



Tikrit University
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Literary Elements & Dramatic Devices

Drama is a unique form of literature designed not just to be read silently, but to be performed live before an audience. It transforms written words into human action, conflict, and emotion. To successfully build a theatrical world, playwrights rely on foundational core elements and specialized creative tools known as dramatic devices.

1. THE CORE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

Every dramatic work—from ancient Greek tragedies to modern stage plays—is built upon these structural pillars:

Act: A major division of a play. Each act must have one or more **scenes** (which is a division of an act). A play must consist of one, two, three, four, or five acts. In the past English plays usually were divided into five acts while playwrights of the twentieth century prefer the three acts form.

Plot: The narrative spine of the play. It is the carefully arranged sequence of events driven by a central conflict. A classic plot layout moves from exposition (introduction) to rising action, reaches a crisis point (climax), and settles into the resolution.

- **Subplot** : a secondary sequence of actions in a dramatic or narrative work, usually involving characters of lesser importance (and often of lower social status). The subplot may be related to the main plot as a parallel or contrast, or it may be more or less separate from it. Subplots are especially common in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, a famous example being that of Gloucester and his sons in Shakespeare's *King Lear*; but they are also found in long novels such as those of Dickens.

Characters: A person in a work of literature. In drama the characters are impersonated by the actors and actresses. They are the driving forces of the action. Unlike traditional fiction where an author can describe a person's inner thoughts directly, drama reveals character primarily through external speech, actions, and reactions.

- **Types of character:**
- **Round character:** is a character drawn with sufficient complexity to be able to surprise the reader without losing credibility. It is discovered from different sides and always develops during the play.
- **Flat character:** is shown from one side only. It has no depth to be discovered and therefore does not develop in the course of the play. Flat character never surprises the reader, and it is immediately recognizable.
- **Protagonist (hero/heroine)** : the main character in a narrative or dramatic work.
- **Chorus:** a group of singers distinct from the principal performers in a dramatic or musical performance. In classical Greek tragedy a chorus of twelve or fifteen masked

performers would sing, with dancing movements, comment on the action of the play, interpreting its events from the standpoint of traditional wisdom.

- **Antagonist:** the most prominent of the characters who oppose the protagonist or hero(ine) in a dramatic or narrative work. The antagonist is often a villain seeking to frustrate a heroine or hero; but in those works in which the protagonist is represented as evil, the antagonist will often be a virtuous or sympathetic character, as Macduff is in *Macbeth*

Dialogue: The spoken exchanges between characters. Dialogue performs multiple tasks simultaneously: it advances the story, reveals individual subtext and personality, and defines relationships between the figures on stage.

Setting: The specific time and place in which the action unfolds. In performance, the setting is visually brought to life through scenery, costume design, and atmospheric lighting.

Conflict: the struggle that grows out of the interplay of the two opposing forces in a plot. Conflict provides interest, suspense, and tension. The person usually, usually the protagonist, may be involved in conflicts of four different kinds (1) struggle against nature; (2) struggle against another person, usually the antagonist; (3) struggle against society; (4) a struggle for mastery by two elements within the person as in *Macbeth*.

Prologue: a kind of introduction to a play.

Epilogue: a short speech delivered at the end of a play.

2. KEY DRAMATIC DEVICES

Dramatic devices are technical tools used by the playwright to reveal interior thoughts, manipulate pacing, and build narrative tension.

Verbal Devices

Monologue: A sustained, uninterrupted speech delivered by a single character to other silent characters present on the stage. It allows a character to lay out a complex argument, share a story, or express deep emotion within the ongoing scene.

Soliloquy: A speech where a character speaks their private thoughts aloud while alone on stage (or isolated from others). It functions as a direct window into the character's mind, ensuring the audience hears their true motives, doubts, or secrets entirely unfiltered.

Aside: A brief comment spoken by a character directly to the audience or quietly to another character, which the rest of the stage characters are conventionally presumed not to hear. It momentarily pauses the illusion of the play to offer quick, sharp commentary.

Situational & Narrative Devices

Dramatic Irony: A powerful situation where the audience possesses vital knowledge that one or more characters on stage lack. This mismatch in information heightens anticipation, creating either intense emotional suspense or sharp comedic timing.

Flashback: The deliberate interruption of the play's chronological timeline to show an event that occurred in the past. This provides critical context, unearthing backstories or hidden motivations exactly when they matter most to the current plot.

Foreshadowing: The strategic placement of subtle hints, symbols, or warnings early in a play that point toward eventual outcomes. It builds an underlying sense of inevitability and expectation as the climax approaches.

3. DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The structure of a typical five-act play as it was first analyzed by Freytag in 1863. The main divisions are: introduction, rising action, climax or crisis (turning point), falling action, and catastrophe.

Introduction creates the tone, gives the setting, introduces some of the characters, and supplies other facts necessary to the understanding of the play. **The rising action** (or complication) is set in motion by the exciting force and continues through successive stages of conflict between the hero and the counter players up to the climax. Climax is the turning point or most intense moment in the drama. It's where the main conflict reaches its peak. **The downward or falling action** stresses the activity of the forces opposing the hero and, while some suspense must be maintained, the trend of the action must lead logically to the disaster with which tragedy is to close. The falling action is often set in movement by a single event called the tragic force. The latter part of the falling action is sometimes marked by an event that delays the catastrophe and seems to offer a way of escape for the hero. This is called the moment of final suspense. The **catastrophe**, marking the tragic fall, usually the death of the hero (and often his opponents as well). A glimpse of restored order often follows the catastrophe.

