

In the previous chapters, you explored activities preparing you to interpret and develop a role from a playwright's script. You used imagination, concentration, observation, sensory recall, and movement to become aware of your personal resources. You used vocal exercises to prepare your voice for creative vocal expression. Improvisation and characterization activities provided opportunities for you to explore simple character portrayal and plot development. All of these activities were preparatory techniques for acting. Now you are ready to bring a character from the written page to the stage.



The Structure of Plays

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Understand the dramatic structure of a play.
- ◆ Recognize several types of plays.
- ◆ Understand how a play is organized.

Warm Up



As a class, play a short game of charades. Use the titles of plays and musicals or the names of famous actors.

Much of an actor's time is spent working from materials written by playwrights. You have probably read plays in your language arts classes. Thus, you probably already know that a play is a story written in dialogue form to be acted out by actors before a live audience as if it were real life.

Other forms of literature, such as short stories and novels, are written in prose form and are not intended to be acted out. Poetry also differs from plays in that poetry is arranged in lines and verses and is not written to be performed.

These students are bringing literature to life in much the same way that Aristotle first described drama over 2,000 years ago.



Plays have distinguishing characteristics that make the style easy to recognize. These characteristics—the way a play is put together—make up what is often called the play’s dramatic structure.

The Elements of a Play

plot

the arrangement of the incidents that take place in a play.

exposition

detailed information revealing the facts of the plot.

climax

turning point in the action of a play.

antagonist

the character opposing the protagonist.



Are these two characters from *Batman Forever* protagonists or antagonists? Even if you didn’t see the movie, what clues help you answer the question correctly?

theme

the basic idea or purpose of the play. It ties together all the characters and events.

The dramatic structure of a play dates back to 335 B.C., when Aristotle described the six basic parts, or elements, of a play. Playwriting has changed through the years, but Aristotle’s basic components of *plot*, *character*, *thought*, *diction*, *song*, and *spectacle* still exist to some extent in all plays. Still, different plays may place more importance on one component than on another. In some plays, plot is the key ingredient. Others might feature spectacle. In still others, song might be the most important feature. Today, many teachers refer to the six basic parts of dramatic structure as *plot*, *character*, *theme*, *language*, *music*, and *spectacle*.

Plot. Aristotle tells us that the **plot** is the arrangement of the incidents that take place in a play. A plot has three basic parts: the beginning, middle, and end. The beginning introduces the audience to who, what, where, when, and why through revealing information called **exposition**. The middle is composed of a series of complications or conflicts, which result in a **climax**, or turning point. In the final part of the plot, the conflict is resolved and the story ends.

Character. The plot of the play is carried out through the action and dialogue of personalities or figures called *characters*. It is through these characters that the playwright reveals his or her message. The principal character, who represents the main thought of the play, is called the protagonist. Standing in the protagonist’s way and opposing the protagonist is a character known as the **antagonist**. All other important characters in the play will side with one of these two characters.

Thought/Theme. Playwrights have an overall meaning, or basic idea, that they wish to get across through the play. This idea, known as the thought or **theme**, ties the characters and events together and gives the play purpose. The theme of a play is usually suggested, or implied, rather than directly stated.

Diction/Language. The playwright tells the story of the play through words, or language. Careful selection of language gives the audience a better understanding of the type of play, the characters, and the plot. The lines of the play and even the stage directions are all considered the language of a play.

Song/Music. During Aristotle’s time, Greek plays were chanted or sung, often accompanied by musical instruments. In today’s theatre, song, or music, includes the sound and characteristics of the actors’ voices, as well as songs, instruments, recorded background music, and even sound effects. These musical elements are used to establish mood and enhance believability in a play.

Preparing tapes of music, background sounds, and other special sound effects is an important part of most successful productions today.



Spectacle. The last of Aristotle's six elements is spectacle. **Spectacle** includes all visual elements of production. Today, scenery, properties, lighting, costumes, makeup, stage movement, and dance are all used to create spectacle in theatre. Although scenes and plays can certainly be staged without these elements, the addition of some form of spectacle enhances most productions.

Organization of a Play

The first Greek plays ran continuously from beginning to end without a break. It was Horace (65–8 B.C.), a Roman poet, who was the first writer to divide a play into five acts. An **act** is a major division of a play. Breaking up the action of a play is now a common practice. Today, most plays are divided into two or three acts, and many plays have just one act. Acts can be further divided into sections called scenes. Thus, a *scene* is a subdivision of an act. Scenes are often used to show the change of location or the passing of time. (See Figure 8–1 on the following page.)

Types of Plays

As you work with different scenes and plays, you will begin to notice the different ways that plays are classified. One play may be called a tragedy, while another may be considered a comedy. Let's look at what makes plays different.

The oldest type of dramatic literature is the tragedy. A **tragedy** deals with a serious situation in a serious way. In a tragedy, the protagonist dies or is defeated at the end of the play. Tragedies are often named after the defeated hero or heroine. *Antigone*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* are all examples of tragedies.

A drama is also a play dealing with a serious subject in a serious way. It differs from a tragedy in that the protagonist does not die and is not

spectacle

all visual elements of production, such as scenery, properties, lighting, costumes, makeup, stage movement, and dance.

act

major division of a play.

tragedy

a play that deals with a serious situation in a serious way. The protagonist dies or is defeated at the end of the play.

Figure 8-1

Divisions of a Play.

Major division of play

Subdivision of play

Scene indicates change of location or passage of time.

Plot develops through dialogue, characterization, and stage directions provided by playwright

A Raisin in the Sun
Act 1, scene 1
By Lorraine Hansberry

Just before the scene opens BENEATHA has used profanity about an upstairs neighbor's use of a vacuum cleaner.

MAMA If you use the Lord's name just one more time—
BENEATHA (*A bit of a whine.*) Oh, Mama—
RUTH Fresh—just fresh as salt, this girl!
BENEATHA (*Dryly.*) Well—if the salt loses its savor—
MAMA Now that will do. I just ain't going to have you 'round here reciting the scriptures in vain—you hear me?
BENEATHA How did I manage to get on everybody's wrong side by just walking into a room?
RUTH If you weren't so fresh—
BENEATHA Ruth, I'm twenty years old.
MAMA What time

comedy

a play that presents its theme and characters in a humorous way. All characters come together at the end of the play.

The novel, *Little Women* has been successfully staged and filmed as a drama.

defeated at the end. In fact, the drama often offers hope for the protagonist's situation. Some dramas that you might enjoy reading are *Little Women*, *The Chalk Garden*, *The Miracle Worker*, and *Raisin in the Sun*.

Another type of dramatic literature is the comedy. A **comedy** presents both theme and characters in a humorous way. A popular comedy plot involves two young people who are in love but who almost don't get together. After several complicated situations, the characters



melodrama

an exaggerated, fast-moving play in which action is more important than characterization. The “good guys” win and the “bad guys” are punished.

finally overcome the opposition and come together at the end of the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Butterflies Are Free*, and *The Star Spangled Girl* are all comedies.

Often a play is a mixture of both comedy and tragedy. One of the most common mixtures is the melodrama. A **melodrama** is an exaggerated, fast-moving play in which action is more important than characterization. In the melodrama, there is a clear-cut distinction between good and evil. In the end, we see the “good guys” win and the “bad guys” punished. Melodramas that you may have read or viewed on videotape are *Dracula*, *Deathtrap*, and *Dial “M” for Murder*.

ACTION



1. Reading a Play

- a. Select and read a one-act play.
 - b. Identify each of Aristotle's six elements. Describe how these elements are used in the play you have read.
 - c. Prepare a short written report on the play you have read. Plan to discuss your work with your acting company or class.
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