

Catastrophe

Definition of Catastrophe

Catastrophe is a final [resolution](#) that appears in a [narrative](#) plot or a long poem. It unravels the mystery or intrigue, and brings the story toward a logical end. In a [tragedy](#), it could be the death of a [protagonist](#) or other [character](#); and in a [comedy](#), it could be the union of major characters. Catastrophe is a synonym of [denouement](#). It is, in fact, the final part following protasis, epitasis, and catatasis.

Catastrophe wraps up the messy and noisy beginning, such as in Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, in which catastrophe is brought on when the main character, Willy Loman, dies in a car wreck, ostensibly committing suicide, so that his family could collect his life insurance. His widow says at his funeral that "Willy, I can't cry ... I made the last payment on the house today..."

Types of Catastrophe

Simple Catastrophe

In a simple catastrophe, the main characters do not undergo any change, nor does anything unravel; the plot merely serves as a passage. Simple catastrophe usually appears in epic poems, rather than in tragedies.

Complex Catastrophe

Complex catastrophe is a very common tool, in which the protagonist either undergoes a major change of fortune. This type of change is probable and necessary to resolving the plot. Complex catastrophe usually appears in novels, plays, movies, and theatrical performances.

Examples of Catastrophe in Literature

Example #1: *Macbeth* (by William Shakespeare)

“Despair thy charm;
And let the angel whom thou still hast serv’d
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother’s womb
Untimely ripp’d.”

The following lines present a perfect example of catastrophe, which involves the death of the primary character. Macbeth falls in a mortal fight with Macduff, a man whom Macbeth has nearly wronged. Here it seems that he himself has invited his end.

Example #2: *Mourning Becomes Electra* (by Eugene O’Neil)

Eugene O’Neil’s play “Mourning Becomes Electra” contains a series of catastrophic events, beginning with the murder of Ezra. Christine manipulates her lover Brant into helping her kill her husband with poison. After his murder, Lavinia and Orin find Brant and shoot him with a pistol.

This catastrophe leads to another catastrophe, in the form of Christine’s suicide. Orin, consumed by a sense of guilt that he had driven their mother into killing herself, goes insane and commits suicide. Now Lavinia lives in a house of her dead relatives’ ghosts, which is a punishment for what they have done.

Example #3: *Romeo and Juliet* (by William Shakespeare)

There are multiple characters who invited catastrophe in the play “Romeo and Juliet.” However, Romeo himself has invited the worst type of catastrophe after he kills Tybalt. Everything in his and Juliet’s life crumbles after that; as a result, Romeo faces a period of exile, leading to a number of other catastrophic events. Had Romeo not killed Tybalt, Friar would have provided a much better plan to hide Juliet, rather than using poison.

The best scene of catastrophe happens in Act-V, Scene-III, in which the fall of Paris and two lovers occurs. After the tragic conclusion of the love scene, Friar tells about the marriage and intrigue. The story ends with the death of star-crossed lovers.

In Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex," peripeteia leads to [anagnorisis](#), which in turn leads to catastrophe or a terrible suffering. Catastrophe reveals the truth about the origin of Oedipus, after which the Queen Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus stabs his eyes, pleading to be exiled. Together all these elements make up catastrophe that King Oedipus invites by exploring his birth. Had he not explored, he might have saved himself and his family from this catastrophe.

Example #5: *The Return of the Native* (by Thomas Hardy)

Catastrophe in Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native*, comes at the point when Eustacia becomes closer to her old lover, Damon Wildeve; which leads to the death of Clym's mother. It happens when Clym goes blind, and the couple faces economic crisis. After this tense period, Clym has a serious fight with his wife and the two separate. Eustacia plans to run away with her lover in the night. However, there comes a heavy storm, which ends up drowning them.

Function

The function of a catastrophe is to unravel the plot in a story. It comes after the [falling action](#). It, in fact, serves as a conclusion of the narrative, when the [conflict](#) in the story in question is resolved. Catastrophe returns the situation to normal, as the characters experience [catharsis](#), and readers feel a sense of relief. Catastrophe is also a moment when the protagonist faces the world with a new outlook. It tests human qualities, and makes readers decide if the character is good or bad.