

plot: The plot (which Aristotle termed the **mythos**) in a dramatic or narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects. This description is deceptively simple, because the actions (including verbal discourse as well as physical actions) are performed by particular characters in a work, and are the means by which they exhibit their moral and dispositional qualities. Plot and character are therefore interdependent critical concepts—as Henry James has said, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (See *character and characterization*.) Notice also that a plot is distinguishable from the *story*—that is, a bare synopsis of the temporal order of what happens. When we summarize the story in a literary work, we say that first this happens, then that, then that. . . . It is only when we specify how this is related to that, by causes and motivations, and in what ways all these matters are rendered, ordered, and organized so as to achieve their particular effects, that a synopsis begins to be adequate to the plot. (On the distinction between story and plot see *narrative and narratology*.)

There are a great variety of plot forms. For example, some plots are designed to achieve tragic effects, and others to achieve the effects of comedy, romance, satire, or of some other *genre*. Each of these types in turn exhibits diverse plot patterns, and may be represented in the mode either of drama or of narrative, and either in verse or in prose. The following terms, widely current in traditional criticism, are useful in distinguishing the component elements of plots and in helping to discriminate types of plots, and of the characters appropriate to them, in both narrative and dramatic literature.

The chief character in a plot, on whom our interest centers, is called the **protagonist** (or alternatively, the **hero** or **heroine**), and if the plot is such that he or she is pitted against an important opponent, that character is called the **antagonist**. Elizabeth Bennet is the protagonist, or heroine, of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813); Hamlet is the protagonist and King Claudius the antagonist in Shakespeare's play, and the relation between them is one of **conflict**. If the antagonist is evil, or capable of cruel and criminal actions, he or she is called the **villain**. Many, but far from all, plots deal with a conflict; Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938), for example, does not. In addition to the conflict between individuals, there may be the conflict of a protagonist against fate, or against the circumstances that stand between him and a goal he has set himself; and in some works (as in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*) the chief conflict is between opposing desires or values in the protagonist's own temperament. For the recent employment of an anti-traditional protagonist, see *antihero*.

A character in a work who, by sharp contrast, serves to stress and highlight the distinctive temperament of the protagonist is termed a **foil**. Thus Laertes the man of action is a foil to the dilatory Hamlet; the firebrand Hotspur is a foil to the cool and calculating Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV*; and in *Pride and Prejudice*, the gentle and compliant Jane Bennet serves as a foil to her strong-willed sister Elizabeth. (“Foil” originally signified “leaf,” and came to be applied to the thin sheet of bright metal placed under a jewel to enhance its brilliance.)

If a character initiates a scheme which depends for its success on the ignorance or gullibility of the person or persons against whom it is directed, it is called an **intrigue**. Iago is a villain who intrigues against Othello and Cassio in Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. A number of comedies, including Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1607) and many *Restoration* plays (for example, William Congreve's *The Way of the World* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*), have plots which turn largely on the success or failure of an intrigue.

As a plot evolves it arouses expectations in the audience or reader about the future course of events and actions and how characters will respond to them. A lack of certainty on the part of a concerned reader about what is going to happen, especially to characters with whom the reader has established a bond of sympathy, is known as **suspense**. If what in fact happens violates the expectations we have formed, it is known as **surprise**. The interplay of suspense and surprise is a prime source of vitality in a traditional plot. The most effective surprise, especially in realistic narratives, is one which turns out, in retrospect, to have been grounded in what has gone before, even though we have hitherto made the wrong inference from the given facts of circumstance and character. As E. M. Forster put it, the shock of the unexpected, "followed by the feeling, 'oh, that's all right' is a sign that all is well with the plot." A "surprise ending," in the pejorative sense, is one in which the author resolves the plot without adequate earlier grounds in characterization or events, often by the use of highly unlikely coincidence; there are numerous examples in the short stories of O. Henry. (For one type of manipulated ending, see *deus ex machina*.) *Dramatic irony* is a special kind of suspenseful expectation, when the audience or readers foresee the oncoming disaster or triumph but the character does not.

A plot is commonly said to have **unity of action** (or to be "an artistic whole") if it is apprehended by the reader or auditor as a complete and ordered structure of actions, directed toward the intended effect, in which none of the prominent component parts, or **incidents**, is nonfunctional; as Aristotle put this concept (*Poetics*, section 8), all the parts are "so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoint and dislocate the whole." Aristotle claimed that it does not constitute a unified plot to present a series of episodes which are strung together simply because they happen to a single character. Many *picaresque narratives*, nevertheless, such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), have held the interest of readers for centuries with such an *episodic* plot structure; while even so tightly integrated a plot as that of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) introduces, for variety's sake, a long story by the Man of the Hill, which is related to the main plot only by parallels and contrasts.

A successful later development which Aristotle did not foresee is the type of structural unity that can be achieved with **double plots**, familiar in *Elizabethan* drama. In this form, a **subplot**—a second story that is complete and interesting in its own right—is introduced into the play; when skillfully invented and managed, the subplot serves to broaden our perspective on the main plot and to enhance rather than diffuse the overall effect. The integral subplot may have the relation of analogy to the main plot (the Gloucester story in *King Lear*), or else of counterpoint against it (the comic subplot involving Falstaff in *1 Henry IV*).

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Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590–96) is an instance of a narrative romance which interweaves main plot and a multiplicity of subplots into an intricately interrelated structure, in a way that the critic C. S. Lewis compares to the **polyphonic** art of contemporary Elizabethan music, in which two or more diverse melodies are carried on simultaneously.

The order of a unified plot, Aristotle pointed out, is a continuous sequence of beginning, middle, and end. The **beginning** initiates the main action in a way which makes us look forward to something more; the **middle** presumes what has gone before and requires something to follow; and the **end** follows from what has gone before but requires nothing more; we feel satisfied that the plot is complete. The structural beginning (sometimes also called the "initiating action," or "point of attack") need not be the initial stage of the action that is brought to a climax in the narrative or play. The epic, for example, plunges *in medias res*, "in the middle of things" (see *epic*), many short stories begin at the point of the climax itself, and the writer of a drama often captures our attention in the opening scene with a representative incident, related to and closely preceding the event which precipitates the central situation or conflict. Thus Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* opens with a street fight between the servants of two great houses, and his *Hamlet* with the apparition of a ghost; the **exposition** of essential prior matters—the feud between the Capulets and Montagues, or the posture of affairs in the Royal House of Denmark—Shakespeare weaves rapidly and skillfully into the dialogue of these startling initial scenes. In the novel, the modern drama, and especially the motion picture, such exposition is sometimes managed by **flashbacks**: interpolated narratives or scenes (often justified, or *naturalized*, as a memory, a reverie, or a confession by one of the characters) which represent events that happened before the time at which the work opened. Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries* (1957) make persistent and skillful use of this device.

The German critic Gustav Freytag, in *Technique of the Drama* (1863), introduced an analysis of plot that is known as **Freytag's Pyramid**. He described the typical plot of a five-act play as a pyramidal shape, consisting of a rising action, climax, and falling action. Although the total pattern that Freytag described applies only to a limited number of plays, various of his terms are frequently echoed by critics of prose fiction as well as drama. As applied to *Hamlet*, for example, the **rising action** (a section that Aristotle had called the **complication**) begins, after the opening scene and exposition, with the ghost's telling Hamlet that he has been murdered by his brother Claudius; it continues with the developing conflict between Hamlet and Claudius, in which Hamlet, despite setbacks, succeeds in controlling the course of events. The rising action reaches the **climax** of the hero's fortunes with his proof of the King's guilt by the device of the play within a play (III. ii.). Then comes the **crisis**, the reversal or "turning point" of the fortunes of the protagonist, in his failure to kill the King while he is at prayer. This inaugurates the **falling action**; from now on the antagonist, Claudius, largely controls the course of events, until the **catastrophe**, or outcome, which is decided by the death of the hero, as well as of Claudius, the Queen, and Laertes. "Catastrophe" is usually applied to tragedy only; a more general term for this

precipitating final scene, which is applied to both comedy and tragedy, is the **denouement** (French for “unknotting”): the action or intrigue ends in success or failure for the protagonist, the conflicts are settled, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding cleared away. A frequently used alternative term for the outcome of a plot is the **resolution**.

In many plots the denouement involves a **reversal**, or in Aristotle’s Greek term, **peripety**, in the protagonist’s fortunes, whether to the protagonist’s failure or destruction, as in tragedy, or success, as in comic plots. The reversal frequently depends on a **discovery** (in Aristotle’s term, **anagnorisis**). This is the recognition by the protagonist of something of great importance hitherto unknown to him or to her: Cesario reveals to the Duke at the end of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* that he is really Viola; the fact of Iago’s lying treachery dawns upon Othello; Fielding’s Joseph Andrews, in his comic novel by that name (1742), discovers on the evidence of a birthmark—“as fine a strawberry as ever grew in a garden”—that he is in reality the son of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson.

Since the 1920s, a number of writers of prose fiction and drama—building on the example of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as early as 1759–67—have deliberately designed their works to frustrate the expectations of chronological order, coherence, reliable narration, and resolution that the reader or auditor has formed by habituation to traditional plots; some writers have even attempted to dispense altogether with a recognizable plot. (See, for example, literature of the *absurd*, *modernism and postmodernism*, *antinovel*, the *new novel*.) Also, various recent types of critical theory have altered or supplemented many traditional concepts in the classification and analysis of plots. The *archetypal critic* Northrop Frye reduced all plots to four types that, he claims, reflect the myths corresponding to the four seasons of the year. Structuralist critics, who conceive diverse plots as sets of alternative conventions and codes for constructing a fictional narrative, analyze and classify these conventional plot forms on the model of linguistic theory. (See *structuralist criticism and narratology*, and the discussion of plots in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 1975, pp. 205–24.) And some recent critical theorists have undertaken to explode entirely the traditional treatments of plots, on the ground that any notion of the “unity” of a plot and of its “teleological” progress toward a resolution are illusory, or else that the resolution itself is only a facade to mask the irreconcilable conflicts and contradictions (whether psychological or social) that are the basic components of any literary text. See under *poststructuralism*.

For recent developments in the concept of plot, see *narrative and narratology*. Refer to Aristotle, *Poetics*; E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927); R. S. Crane, “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*,” in Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (1952); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (rev. 1983); Elder Olson, *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* (1966); Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967); Eric S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense* (1974); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (trans. 1977); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1980); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Invention in Narrative* (1984). For references to *plot* in other entries, see pages 127, 332.

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