

P.G DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, ARA
P.G SEM-III
CC-11 UNIT II
Elements of Tragic-Drama as a Genre

Plot

. Plot is the events in the play and the order in which the events are told. There is no one correct way to structure a drama! However, the structure of a drama is only as effective as it is intentionally formed to elicit the desired response from its audience. A play usually has a beginning, middle, and end. It almost always has a character grow and develop over the course of the play. Let's look closely at one type of plot structure in order to see what plot might look like.

Tragic Plot

According to Aristotle, an effective plot of a tragedy follows this order:

Inciting incident: the background of the play that causes the central conflict.

Example: two brothers murder each other. Their uncle, the King, refuses to bury one of the brothers and makes a law against burying him. This puts the sister of the brothers in a bad place, because her religion requires her to bury them so they go to heaven.

Rising Action: the conflict built through friction between characters.

Example: The sister defies her uncle the King and buries her brother against the king's orders and then refuses to apologize. The king then commands his soldiers to bury his niece alive for her defiance!

Anagnorisis or Scene of Recognition: the protagonist realizes he has made an error that carries serious consequences.

Example: The King receives a warning from a wise elder that burying his niece is a terrible idea that has angered the gods. The king finally realizes he has been a stubborn bonehead (he has exhibited excessive pride, hubris) and has a serious character flaw (hamartia).

Peripeteia or Reversal of Fortune: this is when the protagonist's luck runs out.

Example: the King's recognition of his error comes too late: just as he sends his soldiers to free the niece from her cave, she dies in her cave and the King's son—his niece's betrothed—has killed himself in sorrow.

Scene of Suffering: a bunch of people suffer and/or die as a result of the protagonist's hamartia.

Example: Not only did the King's niece and son die, but a messenger tells him that his wife killed herself in grief. The heartbroken King leaves the city in self-imposed exile. The audience feels pity and fear watching the King suffer, and this helps purge their feelings of pity and fear.

Not all plays or even tragedies follow this structure exactly. That being said, it can be helpful to analyze the ways in which a plot's structure is formed, as this can reveal deeper meanings. For example, what would have happened if the above-mentioned King had recognized his tragic flaw (hamartia) in time to save his niece? This would have been a very different play: perhaps even a romance if the niece and king's son married and lived happily ever after. As in this example (based on *Antigone* by Sophocles), the structure of a play can have profound effects on its meaning or even genre!

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Structure

Whether tragedy, comedy, history, or romance, all plays generally follow the structure of act, scene, and line.

A play can be anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. Usually, a play will be divided into anywhere from one to five acts. These acts usually hinge upon a central plot point. Between each act, the curtain will fall; perhaps in the middle of the play there might be an intermission for audiences to use the restroom or buy drinks. A lot of literary production is driven by economics, after all: playwrights gotta eat, too!

The acts are further divided into scenes. The scene is usually set in a particular moment in time and setting.

When reading the play, actors reference lines. The lines are the dialogue that they speak to one another. A long time ago, poems and plays were often written in verse such as iambic pentameter, so poems and plays shared the concept of line structure. However, in contemporary plays, dialogue may be written in prose. Usually it will still have some kind of numbering system so that actors, directors, and readers can find their place.

When writing about a play, you should try to reference act, scene, and line number in your parenthetical in-text citation. For example (1.3.186) means Act 1, Scene 3, Line 186. However, not all plays have line numbers, or even scenes. So you may need to just reference act and scene (1.3) or just the act (Act 3).

Setting

To provide the story's setting, a play requires sets. If you've ever been involved with a play, you know that the set can be made up of detailed backdrops, specifically designed props, strategic lighting, and sometimes even background noise. A set, along with the characters' subtle indications of the scene, can generate a full setting in the audience's imagination. For example, the play Hamlet starts its setting on a creepy, dark, foggy, cold night in the fictional Castle Elsinore on Denmark. The setting is often established on a stage, or the physical space upon which actors move. In order for a play to take place, there must be actors (people performing the play), an audience (people viewing the play), and action and/or dialogue as performed by the actors.

Character

While in short stories or novels a reader must wait until a character appears to know who the important characters are, in a play they are often the first aspect of the text encountered by readers. The character list usually appears in the first pages of the play. This is because, as a play emphasizes action over narration, the actors must know their parts!

Usually, the most important characters are listed first. Think most spoken lines, protagonists, antagonists, etc. However, the order in which the characters appear on the character list does not necessarily dictate the order of appearance. Like in creative nonfiction or fiction, writers develop characters over the course of the play. Different characters serve different roles such as protagonist,

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antagonist, or foil. There are a few types of character archetypes unique to drama which are described below. Note that not all of them will be in every play!

Protagonist: the hero of the play. Usually the main character or the character with the most spoken lines, or the character around whom all the other characters seem to orbit. Hamlet would be an example of a protagonist.

Antagonist: the villain of the play, usually opposite the protagonist. Claudius would be an example of an antagonist.

Foil: this is a character meant to define another character through juxtaposition or comparison. For example, in Hamlet, Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras and Hamlet and Fortinbras are often considered foils of each other. Fortinbras and Hamlet are both on paths of vengeance, yet each goes about their vengeance in different ways. While Fortinbras uses military strength, Hamlet chooses to use his intellect. While Fortinbras is decisive, Hamlet seems paralyzed by indecision. By examining the ways in which these two characters are similar and different, we can learn a lot about each of them and their significance in the play.

Wise elder: in most plays, there is a wise old man or figure of wisdom who guides the protagonist. In Hamlet, it might be the ghost of his father, or Polonius can be a silly inversion of this archetype. In Antigone, it is probably Tiresias.

Love interest: again, in most plays, there is usually a love interest of the protagonist, though not always. For Hamlet, this is Ophelia (though some scholars have argued Horatio!)

Messenger: a character who delivers news

Dialogue and Action

One of the main differences between fiction and drama is that usually a play's plot is primarily forwarded through dialogue and action. Dialogue is comprised of the words directly spoken by characters, while actions are the physical movements of the actors. In a novel, action is described in detail and dialogue is usually put in quotation marks.

Distinct from the novel form of dialogue evidenced above, in a play, any words which come after the character's name will be considered dialogue. Action is usually not described in great depth, and actors are to interpret what actions to take based on the dialogue. Consider this example from Hamlet by William Shakespeare:

MARCELLUS: Holla, Bernardo!

BERNARDO: Say,
What, is Horatio there?

HORATIO: A piece of him.

BERNARDO: Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, good Marcellus.

MARCELLUS: What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?

BERNARDO: I have seen nothing.

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In the above excerpt from the beginning of the play (1.1), Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio (soldiers) greet each other as they patrol the castle. When Horatio says "a piece of him," we might imagine the fog is so thick or the night so dark that only pieces of each character can be seen. Horatio might be holding up his hand in the torchlight. We might imagine the characters wandering about in the dark speaking to each other, a bit rattled, worrying if the mysterious "thing" Marcellus references will reappear. We learn later in the dialogue that "thing" is an apparition (ghost). None of the characters' movements are described, so we must infer what their actions are through their dialogue.

Although a novel's narrator can describe in detail the thoughts and impressions of its characters, a play's effects depend much more heavily on what the characters say and do. A play is a performance, a spectacle, rather than words on paper. That is, drama is a story performed by actors. Some plays do include a narrator or a chorus, to introduce the scene or set the tone of the play, but the bulk of the production's effect is generated through the dialogue and its visual devices, and since the play's script dictates what the characters will say and often, through stage direction, its production strategies as well, the script is crucial to a successful performance.

Audience

While in other literary works the audience takes a more passive role, in plays the audience often becomes part of the show. When a character goes on an extended soliloquy, or extended speech when they are by themselves on the stage, they will often address the audience directly; the audience gets the insider view of their thoughts. Sometimes actors join audience members or extend the stage into the seats! Audiences in the old days also would get rowdy and interact with the actors and actresses, sometimes in outright chaotic ways. For example, during the first act of a play in 1883, actor John Ritchie was allegedly pelted by rotten eggs and tomatoes and "demoralized" ("AN ACTOR DEMORALIZED"). So, when analyzing drama, it's important to analyze how audience members might experience the play!

Works Cited

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