
Elements of drama

Dramatic meaning is created through the dramatist's and director's manipulation of the elements of drama and an audience's reaction to a performance. In a live performance there are five main dramatic elements – setting, plot, character, theme, and special effects. All these elements can be combined uniquely to generate a particular style for a production and achieve a specific dramatic purpose.

Setting

Setting is the time and place in which the dramatic action occurs. Time is the period in which the action occurs. It can shift and force the action forward. Place is the space in which action happens. This space is used to help define the relationships between the characters and establish their position within the fictional world. When a play opens or a scene changes the characters are placed in a particular situation in relation to the broader setting of the play.

Closely connected with the setting is atmosphere and mood. Drama appeals to the audience's senses to evoke atmosphere. It emerges through the nature of the dramatic action and is connected to suspense and dramatic tension. The emotional experiences of characters interacting in a setting can create and then lighten an intense mood.

A setting is usually researched to achieve authenticity. Setting can intensify the action and provide a broader understanding of a character and life. It needs to be well designed and not inhibit the pace of the play by slowing down scene changes.

Plot

The plot is the narrative framework wherein dramatic action takes place. In a play the plot needs to be tightly structured in order to give the audience a clear picture of what is happening at a single sitting. It may be simple or complex, linear or non-linear, or cyclical. It shapes and orders the nature of how the dramatic message is delivered.

Through the plot characters are shown doing things in a deliberate sequence of actions. The actions are divided into acts and scenes. Within scenes characters are shown in conflict with themselves and with other characters, as well as with aspects of the external world such as the landscape or the weather. The integrating force in the story is the protagonist's journey to resolve a problem that is conveyed during the establishing scenes and is known as the complication. The actions and reactions in the storyline develop the main conflict towards a climactic moment or an event that makes the resolution possible. In a comedy the climax is the moment after which things begin to get better; in a tragedy the climax marks the moment when things begin to deteriorate for the protagonist.

Dramatic techniques such as flashbacks and rhythm, or patterns created through the manipulation of pace and tempo, are useful for developing the plot.

Characterisation

Characterisation is the process of developing fictional people into particular personalities, either simple or complex, with a backstory. Each character represents a point of view that the dramatist wants the audience to explore and so characters are constructed with a set of attitudes and values in mind. Characters gain further delineation and complexity through their interaction with other characters.

Character and plot development are mainly achieved through dialogue. This needs to be natural and realistic both in terms of the cultural world in the setting and the particular attributes of the characters.

Sometimes a character can speak directly to the audience in the form of an aside or a soliloquy. In an aside a character steps out of the action in the play and talks to the audience, while the other characters on the stage appear to be frozen. Asides are short and can usually be regarded as moments of truth for the character speaking. A soliloquy is a speech to the audience when the character is alone on the stage. In a soliloquy a character is thinking out aloud, allowing the audience to become more intimately involved with that character and their private thoughts and inner struggles.

Theme

A theme is a central integrating matter of concern or issue that combines all the elements of drama to deliver a single and clear message to the audience. Themes need to be presented to the audience in an energetic and cohesive way through both the script and a collaborative performance.

Special effects

Costumes, props and sets help the cast and their managers to give the illusion of reality to the world in their play.

Sets or the physical background for the action need to be designed to meet the specific needs of the playwright and director. They should enhance rather than impede the actors' movements on stage and facilitate speedy scene changes.

Costumes are an important part of a character's identity. A costume can signal significant messages about the emotional and mental state of a character, and their social status and political importance.

Props or other physical objects such as a telephone need to be chosen to highlight aspects of the action. They should be limited but effective.

Symbols are images, objects or movements that convey special dramatic meaning and influence the audience at the subconscious level. They may be a part of the dialogue in the form of motifs or imagery in the play script, or actual objects on the set.

Sound effects, music or soundscapes can affect meaning. They can help to create atmosphere by building dramatic tension and creating mood through generating emotion.