

# CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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## All Shakespeare's Plays have FIVE Acts

In Shakespeare's day, people read and studied the plays of Ancient Rome in school, just like we read and study Shakespeare today. That five-act structure comes straight from the Roman playwrights like Seneca. When English writers like Shakespeare started creating a new kind of drama in the Elizabethan age, they naturally turned to the Roman writers they'd read in school for guidance about how to structure their own plays.

- Act 1 is used for the Introduction
- Act 2 is used for the Complication
- Act 3 is used for the Suspense
- Act 4 is the Climax
- Act 5 is the Conclusion

The German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag wrote *Die Technik des Dramas*, a definitive study of the 5-act dramatic structure, in which he laid out what has come to be known as Freytag's pyramid. Under Freytag's pyramid, the plot of a story consists of five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution/denouement.

Freytag's analysis was intended to apply not to modern drama, but rather to ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama.

## Shakespeare Wrote His Plays in Unrhymed Lines of Iambic Pentameter (mostly) :-D

Ten Syllable Lines with a da-DUM beat

He used variety for emphasis to achieve specific effects. Sometimes he rhymed his iambic pentameter. Sometime he used straight prose.

BLANK VERSE is employed in a wide range of situations because it comes close to the natural speaking rhythms of English but raises it above the ordinary without sounding artificial

RHYME is often used for ritualistic or choral effects and for highly lyrical or sententious passages that give advice or point to a moral

PROSE is used whenever verse would seem bizarre.

- in serious letters (Macbeth to Lady Macbeth; Hamlet to Horatio),
- in proclamations,
- in the speeches of characters actually or pretending to be mad (Lady Macbeth; Hamlet and Ophelia; Edgar and King Lear),
- for bantering or relaxed conversation (Mercutio in *Romeo & Juliet*)
- for cynical commentary

## In Medias Res - *In the middle of things*

All of Shakespeare's plays begin in the middle of action that began before the rise of the curtain.

This technique was very successful at getting the audience involved immediately.

## Foreshadowing

An indication of something to come - usually bad.

### Examples:

- The witches make prophecies in Macbeth.
- Romeo has a premonition that the events that will lead to his death will begin at the party that he plans to crash at the Capulets' house. [*Romeo & Juliet*]

*"My mind misgives*

*Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,*

*Shall bitterly begin this fearful date*

*With this night's revels, and expire the term*

*Of a despised life, clos'd in my breast,*

*By some vile forfeit of untimely death:*

*But he that hath the steering of my course*

*Direct my sail!" (1.4.106)*

## The Tragic Hero = Noble Character + Tragic Flaw

A requirement for a tragic hero is that he must have a tragic flaw. The tragic flaw will result in the hero's downfall. Every tragic hero must first exhibit nobility. This makes his tragic flaw more dramatic!

Hubris is the deadly pride that is often the driving force of a tragic hero.

### Examples:

Macbeth's tragic flaw: Too Ambitious; Macbeth's ambition will cause his downfall. Yet at the very beginning of the play, Macbeth distinguishes himself heroically.

Romeo's tragic flaw: Too Impulsive; He falls in love too quickly, he seeks vengeance against Tybalt immediately, he quickly takes his own life when he thinks Juliet is dead without finding out what happened...

## The Tragic Flaw Results in the Death of Tragic Hero

Tragedy must end in the death of the principal character. The death must not be the result of a mere accident, but must be brought about by the tragic flaw in the character of the hero. The hero must nevertheless have in him something which outweighs his defects and interests us in him so that we care for his fate.

## Foil

A minor character whose attitudes, beliefs and behavior differ significantly from those of the main character. The foil serves two main purposes: (1) to highlight flaws in the main character's personality, and (2) to suggest what the main character might have been like if these flaws had not been present.

### Examples:

- Banquo, Macbeth's comrade in arms, serves as a foil to Macbeth in the first 3 acts. Macduff is the foil in the last two acts.

In *Romeo & Juliet*, the nurse is fat and ugly. She makes Juliet look more beautiful.

## Anachronism

Something out of place in the time period of the play. The item is often an object, but may be a verbal expression, a technology, a philosophical idea, a musical style, a material, a custom, or anything else so closely associated with a particular period in time that it would be incorrect to place it within the historical setting of the play.

### Examples:

- Romeo tells the nurse that his name has been like a gun that murdered Juliet. (He means that he has brought her heartache.) Yet guns had not been invented during *Romeo & Juliet's* time period.
- Brutus plots to assassinate Caesar, in 44 BC, and is interrupted by the striking of the clock. Ancient Rome was still the era of the sundial; the mechanical clock was not invented until the 11th-13th century AD.
- In *Macbeth*, Ross refers to... "Ten thousand dollars to our general use." (Not Scottish currency of the time)
- Also in *Macbeth*, Fleance says, "The moon is down; I have not heard the clock." There were no clocks during *Macbeth's* time so one could not strike.

## Dramatic Irony

The character says one thing, but the audience understands it another way.

### Examples:

- *Romeo & Juliet*: Lady Capulet demands the death of Romeo. She does not know that she is demanding the death of her son-in-law and, indirectly, her own daughter.
- *Macbeth*: The emotional effects of the murder haven't quite gotten through to Lady Macbeth when she nonchalantly says, "A little water clears us of this deed." As the audience, we understand the seriousness of the deed, and we are not surprised when Lady Macbeth's conscience eventually affects her mind, and she has a complete mental breakdown.

## Soliloquy

A dramatic monologue; one person speaking alone on stage. The purpose is to let the audience know what the character is thinking. A soliloquy is like a "voice-over" in a movie.

### Examples:

**HAMLET:** To be, or not to be--that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--  
No more--

**MACBETH:** She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing.

- *Macbeth (Act 5, Scene 5)*

### ROMEO:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
...It is my lady, O, it is my love!  
O, that she knew she were!  
She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?  
Her eye discourses; I will answer it.  
I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks:  
Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,  
Having some business, do entreat her eyes  
...See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!  
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,  
That I might touch that cheek!

- *Romeo & Juliet (Act 2 Scene 2)*

## References to Blood

Just like today, audiences in the Elizabethan Age were drawn to blood and violence. Shakespeare wanted to appeal to the people in the pit, so they would pay attention to the play rather than throwing tomatoes. Therefore, blood is a major ingredient of Shakespeare's plays.

### Examples:

- "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" and "Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood" [*Macbeth*]
- "...purple fountains issuing from your veins." [*Romeo & Juliet*]

## References to Night & Light & Weather

The Globe Theater used the light of day to illuminate the stage. The roof was open to the sun. As a result, audiences had to be told when the scene was set at night or when the weather was not pleasant. Shakespeare gives us clues in the dialogue of the characters.

### Examples:

- Romeo tells Juliet to look at the streaks of light coming from the eastern part of the sky, meaning that it is almost dawn, and he must leave her.
- In *King Lear*, Kent says: "Who's there, besides foul weather?" Gentleman replies: "One minded like the weather, most unquietly."
- The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve. Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time. ~ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- KING LEAR: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
- Lorenzo in *Merchant of Venice* says, "The moon shines bright: in such a night as this, When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees."
- PARIS in *Romeo & Juliet*: Give me thy torch, boy: hence, and stand aloof:

## Comic Relief

**Comic relief** is the inclusion of a humorous character, scene, or witty dialogue in an otherwise serious work, often to relieve tension. A comic scene is often included right after an intense moment.

### Examples:

- The Comic Porter right after the murder of Macbeth
- The grave-digger scene in *Hamlet*
- The mockery of the fool in *King Lear*
- Dogberry, the head constable, and Verges, his deputy in *Much Ado About Nothing*
- The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*
- Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* - He jests and puns every chance he gets
- Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*. This part was intended for Will Kempe, the comedian of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Peter's funny bit comes in Act IV Scene 5.
- In popular culture the character of C-3PO, featured in all six *Star Wars* films, is also considered to be used as comic relief.

In *Les Misérables*, the song "Master of the House" relieves much of the sadness shown before it in the musical.

## The Last Person to Speak is Typically the Person of Highest Birth.

Shakespeare did this in his plays to honor the nobility who often sponsored theater companies.

### Examples:

- In *Romeo & Juliet*, the Prince speaks last.
- In *Macbeth*, the new King Malcolm says the final words!!
- Duke of Albany says last lines in *King Lear*.
- Octavius – Augustus Caesar – says the final lines in *Julius Caesar* and in *Antony & Cleopatra*.

## Nature is in Tune with the Deeds of Men

Positive natural phenomena occur along with good deeds and bad natural phenomena occur along with misdeeds.

### Examples:

- At the end of *Romeo & Juliet*, the sun refuses to come out because of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.
- Events occur after the murder in *Macbeth* that go against nature – weird weather, horses ate each other...
- Bad weather occurs when talking to the witches in *Macbeth*.

## Supernatural – Witches, Ghosts, and Superstitions

Shakespeare understood the way people thought and were preoccupied with the supernatural during his lifetime. The Elizabethan period was one filled with magic and wonder, and sometimes terror. Witch trials were held during this period, and pagan influence still shuddered through the "common" folk. Shakespeare wisely capitalized on these many superstitions.

### Examples:

- In *Macbeth* – Witches, the bloody dagger in the air, Banquo's ghost, the unnatural occurrences after the murder, the owl screeching before the murder, the voices Macbeth heard while committing the murder
- The ghost of Hamlet's father tells Hamlet that he had been murdered.
- In *Romeo & Juliet*, Romeo begins to profess his love by the moon, but Juliet interjects, "O, swear not by the moon".
- Romeo says that Mercutio's spirit is waiting for Tybalt or Romeo to go with him. Romeo means that he intends to fight Tybalt to the death.

## Pun - A Play on Words

A form of word play which suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect.

### Examples:

- *No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.*  
Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, Scene 1)  
Hint: Grave=serious, dead, sad
- *If reasons were as plentiful as blackberries, I would give no man a reason upon compulsion, I.*  
Henry IV, Part One (Act 2, Scene 4)  
Hint: "Reason" was pronounced "raisin" in Shakespeare's day.
- *Give me a torch: I am not for this ambling; Being but heavy, I will bear the light.*  
*Romeo and Juliet* (Act I, Scene 4)  
Hint: Heavy = in a bad mood;  
Light = not weighing much; a torch.
- *Now is the winter of our discontent Made glorious summer by this sun of York...*  
Richard III (Act I Scene 1)  
Context: These are the opening lines of Richard III. King Richard III was the son of the Duke of York.
- *Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun.*  
Hamlet (Act 1, Scene 2)  
This is Hamlet's response to the King's question, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"  
He means that the King has called Hamlet "son" once too often.

*Much Ado About Nothing* - Dogberry and Verges are well intentioned and take their jobs very seriously, but they are also ridiculous.

Dogberry is a master of malapropisms, always getting his words just slightly wrong.

- You are thought here to be the most senseless [sensible] and fit man for the constable of the watch"
- Comparisons are odorous" [odious]
- Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended [apprehended] two a[u]spicious [suspicious] persons

Dogberry is an archetype for bumbling police officers in modern film and television comedies. Among movie and TV policemen who followed in his footsteps are Sheriff Buford T. Justice (*Smoky and the Bandit*), Inspector Clouseau (*The Pink Panther*), Maxwell Smart (*Get Smart*), and Barney Fife (*Andy Griffith Show*).

## Biblical Imagery

Shakespeare uses a great deal of Biblical imagery - it could not possibly be listed here.

### Examples:

#### MACBETH

First Witch: *All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!*  
"All hail" is a common greeting in the New Testament, but one use of the phrase stands out in particular. In Matthew 26.49, Judas prepares to betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin and Roman soldiers. Judas approaches Jesus, saying, "Hail Master." The Witches greet Macbeth in a similar fashion, and, as Judas betrayed Jesus, so do the Witches betray Macbeth.

Banquo: *If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which will not, Speak then to me* (1.3.60) Banquo, unconvinced that the Witches can foresee the future, makes reference to Ecclesiastes 11.6: "*In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.*"

When Lady Macbeth attempts to pass off the murder of King Duncan with the nonchalant comment that "*a little waters clears us of this deed. / How easy is it then!*" (2.2.71), and even more when she washes her hands in the sleepwalking scene, she becomes another Pilate, futilely washing her hands in a false innocence.

Late in the play Macbeth becomes a latter-day King Saul, a doomed king on the verge of death consulting a witch.

#### MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Measure for Measure is the only work by Shakespeare to take its title from the Bible: the phrase comes from Matthew: *For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.* (Matthew 7:2; Geneva Bible).

#### HAMLET

For four acts of the play Hamlet has tried to set the world straight in his own strength. In Act 5 Hamlet is transformed as he comes to trust in divine providence instead of human initiative. When Horatio suggests that Hamlet call off a duel, Hamlet replies, "*Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.*" This alludes to Jesus' famous statement about the sparrow: "*Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father? Yea, and all the hairs of your head are numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows*" (Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 12:6).