

Dramatic Literary Terms

- Note: 1. Terms denoted with an asterisk (*) indicate terms that are applicable to both plays and fiction.
2. An asterisk (*) next to a term in a definition indicates that the term is defined elsewhere.

TERMS IN BOLD ARE ON THE TEST!

- Act** – a major division in the action of the play, comprising one or more *scenes. A break between acts often coincides with a point at which the plot jumps ahead in time.
- ***Antagonist** – the most prominent of the characters who oppose the *protagonist or hero(ine) in a dramatic or narrative work. The antagonist is often a villain seeking to frustrate a heroine or hero; but in those works in which the protagonist is represented as evil, the antagonist will often be a virtuous or sympathetic character, as Macduff is in *Macbeth*.
- Aside** – a short speech or remark spoken by a character in a drama, directed either to the audience or to another character, which by *convention is supposed to be inaudible to the other characters on stage.
- ***Catastrophe** – the final resolution or *denouement of the plot in a *tragedy, usually involving the death of the *protagonist.
- ***Catharsis (ca-THAR-sis)** – the effect of purgation or purification achieved by tragic drama, according to Aristotle’s argument in his *Poetics* (4th century BC). Aristotle wrote that a *tragedy should succeed “in arousing pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions.” There has been much dispute about his meaning, but Aristotle seems to be rejecting Plato’s hostile view of poetry as an unhealthy emotional stimulant. His metaphor of emotional cleansing has been read as a solution to the puzzle of audiences’ pleasure or relief in witnessing the disturbing events enacted in tragedies. Another interpretation is that it is the *protagonist’s guilt that is purged, rather than the audience’s feeling of terror. *Adjective*: cathartic.
- ***Climax** – the turning point or high point in a plot’s action.
- ***Comic Relief** – the interruption of a serious work, especially a *tragedy, by a short humorous episode that relieves emotional tension.
- ***Conflict** – A clash of actions, desires, ideas, or goals in the plot of a story. Conflict may exist between the main character and some other person or persons (man vs. man), between the main character and some external force – physical nature, society, or “fate” (man vs. nature), or between the main character and some destructive element in his own nature (man vs. himself).
- ***Denouement (DAY-new-MA)** – the portion of a plot that reveals the final outcome of its conflicts or the solution of its mysteries.
- ***Deus ex machina** – (“god from the machine”). The resolution of a plot by use of a highly improbable chance, coincidence or artificial device that solves some difficult problem or crisis.
- ***Epilogue** – a concluding section of any written work during which the characters’ subsequent fates are briefly outlined.
- ***Exposition** – the setting forth of a systematic explanation of or argument about any subject; or the opening part of a play or story, in which we are introduced to the characters and their situation, often by reference to preceding events. *Adjective*: expository. *Verb*: expound.
- ***Falling Action** – The segment of the plot that comes between the climax and the conclusion.
- ***Foil** – a character whose qualities or actions serve to emphasize those of the *protagonist (or of some other

character) by providing a strong contrast with them.

***Hamartia (ha-mar-TEE-a)** – the Greek word for error or failure, used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (4th century BC) to designate the false step that leads the *protagonist in a *tragedy to his or her downfall. The term should not be confused with *tragic flaw* which is a defect in character. Hamartia is the action that the character takes.

***Hero or Heroine** – the main character in a narrative or dramatic work. The term protagonist is preferable since the leading character may not be morally or otherwise superior. When our expectations of heroic qualities are strikingly disappointed, the central character may be known as an anti-hero or anti-heroine.

***Hubris (HOO – bris)** the Greek word for ‘insolence’ or ‘affront’, applied to the arrogance or pride of the *protagonist in a *tragedy in which he or she defies moral laws or the prohibitions of the gods. The protagonist’s transgression or *hamartia leads eventually to his or her downfall, which may be understood as divine retribution. In proverbial terms, hubris is thus the pride that comes before a fall. *Adjective*: hubristic.

In medias res (in-MEED-ee-us-RACE) -- “in the middle of things”; the technique of beginning a story in the middle of the action.

Monologue – an extended speech uttered by one speaker, either to others or as if alone. See also soliloquy.

***Plot** – The careful arrangement by an author of incidents in a narrative to achieve a desired effect.

***Prologue** – an introductory section of a literary work or an introductory speech in a play.

***Protagonist** – The central character in a story.

***Rising Action** – The part of a plot that leads through a series of events of increasing interest and power to the climax or turning point. The rising action begins with an inciting moment, an action or event that sets a conflict of opposing forces into motion, and moves through complication(s), an entangling of the affairs of the characters in a conflict, toward the climax, the major crisis that brings about a change in the fortunes of the protagonist.

Scene – a subdivision of an act or of a play not divided into acts. A scene normally represents actions happening in one place at one time, and is marked off from the next scene by a curtain, a black-out, or a brief emptying of the stage.

***Setting** – the general locale, time in history, or social milieu in which the action of a literary work takes place.

Soliloquy – a dramatic speech uttered by one character speaking aloud while alone on stage, or while under the impression of being alone. The soliloquist thus reveals his or her inner thoughts and feelings to the audience, either in supposed self-communion or in a consciously direct address.

Stage directions – the information provided in addition to the dialogue to help a reader visualize the setting, characters, and action. Usually in italics, are intended for the director, actors, etc.

***Tragedy** – a type of drama in which the protagonist, a person of unusual moral or intellectual stature or outstanding abilities, suffers a fall in fortune due to some error of judgment or flaw in his or her nature.

***Tragic Flaw** – the defect of character that brings about the protagonist’s downfall in a *tragedy.

***Villain** – the principal evil character in a play or story. The villain is usually the antagonist opposed to the protagonist, but in some cases may be the protagonist himself/herself.