





Theatrical Terms




BLACKOUT / BO / B.O. Complete absence of stage lighting. This usually signifies the end of a scene or the play.

CHARACTER A character is a person presented in a dramatic or narrative work. A hero or heroine, often called the **protagonist**, is the central character who engages the audience's interest and empathy. The **antagonist** is the character, force, or collection of forces that stands directly opposed to the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story.

 A **static character** does not change throughout the play, and the audience's knowledge of that character does not grow, whereas a **dynamic character** undergoes some kind of change because of the action in the plot.

 A **flat character** embodies one or two qualities, ideas, or traits that can be readily described in a brief summary. Some flat characters are recognized as stock characters; they embody stereotypes such as the "dumb blonde" or the "mean stepfather." They become types rather than individuals.


 **Round characters** are more complex than flat or stock characters, and often display the inconsistencies and internal conflicts found in most real people.

CLIMAX See **plot**.

COMEDY A work intended to interest, involve, and amuse the audience, in which no terrible disaster occurs and that ends happily for the main characters.

 **High comedy** refers to verbal wit, such as puns.

 **Low comedy** is generally associated with physical action and is less intellectual.

 **Romantic comedy** involves a love affair that meets with various obstacles (like disapproving parents, mistaken identities, deceptions, or other sorts of misunderstandings) but overcomes them to end in a blissful union.

COMIC RELIEF A humorous scene or incident that ends tension in an otherwise serious work. In many instances these moments enhance the thematic significance of the story in addition to providing laughter.

CONFLICT The struggle within the plot between opposing forces. The protagonist engages in the conflict with the antagonist, which may take the form of a character, society, nature, or an aspect of the protagonist's personality. See also **character**, **plot**.

DIALOGUE The spoken text of a play - conversations between characters is dialogue. The verbal exchanges between characters. Dialogue makes the characters seem real to the audience by revealing firsthand their thoughts, responses, and emotional states.

DOWNSTAGE The part of the stage nearest to the audience.

DRAMA Derived from the Greek word *dram*, meaning "to do" or "to perform". Drama is designed for performance in a theater; actors take on the roles of characters, perform indicated actions, and speak the dialogue written in the script. Play is a general term for a work of dramatic literature, and a playwright is a writer who makes plays.

DRAMATIC IRONY See **irony**.

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE A type of lyric poem in which a character addresses a distinct but silent audience imagined to be present in such a way as to reveal a dramatic situation and, often unintentionally, some aspect of his or her temperament or personality.

FARCE A form of humor based on exaggerated, improbable incongruities. Farce involves rapid shifts in action and emotion, as well as slapstick comedy and extravagant dialogue.

FORESHADOWING The introduction early in a story of verbal and dramatic hints that suggest what is to come later.

IRONY A literary device that uses contradictory statements or situations to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true. It is ironic for a firehouse to burn down, or for a police station to be burglarized.



Verbal irony is a figure of speech that occurs when a person says one thing but means the opposite. **Sarcasm** is a strong form of verbal irony that is supposed to hurt someone through, for example, false praise.



Dramatic irony creates a discrepancy between what a character believes or says and what the audience knows to be true.



Tragic irony is a form of dramatic irony found in tragedies such as Oedipus the King, in which Oedipus searches for the person responsible for the plague that ravishes his city and ironically ends up hunting himself.



Situational irony exists when there is a problem between what is expected to happen and what actually happens due to forces beyond human control.



Cosmic irony occurs when a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes and expectations of a character or of humankind in general. In cosmic irony, a discrepancy exists between what a character aspires to and what universal forces provide. Think of the idea of Murphy's Law.

LINE A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page.

ONE-ACT PLAY A play that takes place in a single location and unfolds as one continuous action.

PARODY A humorous imitation of another, usually serious, work. Parodists imitate the tone, language, and shape of the original in order to soften the subject matter, making the original work seem absurd.

PLOT A playwright's selection and arrangement of incidents in a story to shape the action and give the story a particular focus. Discussions of plot include not just what happens, but also how and why things happen the way they do. Plays have a **beginning, middle** and **end**.



The **beginning** is the rising action, in which complication creates some sort of conflict for the protagonist. The **middle** is the climax, the moment of greatest emotional tension in a narrative, usually marking a turning point in the plot at which the rising action reverses to become the falling action. The **end**, the falling action or resolution is characterized by diminishing tensions and the resolution of the plot's conflicts and complications.



In medias res is a term used to describe the common strategy of beginning a story in the middle of the action. In this type of plot, we enter the story on the verge of some important moment.

PROBLEM PLAY A problem play is a type of drama that presents a social issue in order to awaken the audience to it. These plays usually reject romantic plots in favor of holding up a mirror that reflects not simply what the audience wants to see but what the playwright sees in them. Often, a problem play will propose a solution to the problem that does not coincide with prevailing opinion.. See also **drama**.

PROLOGUE The opening speech or dialogue of a play, especially a classic Greek play, that usually gives the exposition necessary to follow the subsequent action. See also **drama**.

SATIRE The literary art of ridiculing a folly or vice in order to expose or correct it. The object of satire is usually some human frailty; people, institutions, ideas, and things are all fair game for satirists. Satire evokes attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation toward its faulty subject in the hope of somehow improving it. See also **irony, parody**.

SCENE In drama, a scene is a subdivision of an act. According to traditional conventions, a scene changes when the location of the action shifts or when a new character enters. See also **act, drama**.

SCRIPT The written text of a play, which includes the dialogue between characters, stage directions, and often other important information. See also **drama, prologue, stage directions**.

SETTING The physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are usually the time and the place. Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come.

SOLILOQUY A dramatic convention by means of which a character, alone onstage, utters his or her thoughts aloud. Playwrights use soliloquies as a convenient way to inform the audience about a character's motivations and state of mind. Shakespeare's Hamlet delivers perhaps the best known of all soliloquies, which begins: "To be or not to be."

STAGE DIRECTIONS A playwright's written instructions about how the actors are to move and behave in a play. They explain in which direction characters should move, what facial expressions they should assume, and so on. See also **drama, script**.

STAGE LEFT / RIGHT Left/ Right as seen from the Actor's point of view on stage. (ie Stage Left is the right side of the stage when looking from the auditorium.)

SUBPLOT The secondary action of a story, complete and interesting in its own right, that reinforces or contrasts with the main plot. There may be more than one subplot, and sometimes as many as three, four, or even more, running through a piece of fiction. Subplots are generally either analogous to the main plot, thereby enhancing our understanding of it, or extraneous to the main plot, to provide relief from it. do not typically take place in ten minute plays because there is not enough time to develop the second story. See also **plot**.

TRAGEDY A story that presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves in the face of failure, defeat, and even death. Tragedies recount an individual's downfall; they usually begin high and end low.



The **revenge tragedy** is a well-established type of drama that can be traced back to Greek and Roman plays. Revenge tragedies basically consist of a murder that has to be avenged by a relative of the victim. A tragic flaw is an error or defect in the tragic hero that leads to his downfall, such as greed, pride, or ambition.

TRAGICOMEDY A type of drama that combines certain elements of both tragedy and comedy. The play's plot tends to be serious, leading to a terrible catastrophe, until an unexpected turn in events leads to a reversal of circumstance, and the story ends happily.

UPSTAGE

The part of the stage furthest from the audience. When an actor moves upstage of another and causes the victim to turn away from the audience he is "upstaging". Also, an actor drawing attention to himself away from the main action (by moving around, or over-reacting to onstage events) is upstaging.