CHAPTER 16
Drama

Like prose fiction, a play tells a story about imaginary characters and events, usually developing to a major point of crisis followed by a dénouement and resolution of conflicts and tensions. It has many of the features of novels and short stories discussed in the previous chapter, including elements of structure and characterisation.

A play, however, is written to be performed rather than read. This means there are special features of drama to consider whenever you analyse a play.

Structure and form

Plays are almost always broken down into ‘scenes’ (smaller units) and ‘acts’. A ‘scene’ refers to the action that takes place in a single setting. Typically, a scene will have a beginning, a middle and an end – similar to a short story. An ‘act’ refers to a group of scenes that share a physical setting or are close together in their temporal settings; that is, events within acts happen roughly within the same time period. A play may have anywhere from one to five acts, and each of these may vary in duration.

- Shakespeare’s plays have five acts, each with several scenes.
- Chekhov’s major dramatic works have four acts but no internal divisions into scenes.
- In the 20th and 21st centuries, continued experimentation with form has led to a loosening of conventional structures, and one-act plays have become relatively common. However, long plays of three or four acts are still often used.

How to refer to acts and scenes

When referring to a play comprising acts and scenes, it is usual to give the number of the act first, then the number of the scene within that act. A few examples are shown below, using the modern conventions as well as older conventions.

**Modern convention:** In modern convention, both the number of the act and the number of the scene are written in Arabic numerals.

In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Lear is abandoned in the storm in *Act 3 Scene 2*, denoted 3.2.

**Older conventions:** In older conventions, Roman numerals are used for acts, or for both acts and scenes.

In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Lear is abandoned in the storm in *Act III Scene 2* (III.2) or *Act III Scene ii* (III.ii).
Two key forms: tragedy and comedy

The two main forms used in drama are tragedy and comedy. These forms shape the overall structure or shape of the narrative, as shown in the table below. They were established by the ancient Greek playwrights (such as Sophocles and Euripides), and continue to exert a very strong influence on the writing and performing of plays, although there have been many variations on their basic shapes and elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tragedy</th>
<th>Comedy</th>
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<tr>
<td>The tragic hero is at first successful and acclaimed.</td>
<td>A problem is presented within an otherwise harmonious atmosphere.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The hero errs due to a flaw in his character; the action arises to a point of crisis (the climax).</td>
<td>Misunderstandings or conflicts lead to separation and anxiety.</td>
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<td>The hero falls from grace and ultimately dies, along with those who have been close to him. This results in a sense of catharsis or resolution.</td>
<td>Finally the confusion is ended and relationships are restored – usually in the form of a marriage or double marriage.</td>
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In a comedy, the overall pattern is essentially the reverse of that for a tragedy: a comedy can be seen schematically as a fall, then a rise; whereas a tragedy comprises a rise, then a fall.

Types of dialogue

The dialogue is what the characters say. Dialogue is almost always used in novels and short stories, but takes on much more importance in drama, where there is no narrative voice to provide explanations and descriptions.

A monologue is a speech delivered by a character alone onstage. This can occur when other characters are offstage, or in a play written for only one actor.

Soliloquies

A soliloquy is a speech in which a character directly informs the audience of their innermost thoughts and feelings. Usually the character is alone onstage, and it is understood that no other character hears what is said.

- A soliloquy is usually a significant speech: Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is 34 lines in length, for example. Such speeches temporarily hold up the action to focus the audience's attention on the character's state of mind and internal dilemmas.
- This technique brings the audience into a more intimate relationship with that character, often providing insights into a character's state of mind that the other characters do not have.

Asides

In an aside, the character speaks directly and briefly to the audience – in a few lines at most – without the other characters leaving the stage. The theatrical conventions are that:

- other characters do not hear what is said
- asides are indicated in a stage direction [aside] so that the actor knows to address the audience
- the action is kept moving forwards.

Asides and soliloquies often help to create dramatic irony (see page 152) through the gap or difference between what a character 'confesses' to the audience and what they say to other characters.
Play as text

In a sense, the print text of a play is only a partial text. The print text requires a performance in order to be fully realised. Stage directions are written by the playwright to guide the director and actors in their production and performance of the play. They are thus critical to understanding a play when reading the print text.

Stage directions are conventionally italicised in the print text and include information of three main kinds:

- details of the layout and appearance of the stage, e.g. props, settings and lighting
- descriptions of music or sound effects to be heard
- directions to guide the presentation and performances of the characters, e.g. physical appearance, movements on and off the stage, and the actors' gestures and tone of voice at key moments.

The staging of a play has a significant effect on how meaning is communicated to the audience. In many pre-20th century plays there are relatively few stage directions, so many features of the text that directly affect its meaning are ultimately in the hands of the director.

Play as performance

Aspects of a play performance that are crucial elements of the narrative include:

- props and sets
- lighting
- sound
- character positions and movements (including gestures and facial expressions)
- the manner in which lines are delivered (including tone, pace, pitch, pauses)
- costumes and make-up.

The following sections consider how a playwright or director can use these performance aspects to convey information and ideas, and how they can impact on an audience's responses to a performance.

Props and sets

Props and sets establish the play's setting or settings. They include all the objects present on the stage, pictures hanging on walls and backdrops (which can incorporate doors and windows).

Personal props are objects carried on by actors. The type of personal prop (e.g. a walking stick, umbrella, fan), and the way in which it is handled by the actor, contribute to characterisation as well as the themes explored by the play.

Sets can be rich and detailed, perhaps reflecting an affluent household or a vibrant, dynamic society; or they can be minimal, inviting the audience to see whatever items are present as symbolic. They often create a social and historical context for the play's concerns, ensuring that the audience sees the characters as part of a broader society.
Lighting

Lighting has several important functions in the theatre, including:

- drawing the audience's attention to a character or group of characters
- creating a mood or ambience (e.g. soft and intimate, or harsh and alienating)
- signalling a shift in location and/or time at a scene change, through lights going down then coming back up.

Lighting can also have a symbolic function, especially when the light source is one of the props (for example, a candle or a lamp).

Sound

Apart from the characters' dialogue, the two main types of sound used in drama are sound effects and music.

Sound effects can heighten the sense of realism at dramatic moments (e.g. gunshots or explosions at a crisis point). They also add to the play's construction of the illusion that the characters inhabit not merely the stage, but a larger 'world'.

Music can be part of a play's action – as when a character sings, plays a piano or listens to the radio – or it can be background or 'incidental' music. In either case, it can:

- create a mood
- help establish the historical period
- reinforce aspects of the characters' class or cultural context
- enhance characterisation by showing an aspect of the character not expressed in words.

The exact nature or piece of music is rarely indicated in stage directions; this allows the director considerable freedom in creating the mood and feeling of a scene.

Character positions and movements

In the theatre, the audience is fixed in position throughout the play. This is a significant difference from a novel or film. A novelist can change the reader's perspective on the action by shifting the narrative point of view; a film-maker does this by changing camera positions and angles. The playwright, however, depends on manipulating the characters' positions and movements to achieve similar effects. This can be done by:

- shifting characters between the front and rear of the stage to focus on certain characters at different times
- grouping characters together in different ways
- using entries and exits on and off the stage in order to represent various relationships or to 'forward action offstage'.

Character movements and positions are usually only given at key points in the narrative; such directions ensure that the characters' interactions and relationships are clearly conveyed to the audience.

In Greek and Shakespearean drama there are few stage directions describing movement; those present indicate little more than the characters' entrances and exits, their most basic actions ('kneeling', 'fights', 'dies') and to whom they speak. However, plays written in the 19th and 20th centuries use more frequent and specific stage directions, including detailed information about how the lines should be spoken, and the characters' gestures and facial expressions.