

Dramatic Features

Aside A brief speech in which a character turns from the person being addressed to speak directly to the audience; a dramatic device for letting the audience know what a character is really thinking or feeling as opposed to what the character pretends to think or feel

Allusion A reference, explicit or implicit, to something in previous literature or history

Anagnorisis - a moment in a play or other work when a character makes a critical discovery.

Aposiopesis When a sentence is purposefully left incomplete or cut off. It's caused by an inability or unwillingness to continue speaking. This allows the ending to be filled in by the listener's imagination. In order to show aposiopesis in a sentence, one may use the em dash (–) or ellipsis (...).

Blank verse Non-rhyming poetry, usually written in iambic pentameter. Most of Shakespeare's dialogue is written in blank verse, though it does occasionally rhyme.

Catharsis

The purging of the feelings of pity and fear that, according to Aristotle, occurs in the audience of tragic drama. The audience experiences catharsis at the end of the play, following the catastrophe.

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A & P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier

Comic relief

The use of a comic scene to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. The comedy of scenes offering comic relief typically parallels 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 banters with Hamlet.

Complication

An intensification of the [conflict](#) in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer

Denouement

The resolution of the [plot](#) of a literary work. The denouement of *Hamlet* takes place after the [catastrophe](#), with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement, Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet

Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Diction

The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Dramatic monologue

A speaker addresses a silent listener. As readers, we overhear the speaker in a dramatic monologue.

Dramatic irony: Where the audience or reader is aware of something important, of which the characters in the story are not aware. Macbeth responds with disbelief when the weird sisters call him Thane of Cawdor; ironically, unbeknownst to him, he had been granted that title by king Duncan in the previous scene.

Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central

characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

Falling action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of *Othello* begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona

Farce-a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations

Flashback

An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks

Foil: A character who is meant to represent characteristics, values, ideas, etc. which are directly and diametrically opposed to those of another character, usually the protagonist. (Although it is technically a literary element, the term is only useful for identification, as part of a discussion or analysis of character; it cannot generally be analyzed by itself.) The noble, virtuous father Macduff provides an ideal foil for the villainous, childless Macbeth.

Foreshadowing

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* includes foreshadowing as does Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

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 modern and contemporary plays such as Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Wasserstein's *Tender Offer*, and Wilson's *Fences*.

Gesture

The physical movement of a character during a play. Gesture is used to reveal character, and may include facial expressions as well as movements of other parts of an actor's body. Sometimes a playwright will be very explicit about both bodily and facial gestures, providing detailed instructions in the play's stage directions. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* includes such stage directions. See [Stage direction](#).

Hubris Overbearing and excessive pride

Improvisation Something that is improvised, especially a piece of music, drama, etc., created without preparation.

Motif: A recurring important idea or image. A motif differs from a theme in that it can be expressed as a single word or fragmentary phrase, while a theme usually must be expressed as a complete sentence. Blood is an important motif in *A Tale of Two Cities*, appearing numerous times throughout the novel.

Multiple roles-one actor playing two or more roles, which may be deliberately scripted in a play or film, or merely be a by-product of a low budget.

Pathos

A quality of a play's action that stimulates the audience to feel pity for a character. Pathos is always an aspect of tragedy, and may be present in comedy as well.

Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of *Oedipus the King*; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of *Othello*.

Resolution

The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See [Plot](#).

Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the [protagonist](#). Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See [Recognition](#) and also [Irony](#).

Rising action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the [climax](#). See [Climax](#), [Denouement](#), and [Plot](#).

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century

Slapstick-Comedy based on deliberately clumsy actions and humorously embarrassing events.

Soliloquy a device often used in drama whereby a character relates his or her thoughts and feelings to him/herself and to the audience

Stage direction

A playwright's descriptive or interpretive comments that provide readers (and actors) with information about the dialogue, setting, and action of a play. Modern playwrights, including Ibsen, Shaw, Miller, and Williams tend to include substantial stage directions, while earlier playwrights typically used them more sparsely, implicitly, or not at all. See [Gesture](#).

Staging

The spectacle a play presents in performance, including the position of actors on stage, the scenic background, the props and costumes, and the lighting and sound effects. Tennessee Williams describes these in his detailed stage directions for *The Glass Menagerie* and also in his production notes for the play

Subplot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel [plot](#) in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of *Hamlet*.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense

Tragic flaw

A weakness or limitation of character, resulting in the fall of the [tragic hero](#). Othello's jealousy and too trusting nature is one example. See [Tragedy](#) and [Tragic hero](#).

Tragic hero

A privileged, exalted character of high repute, who, by virtue of a [tragic flaw](#) and fate, suffers a fall from glory into suffering. Sophocles' Oedipus is an example. See [Tragedy](#) and [Tragic flaw](#).

Two-hander-a play for two actors.

Unities

The idea that a play should be limited to a specific time, place, and storyline. The events of the [plot](#) should occur within a twenty-four-hour period, should occur within a given geographic locale, and should tell a single story. Aristotle argued that Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* was the perfect play for embodying the unities.