

Dramatic Jargon

A glossary compiled from the writings of Alexander Mackendrick

Anagnorisis

A character's discovery or recognition, sudden awareness of a situation, a change from ignorance to knowledge, a realization of the truth.

Anima figures

Love interest, the heroine. A female figure designed to reflect feminine aspects within the male figure to whom she is attached. Occasionally the "reward" of the protagonist, e.g. Edie Doyle in *On the Waterfront* is both the "reward" of Terry Malloy and a personification of the gentler, uncorrupted side of him.

Antagonist

A character who personifies the problems and thematic forces which are an obstacle to the goals of the protagonist. In melodrama, the villain or heavy. Frequently the activator of the plot. Note that a passive or weak protagonist is apt to call for a strong antagonist if there is to be dramatic tension. Discuss the proposition that, as far as plot is concerned, the antagonist(s) is more important than the protagonist.

Anticlimax

A sudden relaxation of tension arising out of the avoidance of some anticipated crisis. Occasionally used to relieve the monotony of a particular tension and disguise preparation for the next.

Backstory

Events previous to the start of the plot which are essential to an appreciation of present circumstances and understanding of character behaviour. Note that a character who is believable will quite probably have rehearsed the present dramatic dilemma in a prior context. Character exposition through backstory is a common method of giving depth to an individual: the past as explanation of the present and foreshadowing of behaviour in the future.

Characters

Figures necessary to demonstrate the story in action, who act out the story, usually personifications of the theme. Character is seldom dramatic as a quality of personality until it reveals itself in action or reaction between two or more personages. A character will often evolve and change throughout the story, or changes in the audience's perception of a character will take place, e.g. in *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy's progression from the defeated cynicism of his early talk with Edie to his final denunciation of Johnny Friendly as he goes from being a "bum" to "somebody." In *The Third Man*, Holly Martins' progression involves the gradual shedding of his simple-minded loyalty to Harry Lime, from naive hero-worship to disillusionment.

Character colour

Mannerisms of speech and/or behaviour designed to provide contrast. They give vitality and are frequently the clue to character development. Often useful in the case of subsidiary figures for whom there is little time to explore more significant distinctions, and frequently the clue to progression of character, e.g. in *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy's punchy stammer and incoherence, symbols of his moral indecision. Note, too, the use of props and costume which illustrate personality traits, e.g. Charley Malloy's camel-hair coat, gloves and hat.

Climax

A crisis which is fully played out, a cap on preceding crises.

Confrontation scene

A showdown or shootout in which two characters, with or without subsidiaries, meet to resolve conflict that has been anticipated, e.g. taxi-cab scene in *On the Waterfront*, Ferris wheel scene in *The Third Man*.

Crisis

Any heightening of tension, whether between characters or in the circumstances of a character with whom we have sympathy. Sometimes an abrupt increase in the tension within ourselves as observers.

Denouement

The unknotting of the dramatic tensions.

Disclosures and revelations

Story progression through exploration of past events, usually prompting reactions that motivate the present action.

Drama

From the Greek verb “to do.” Drama is inseparable from action, things performed.

Dramatic narrative, therefore, is the sequence of performed events, things done before our eyes and ears that tell a story.

Dramatic irony

Any situation in which we, the audience, are aware of some significant circumstances of which one or more characters in the scene in question are ignorant (“Unbeknownst to...”). A key component of most (perhaps all) effective dramatic structures that automatically sets up “expectation mingled with uncertainty”: the characters in a story may or may not discover what the audience knows.

Exposition

The background information necessary for an appreciation of the present dramatic action.

Flashbacks, visions and dreams

Scenes or sequences outside the linear time/space of the narrative, and subjective in quality. Note that voice-over narration is often associated with flashbacks and is often used as a substitute for exposition, tending to weaken dramatic tension. Unless there is some present impact, flashback and voice-over are apt to be dramatically feeble. They are reflective and liable to weaken the tension of the here-and-now, though they may contribute lyric value to a story.

Foil

A subsidiary character or supporting role invented for exposition or to illuminate some aspect of another person. A supporting role who asks the questions to which the audience seeks an answer. Foils can also be figures who are a reflection of some aspect within the more important character to whom they are attached. Sometimes a confidant, frequently “the girl” or friend (e.g. Horatio in *Hamlet*), a figure who personifies an aspect of the protagonist and helps externalise what would otherwise be an inner and hence less dramatic conflict, e.g. Charley Malloy in *On the Waterfront* is a corrupted version of his brother Terry, a foil for Terry’s disillusioned side. Sergeant Paine in *The Third Man* reflects the more tolerant aspects of Colonel Calloway towards Holly Martins.

Genre

The opening “Once Upon a Time...” Not simply the time and the place where the story is set but often a whole set of story formulas and values.

Hamartia

A character’s tragic flaw or error in judgment, including accidents, sins and wrongdoing, an unwitting mistake due to ignorance of circumstance or an error of judgment.

Mimesis

Plato and Aristotle defined it as the representation and imitation of nature and human behaviour.

Narrative

From the Latin for “knowing,” its dictionary meaning is “something that is related,” a “recital of events.”

Narrative momentum

The drive of the plot. Stories that are tightly structured are apt to have a strong sense of causality: what happens in this scene hopefully provokes in the audience the question “What Happens Next?” Note that this tension is not limited to suspense of plot developments but also where tension lies in emotional development and character progression.

Objective

An aim or goal, something toward which efforts are directed. That which a character strives to obtain or achieve. Note that it may be a negative objective, such as the desire to escape from a situation or avoid painful circumstances.

Obligatory scene

A term invented by nineteenth-century theorists on dramatic structure. A scene which the audience feels that it has, for one reason or another, been promised and the absence of which may be disappointing. William Archer: the scene “which the audience (more or less clearly and consciously) foresees and desires, and the absence of which it may with reason resent.” Often a confrontation scene near the end, central to the dramatisation of the theme (the seed of the story), e.g. Terry Malloy going to the docks to confront Johnny Friendly in *On the Waterfront*, Holly tracking down Harry in the sewers under Vienna in *The Third Man*.

Obstacle

Something which stands in the way and prevents a character from achieving his or her objective. Note that when the obstacle is some inner characteristic it is often desirable to create a secondary figure (a foil) who is the personification of one of the conflicting aspects of the personage in question.

Peripety

A Greek term meaning “turn of the wheel.” In contemporary jargon: a story twist, a shift in circumstances, a surprise. Often a reversal of a situation, a turning of the tables, an abrupt shift in audience perception, something that upsets the present circumstances and reverses relationships. While it may come as an unexpected switch, it is nevertheless, in hindsight, dramatically inevitable and rewarding. A character *peripety* might unmask some previously hidden aspect of an individual.

Plot

The sequence of incidents and changing situations, the narrative progression, usually developing as cause-and-effect. Tension is created through anticipation of crisis, usually resulting from actions and reactions of the characters.

Plants and foreshadowing

Signals to the audience about future events of which the characters in the story are unaware. Hints that prepare our expectations and make a promise for the future. Laying “the fuse” that ultimately pays off. Note that plausibility is a curious thing in drama. An audience that has been carefully prepared to want some incident or event will readily forgive coincidences and dramatic contrivances, providing they are skilfully prepared for and foreshadowed. As Aristotle first put it, “A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.”

Point of attack

The inciting incident, the hook. The point chosen for the start of the narrative (“So one day...”). Frequently the beginning of the plot and an incident which provides for both the exposition of backstory and expectation of future consequences. In modern stories the point of attack might precede exposition, since exposition is more dramatic when there is something at stake. In *On the Waterfront*, the murder of Joey Doyle is the incident which seizes the attention of the audience, and sets in motion the story involving Terry Malloy.

Protagonist

Central character and often the point of view dictated by the theme. Not necessarily the “hero.” Traditionally the activator of the story, even the victim of the actions of others. The character who travels the longest distance in the course of the story, the figure whose objective (action) sets in motion the drama. In storyteller’s jargon, this is the “There was a...” line. Often the figure with whom we are invited to identify. Note that some stories have two or more protagonists who have a single objective and who function as foils to one another. They are often differentiated by contrasts of temperament or physical characteristics, e.g. Butch and Sundance in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Joe and Jerry in *Some Like It Hot*, and the characters in stories such as *The Seven Samurai* and *The Wild Bunch*. Note also that the protagonist is not necessarily the point of attack of a story (that might be the antagonist, who pulls the world “out of balance,” thus forcing the protagonist to respond).

Resolution

The final establishing of the dramatic equilibrium, often with the effect of the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. Everything that is relevant to the theme is in place and nothing that might alter the equilibrium remains still to happen. In sum, uncertainty is ended and all that could have been anticipated has taken place.

Subplot and plot

Parallel threads of the narrative, sequential events that make up the narrative, usually a chain of cause-and-effect that drives the story from its initial premise through continuous tension of suspense or surprise until the final resolution of the tensions. Subsidiary action which may reflect the central theme in one way or another.

Surprise

The reaction to a turn of events not foreseen. A *peripety*, if the unexpected development results in a complete overturning of the dramatic circumstances or relationships.

Suspense

Tension in the mind of the audience based on anticipation of a crisis. This is “expectation mingled with uncertainty” of the most elementary kind, the anxiety over an anticipated crisis, welcome or unwelcome.

Suspended tension

Relaxation of a narrative line, often simply for the purpose of preparing the “build” that will establish a new crisis of the dramatic action, often involving backstory.

Theme

The central idea of the story, its point or “meaning,” generally in abstract terms. The dramatic concept as a generalization. More general than plot, the oppositions of more abstract concepts which represent the idea and meaning of the story.

Willing suspension of disbelief

An attitude of mind in which the audience, through some devices of story structure, accepts as plausible some circumstances which would otherwise be incredible. A belief in the unbelievable.

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