Glossary of Dramatic Terms

Note: The Glossary is in alphabetical order. The terms have been collected and adapted from various sources, listed at the end of this document.

Act: A major division in a play. An act can be sub-divided into scenes. (See scene). Greek plays were not divided into acts. The five act structure was originally introduced in Roman times and became the convention in Shakespeare's period. In the 19th century this was reduced to four acts and 20th century drama tends to favor three acts.

Antagonist: A character or force against which another character struggles.

Examples: Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*; Tiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Apron: The part of a proscenium stage that sticks out into the audience in front of the proscenium arch.

Aside: Words spoken by an actor directly to the audience, but not "heard" by the other characters on stage during a play.

Example: In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago voices his inner thoughts a number of times as "asides" for the audience.

Blocking: Movement patterns of actors on the stage. Planned by the director to create meaningful stage pictures.

Box set: A set built behind a proscenium arch to represent three walls of a room. The absent **fourth wall** on **the proscenium** line allows spectators to witness the domestic scene. First used in the early nineteenth century.

Catharsis: The purging of the feelings of pity and fear. According to Aristotle the audience should experiences catharsis at the end of a tragedy.

Character: An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Dramatic characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change).

Example: In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

Chorus: A traditional chorus in Greek tragedy is a group of characters who comment on the action of a play without participating in it. A modern chorus (any time after the Greek period) serves a similar function but has taken a different form; it consists of a character/narrator coming on stage and giving a prologue or explicit background information or themes.

Example 1: Traditional Chorus – The majority of Sophocles' plays.

Example 2: Modern Chorus – The Prologue in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which gives the background to the action. The protagonist in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, who introduces the themes of the play.

Climax: The turning point of the action in the plot of a play and the point of greatest tension in the work. (See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid)

Example: The final duel between Laertes and Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Comedy: A dramatic work in which the central motif is the triumph over adverse circumstance, resulting in a successful or happy conclusion. (http://dictionary.reference.com). Comedy can be divided into visual comedy or verbal comedy. Within these 2 divisions there are further sub-

divisions. For example visual comedy includes farce and slapstick. Verbal Comedy includes satire, black comedy and comedy of manners.

Comic Relief: Comic relief does not relate to the genre of comedy. Comic relief serves a specific purpose: it gives the spectator a moment of "relief" with a light-hearted scene, after a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. Typically these scenes parallel the tragic action that they interrupt. Comic relief is lacking in Greek tragedy, but occurs regularly in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Example: The opening scene of Act V of *Hamlet*, in which a gravedigger banters with Hamlet.

Conflict: There is no drama without conflict. The conflict between opposing forces in a play can be external (between characters) or internal (within a character) and is usually resolved by the end of the play.

Example: Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

Complication: An intensification of the conflict in a play

Convention: Literary conventions are defining features or common agreement upon strategies and/or attributes of a particular literary genre.

Examples: The use of a chorus was a convention in Greek tragedy. Soliloquies, (which are not realistic) are accepted as part of the dramatic convention.

Denouement / Resolution: Literally the action of untying. A denouement (or resolution) is the final outcome of the main complication in a play. Usually the denouement occurs AFTER the climax (the turning point or "crisis"). It is sometimes referred to as the explanation or outcome of a drama that reveals all the secrets and misunderstandings connected to the plot. (See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid)

Example: In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the climax occurs when Othello kills his wife. The denouement occurs when Emilia, proves to Othello that his wife was in fact honest, true, and faithful to him.

***Deus Ex Machina*:** When an external source resolves the entanglements of a play by supernatural intervention. The Latin phrase means, literally, "a god from the machine." The phrase refers to the use of artificial means to resolve the plot of a play.

Examples: Many of Euripides' plays have gods coming to rescue the day. In *Medea* a dragon-drawn chariot is sent by Apollo, the Sun-God, to rescue Medea who has just murdered her children. In Joe Orton's classic play, *What the Butler Saw* (1969) the *deus ex machina* comes in the form not of a god but of a policeman who saves the day.

Dialogue: The conversation of characters in a literary work. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names. (See Appendix 2 for discussion on what is dialogue in dramatic terms.)

Diction: According to the Cambridge Dictionary, diction is "the manner in which words are pronounced." Diction, however, is more than that: it is a style of speaking. In drama diction can (1) reveal character, (2) imply attitudes, (3) convey action, (4) identify themes, and (5) suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character.

Example: Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*.

Dramatic Irony: A device in which a character holds a position or has an expectation reversed or fulfilled in a way that the character did not expect but that the audience or readers have

anticipated because their knowledge of events or individuals is more complete than the character's.

Example: In Shakespeare's *Othello* Othello blames Desdemona for cheating on him. The audience knows that she is faithful and Iago deceives him.

Dynamic Character: Undergoes an important change in the course of the play- not changes in circumstances, but changes in some sense within the character in question -- changes in insight or understanding or changes in commitment, or values. The opposite is a static character who remains essentially the same.

Exodos: The final scene and exit of the characters and chorus in a classical Greek play.

Exposition: "The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided" (highered.mcgraw-hill.com). (See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid). In most drama the characters have to expose the background to the action indirectly while talking in the most natural way. What any person says must be consistent with his character and what he knows generally. Exposition frequently employs devices such as gestures, glances, "asides" etc. (See Prologue for explicit exposition).

Example: Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, begins with a conversation between the two central characters. This dialogue gives the audience details (in the most natural way) of what has occurred before the play began, details, of importance to the development of the plot.

Falling Action: This is when the events and complications begin to resolve themselves and tension is released. We learn whether the conflict has or been resolved or not.

Flashback: An interruption of a play's chronology (timeline) to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time-frame of the play's action.

Examples: In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello recalls how he courted Desdemona.

Flat Characters: Flat characters in a play are often, but not always, relatively simple minor characters. They tend to be presented though particular and limited traits; hence they become stereotypes. For example, the selfish son, the pure woman, the lazy child, the dumb blonde, etc. These characters do not **change** in the course of a play.

Foil: A secondary character whose situation often parallels that of the main character while his behavior or response or character contrasts with that of the main character, throwing light on that particular character's specific temperament.

Examples: In *Hamlet*, Laertes', father is murdered. His situation parallels Hamlet's situation but his response is very different. In *Othello*, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

Foreshadowing: Anton Chekhov best explained the term in a letter in 1889: "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it." **Chekhov's gun,** or foreshadowing is a literary technique that introduces an apparently irrelevant element is introduced early in the story; its significance becomes clear later in the play. (Taken from and adapted: Wikipedia on Chekhov)

Examples: At the beginning of the Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the protagonist Nora goes against the wishes of her husband in a very minor way. This action foreshadows her later significant rebellion and total rejection of her husband. In Synge's *Riders to the Sea* the mother's vision of her recently drowned son foreshadows the death of her remaining son.

Fourth Wall: The imaginary wall that separates the spectator/audience from the action taking place on stage. In a traditional theatre setting (as opposed to a theatre in the round) this

imaginary wall has been removed so that the spectator can "peep" into the fictional world and see what is going on. If the audience is addressed directly, this is referred to as "breaking the fourth wall."

Gesture: The physical movement of a character during a play. Gesture is used to reveal character, and may include facial expressions as well as movements of other parts of an actor's body.

> *Example*: Most modern playwrights explicitly mention both bodily and facial gestures, providing detailed instructions in the play's stage directions.

Hubris: The Greek term *hubris* is difficult to translate directly into English. This negative term implies both arrogant, excessive self-pride or self-confidence, and a lack of some important perception or insight due to pride in one's abilities. This overwhelming pride inevitably leads to a downfall. (Taken from http://web.cn.edu)

> *Example*: In Sophocles *Oedipus*, Oedipus' refusal to listen to anyone illustrates hubris. He believes he knows best – even better than the prophet Tiresias – and his refusal to listen leads to his downfall.

In medias res: "In the midst of things" (Latin); refers to opening a plot in the middle of the action, and then filling in past details by means of exposition or flashback.

Inciting Incident: The first incident leading to the rising action of the play. Sometimes the inciting incident is an event that occurred somewhere in the character's past and is revealed to the audience through exposition.

Irony: In general, a term with a range of meanings, all of them involving some sort of discrepancy or incongruity between what is expected or understood and what actually happens or is meant. Irony is used to suggest the difference between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, and thus, the complexity of experience.

A. ***Verbal irony***: the opposite is said from what is intended. It should not be confused with sarcasm which is simply language designed to wound or offend.
Verbal irony, also called rhetorical irony, is sometimes viewed as a figure of speech, since it is a rhetorical device that involves saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Verbal irony is the most common kind of irony and is characterized by a discrepancy between what a speaker (or writer) says and what he or she believes to be true. More specifically, a speaker or writer using verbal irony will say the opposite of what he or she actually means.

B. ***Dramatic irony***: the contrast between what a character believes and/or says and what the audience knows to be true. Dramatic irony (sometimes referred to as ***tragic irony*** when it occurs in a tragedy) may be used to refer to a situation in which the character's own words come back to haunt him or her. However, it usually involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what audience (or reader) knows to be true. They reader possess some material information that the character lacks, and it is the character's imperfect information that motivates or explains his or her discordant response.

C. ***Irony of situation*** :discrepancy between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate. This includes both dramatic & cosmic irony.

The term ***dramatic irony*** (sometimes referred to as tragic irony when this occurs in a tragedy) may be used to refer to a situation in which the character's own words come back to haunt him or her. However, it usually involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what audience (or reader) knows to be true. They reader possess some material information that the character lacks, and it is the character's imperfect information that motivates or explains his or her discordant response.

Cosmic irony, or irony of fate, is characterized by four elements. First, it involves a powerful deity (or fate itself) with the ability and desire to manipulate events in a character's life. Second, the character subject to this irony believes in free will. Thus, whether or not the character acknowledges the deity's existence, he or she persists in attempting to control, or at least affect, events. Third, the deity "toys" with the character in such a way that the outcome is clear to the d observer, but the character hopes for escape. The deity may permit—or even encourage—the character to believe in self-determination, thereby raising false hopes that the audience knows will be crushed. Fourth, cosmic irony always involves a tragic outcome. Ultimately, the character's struggle against destiny will be in vain.

Linear Plot: A traditional plot sequence in which the incidents in the drama progress chronologically; in other words, all of the events build upon one another and there are no flashbacks. Linear plots are usually based on causality (that is, one event "causes" another to happen) occur more commonly in comedy than in other forms.

Monologue: A speech by a single character without another character's response. The character however, is speaking to someone else or even a group of people. (see soliloquy below)

Examples: Shakespeare's plays abound with characters talking with no one responding. A clear example of how a monologue addresses someone occurs when Henry V delivers his speech to the English camp in the Saint Crispin's Day speech. He wants to inspire the soldiers to fight even though they are outnumbered. This is a monologue because (a) he alone speaks (b) he is addressing other characters.

Motivation: The thought(s) or desire(s) that drives a character to actively pursue a want or need. This want or need is called the *objective* . A character generally has an overall objective or long-term goal in a drama but may change his or her objective, and hence motivation, from scene to scene when confronted with various obstacles.

Example: In the play *Othello*, Iago's objective is Othello's downfall.

Plot: The sequence of events that make up a story. According to Aristotle, "The plot must be 'a whole' with a beginning, middle, and end" (*Poetics*, Part VII). A plot needs a motivating purpose to drive the story to its resolution, and a connection between these events.

Example: "The king died and then the queen died." Here there is no plot. Although there are two events – one followed by the other – there is nothing to tie them together. In contrast, "The king died and then the queen died of grief," is an example of a plot because it shows one event (the king's death) being the cause of the next event (the queen's death). The plot draws the reader into the character's lives and helps the reader understand the choices that the characters make.

Plot Structure: See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid

Point of attack: The point in the story at which the playwright chooses to start dramatizing the action; the first thing the audience will see or hear as the play begins.

Proscenium Arch: An architectural element separating the performance area from the auditorium in a theatre. The arch functions to mask stage machinery and helps create a "frame" for the stage action. First used in Europe during the Renaissance, the arch developed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries into the "picture frame" stage of the late 19th century.

Prologue: (1) In original Greek tragedy, the prologue is either the action or a set of introductory speeches before the first entry of the chorus. Here, a single actor's monologue or a dialogue between two actors would establish the play's background events. (2) In later literature, the prologue serves as explicit exposition introducing material before the first scene begins. (Taken and adapted from: web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html). The prologue is performed/delivered by the chorus. (See Chorus)

Examples: A chorus gives a prologue with the background information as to the feud between the families in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Tom, one of the protagonists in William's *A Glass Menagerie* gives a prologue both of the background of the play and the character's philosophy.

Props: [Property] Articles or objects that appear on stage during a play. Props can also take on a significant or even symbolic meaning.

Examples: The Christmas tree in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Laura's collection of glass animals in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*.

Protagonist: The main character of a literary work.

Recognition: See denouement.

Repertory: A system of producing plays in which a company of actors is assembled to stage a number of plays during a specific period of time. The repertory company included actors, each of whom played roles in several plays throughout a theatrical season and who often specialized in a specific type of role

Resolution: The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. (See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid)

Reversal or Peripeteia: The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist- from failure to success or success to failure.

Examples: Oedipus's and Othello's moments of enlightenment are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn.

Rising Action: An event, conflict or crisis or set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's plot leading up to the climax. (See Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid)

Example: The result of Othello promoting Cassio rather than Iago sets in motion everything else that follows.

Round Characters: A round character is depicted with such psychological depth and detail that he or she seems like a "real" person. The round character contrasts with the flat character who serves a specific or minor literary function in a text, and who may be a stock character or simplified stereotype. If the round character changes or evolves over the course of a narrative or appears to have the capacity for such change, the character is also dynamic. In longer plays, there may be several round characters. **(http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html).**

Satire: A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies.

Example: Joan Littlewood's *Oh! What a Lovely War* about World War I. Even the title indicates this is a satire.

Scene: A traditional segment in a play. Scenes are used to indicate (1) a change in time (2) a change in location, (3) provides a jump from one subplot to another, (4) introduces new characters (5) rearrange the actors on the stage. Traditionally plays are composed of acts, broken down into scenes.

Scenery: The physical representation of the play's setting (location and time period). It also emphasizes the aesthetic concept or atmosphere of the play.

Strophe (& Antistrophe): A portion of a choral ode in Greek tragedy followed by a metrically similar portion, the antistrophe. The words mean "turn" and "counter-turn," suggesting contrasting movements of the chorus while the ode was being sung. These two parts are sometimes followed by an **epode**, during which the chorus may have remained stationary

Soliloquy: A speech meant to be heard by the audience but not by other characters on the stage (as opposed to a monologue which addresses someone who does not respond). In a soliloquy only the audience can hear the private thoughts of the characters.

Example: Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" speech.

Stage Direction: A playwright's descriptive or interpretive comments that provide readers (as well as actors and directors) with information about the dialogue, setting, and action of a play. Modern playwrights tend to include substantial stage directions, while earlier playwrights typically use them more sparsely, implicitly, or not at all. (See gesture).

Staging: The spectacle a play presents in performance, including the position of actors on stage, the scenic background, the props and costumes, and the lighting and sound effects.

Static Character: A dramatic character who does not change.

Suspension of Disbelief: Samuel Taylor Coleridge first used the term in 1817. In its most basic form the term means that we accept something as real or representing the real when it obviously is not. In drama this is a crucial condition, as we must put aside put aside our disbelief and accept the premise presented as real for the duration of the performance.

Example: The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, …
can this cockpit [stage] hold
The vast fields of France? …
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, …,
On your imaginary forces work.

Shakespeare, Prologue Henry V

Shakespeare expresses it clearly in the speech above. On entering the theatre, the audience let their imagination take them into another world and ignore their literal surroundings. In this example, they accept that the few actors playing soldiers represent the thousands that took part in the battle.

Stock Character: A recognizable character type found in many plays. Comedies have traditionally relied on such stock characters as the miserly father, the beautiful but naïve girl, the trickster servant.

Subplot: A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot that coexists with the main plot.

Example: The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot within the overall plot of *Hamlet*.

Theatre of the Absurd: A type of drama and performance that conveys a sense of life as devoid of meaning and purpose. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who described and analyzed a group of mid-twentieth-century play in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, including the work of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco.

Theme: A central idea or statement that unifies and controls an entire literary work. The theme can take the form of a brief insight or a comprehensive vision of life; it is *not* a message or a moral. A theme must be expressible in the form of a statement - not "motherhood", but "Motherhood sometimes has more frustration than reward", and as such is the author's way of communicating and sharing ideas, perceptions, and feelings with readers. A theme must be stated as a generalization about life; names of characters or specific situations in the plot are not part of the theme. It must account for all the major details of the play and be reflected in its core aspects of character, setting and plot. The theme reflects the author's perspective of what it means to be human in the circumstances of the play, unifying and controlling it. There is no one "correct" way of expressing the theme of a play.

Tragedy: A type of drama in which the characters experience reversal of fortune, usually for the worse. In tragedy, suffering awaits many of the characters, especially the hero. See Appendix 4 on Tragedy.

Tragic flaw: A weakness or limitation of character, resulting in the fall of the tragic hero.

Example: Othello's jealousy and too trusting nature is his tragic flaw.

Tragic hero: A privileged, exalted character of high repute, who, by virtue of a tragic flaw and/or fate, suffers a fall from a higher station in life into suffering.

Example: Sophocles' Oedipus.

Unity of time, place, and action ("the unities"):
Limiting the time, place, and action of a play to a single spot and a single action over the period of 24 hours.

Sources

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Appendix 1: Freytag's Pyramid

