The Elements Of Drama

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The elements of drama, by which dramatic works can be analyzed and evaluated, can be categorized into three major areas:

Literary elements

Technical elements

Performance elements

Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was a Greek philosopher whose writings still influence us today. He was the first to write about the essential elements of drama more than 2,000 years ago. While ideas have changed slightly over the years, we still discuss Aristotle's list when talking about what makes the best drama.

Aristotle's Six Elements of Drama

Aristotle considered these six things to be essential to good drama:

- **Plot:** This is what happens in the play. Plot refers to the action; the basic storyline of the play.
- **Theme:** While plot refers to the action of the play, theme refers to the meaning of the play. Theme is the main idea or lesson to be learned from the play. In some cases, the theme of a play is obvious; other times it is quite subtle.
- **Characters:** Characters are the people (sometimes animals or ideas) portrayed by the actors in the play. It is the characters who move the action, or plot, of the play forward.
- **Dialogue:** This refers to the words written by the playwright and spoken by the characters in the play. The dialogue helps move the action of the play along.
- **Music/Rhythm:** While music is often featured in drama, in this case Aristotle was referring to the rhythm of the actors' voices as they speak.
- **Spectacle:** This refers to the visual elements of a play: sets, costumes, special effects, etc. Spectacle is everything that the audience sees as they watch the play.

The Modern Theater

In the modern theater, this list has changed slightly, although you will notice that many of the elements remain the same. The list of essential elements in modern theater is as follows:

- Characters
- Plot
- Theme
- Dialogue
- Convention
- Genre
- Audience

The Modern Theater

The first four, character, plot, theme and dialogue remain the same, but the following additions are now also considered essential elements of drama.

- **Convention:** These are the techniques and methods used by the playwright and director to create the desired stylistic effect.

- **Genre:** Genre refers to the type of play. Some examples of different genres include comedy, tragedy, mystery and historical play.

- **Audience:** This is the group of people who watch the play. Many playwrights and actors consider the audience to be the most important element of drama, as all of the effort put in to writing and producing a play is for the enjoyment of the audience.

Literary Elements

There are six stages in a plot structure.

1. **Initial incident:** The event that "gets the story going"

2. **Preliminary event:** Whatever takes place BEFORE the action of the play that is directly related to the play

3. **Rising action:** A series of events following the initial incident and leading up to the dramatic climax

4. **Climax:** The turning point or high point of a story, when events can go either way

5. **Falling action:** The series of events following the climax

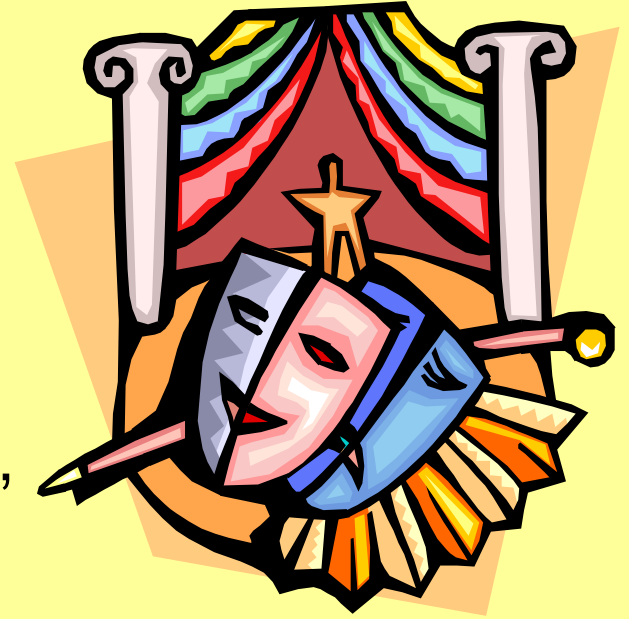6. **Denouement:** Another term for the conclusion from the French word for "unraveling"

Other Literary Elements

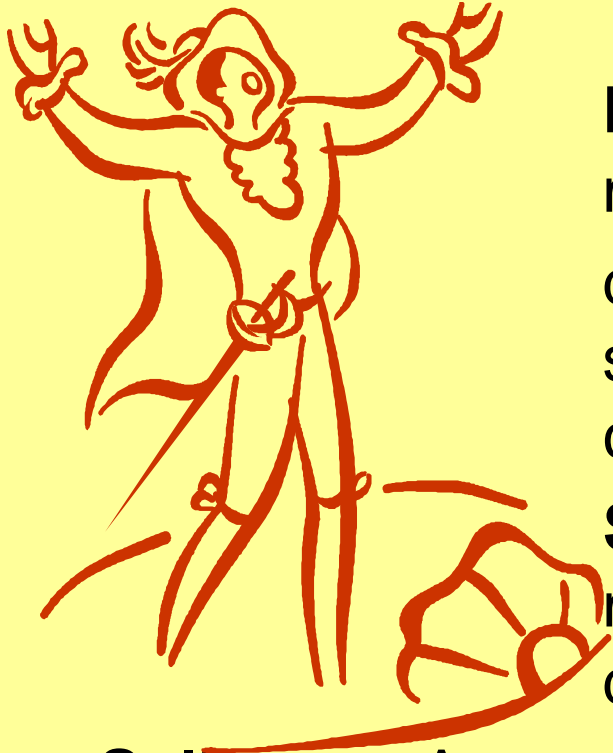**Exposition:** The "who, when, where and what" part of the play

Story organization: beginning, middle, end

Conflict: The internal or external struggle between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates dramatic tension

Suspense: A feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome, used to build interest and excitement on the part of the audience

Other Literary Elements

Language: In drama, the particular manner of verbal expression, the

diction or style of writing, or the speech or phrasing that suggests a class or profession or type of character
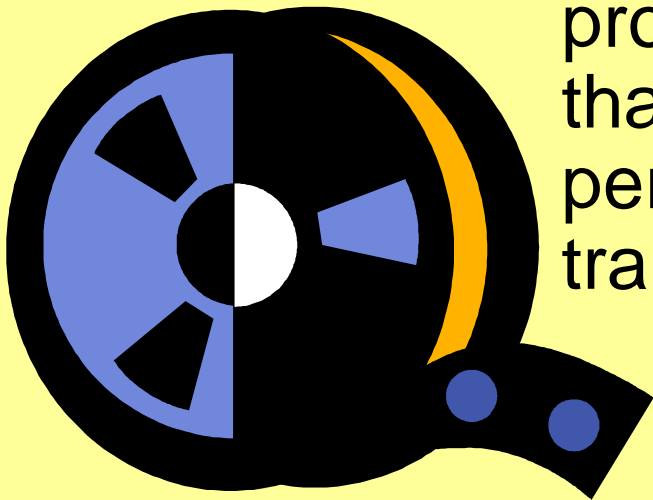
Style: the shaping of dramatic material, settings, or costumes in a deliberately non-realistic manner

Soliloquy: A speech by a single actor who is ALONE on stage

Monologue: A long speech made by one actor (a monologue may be delivered alone or in the presence of others.)

Technical Elements

- **Scenery (set):** The theatrical equipment, such as curtains, flats, backdrops, or platforms, used in a dramatic production to communicate environment

- **Costumes:** Clothing and accessories worn by actors to portray character and period.

- **Props:** Short for *properties;* any article, except costume or scenery, used as part of a dramatic production; any moveable object that appears on stage during a performance, from a telephone to a train
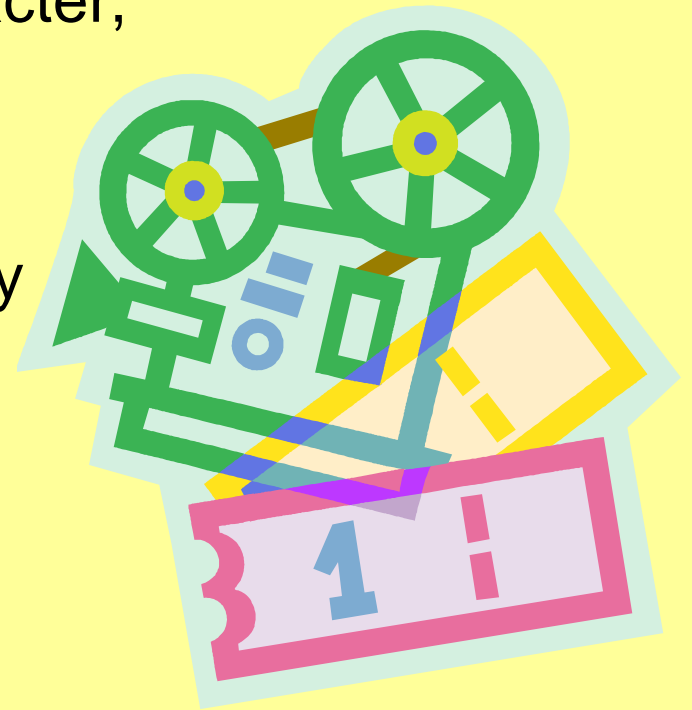
Other Technical Elements

Lights: The placement, intensity, and color of lights to help communicate environment, mood, or feeling

Sound: The effects an audience hears during performance to communicate character, context, or environment

Makeup: Costumes, wigs, and body paint used to transform an actor into a character.

Performance Elements

Acting: Use of face, body, and voice to portray character

Character motivation: The reason or reasons for a character's behavior; an incentive or inducement for further action for a character

Character analysis: In responding to dramatic art, the process of examining how the elements of drama – literary, technical, and performance – are used

Empathy: The capacity to relate to the feelings of another

Other Performance Elements

Speaking: The mode of expression or delivery of lines

Breath control: Proper use of the lungs and diaphragm muscle for maximum capacity and efficiency of breath for speaking

Vocal expression: How an actor uses his or her voice to convey character

Inflection: Change in pitch or loudness of the voice.

Projection: How well the voice carries to the audience

Speaking style: The mode of expression or delivery of lines

Diction: Selection and pronunciation of words; clarity of speech.

Other Performance Elements

Nonverbal expression

Gestures: Any movement of the actor's head, shoulder, arm, hand, leg, or foot to convey meaning

Facial expression: Physical and vocal aspects used by an actor to convey mood, feeling, or personality