters; 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 counterparts the main character in a play. 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 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.