

Climax

Climax Definition

Climax, a Greek term meaning “ladder,” is that particular point in a [narrative](#) at which the [conflict](#) or tension hits the highest point. Climax is a structural part of a plot, and is at times referred to as a “crisis.” It is a decisive moment or a turning point in a storyline at which the [rising action](#) turns around into a [falling action](#). Thus, a climax is the point at which a conflict or crisis reaches its peak, then calls for a [resolution](#) or [denouement](#) (conclusion). In a five-act play, the climax is close to the conclusion of act 3. Later in the 19th century, five-act plays were replaced by three-act plays, and the climax was placed close to the conclusion or at the end of the play.

Examples of Climax in Literature

Let us analyze a few climax examples in literature:

Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

In William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, the story reaches its climax in Act 3. In the first scene of the act, Romeo challenges Tybalt to a duel after he (Tybalt) killed Mercutio:

“And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!
Now, Tybalt, take the ‘villain’ back again
That late thou gavest me; for Mercutio’s soul
Is but a little way above our heads ...”

As soon as he killed Tybalt, Romeo says:

“O! I am Fortune’s Fool!”

He realizes that he has killed his wife's cousin. This juncture in the play is a climax, as the [audience](#) wonders how Romeo would get out of this terrible situation. Similarly, it qualifies as a climax because, after this act, all the prior conflicts start to be resolved, and mysteries unfold themselves, thus moving the story toward its logical conclusion during the coming scenes.

Example #2: *The Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

In Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, the narrative reaches its climax when Marlowe starts his journey in his steam boat, in the direction of the inner station, and his final discovery upon reaching the station and meeting "Kurtz." He was shocked to discover that Kurtz had abandoned all norms and morals of his civilization, after giving in to the savage customs of the wild Congo. Following this point in the novel, the mystery surrounding Kurtz is unfolded, and the questions in the mind of Marlow find their answers automatically when he sees the real situation.

Climax as a Stylistic Device

As a stylistic device, the term climax refers to a literary device in which words, phrases, and clauses are arranged in an order to increase their importance within the sentence. The following are examples of climax as a stylistic device:

Example #3: *The Passionate Pilgrim* (By William Shakespeare)

See how William Shakespeare achieves climax in the passage below, taken from his [Sonnet](#) *The Passionate Pilgrim*:

“Beauty is but a vain and doubtful good;
A shining gloss that vadeth suddenly;
A flower that dies when first it gins to bud;
A brittle glass that's broken presently:
A doubtful good, a gloss, a glass, a flower,
Lost, vaded, broken, dead within an hour.”

The phrase “dead within an hour” is placed at the very end, as it marks the climax of the fate of beauty, which he introduces as “a vain and doubtful good.”

Example #4: *I Have a Dream* speech (By Martin Luther King, Jr.)

“This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This line from Martin Luther King’s famous speech, *I Have a Dream*, qualifies as the climax of the speech. It criticizes and rejects racial discrimination suffered by black Americans at the hands of white Americans.

Function of Climax

A climax, when used as a plot device, helps readers understand the significance of the previously rising action to the point in the plot where the conflict reaches its peak. The climax of the story makes readers mentally prepared for the resolution of the conflict. Hence, climax is important to the plot structure of a story. Moreover, climax is used as a stylistic device or a [figure of speech](#) to render balance and brevity to speech or writing. Being employed, it qualifies itself as a powerful tool that can instantly capture the undivided attention of listeners and readers alike. Hence, its importance cannot be underestimated.