

ARISTOTLE

In the Ancient Greek world, Aristotle was known as one of the most learned scholars. One of the most important documents written during this time was his work, *The Poetics*, in which Aristotle wrote about many things, including politics and theatre. When Aristotle discussed theatre, or what he called tragedy, he stressed that:

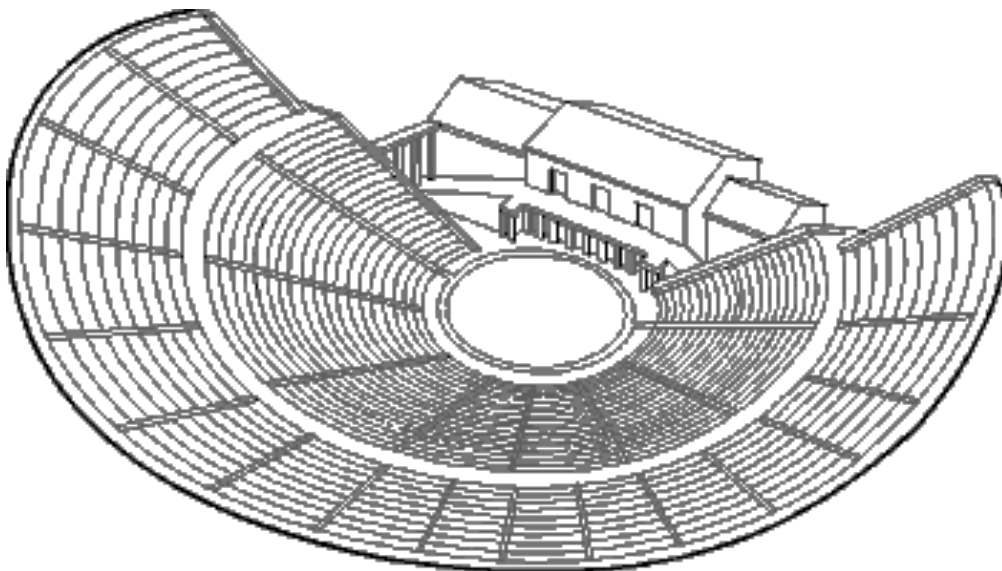
- Drama is an imitation of life
- We learn through imitation
- Learning something is the greatest pleasure of life.
- All human happiness or misery takes the form of action. This was why he places plot first in his list of the elements of drama.

In Aristotle's discussion of plot, he maintains that:

- Action must be complete in itself with a beginning, a middle, and an end
- Incidents must follow each other in logical order
- All events must reach a plausible conclusion

Aristotle designated what has become known as the **six elements of tragedy**. He listed these in order of importance to a play. He chose PLOT as the most important element because an audience must learn from the events they are viewing. Next, he chose CHARACTER because the audience must have someone to relate within the events they are viewing. THOUGHT is the theme that is supposed to be related. DICTON is the choice of words that the playwright uses to forward the events. MUSIC is any form of sound that the audience hears, and SPECTACLE is the substance of the world- this is seen as least important to Aristotle.

WHO IS THE GREEK CHARACTER? The Greeks told stories of heroes and gods, monsters and curses. They did this for several reasons: theatre was a religious and educational experience. They went to theatre to be utterly changed as a person, so playwright's had a responsibility to create stories that taught people how to be good citizens. So, a greek hero was always a mighty hero that made a mistake of some kind that could have been avoided. Often this mistake was an affront to the gods or disrupted the natural order of the world; they would have to be taught a lesson. The goal was to teach the audience that if they transgressed, they would be PUNISHED!!!



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PLAYWRITING AS EVENT WRITING

Aristotle's plot breakdown: Aristotle broke the events of the play down into identifiable moments. They are documented as follows:

-*Exposition:* Stories begin with character introductions, setting details, and background information. Elements established can be used as foreshadowing for the future.

-*Inciting Incident:* All stories begin in some sort of stasis. When it is disrupted, the characters all struggle to bring the world back into stasis. This is the introduction of the central conflict.

-*Rising Action:* These are the scenes in which complications occur. This could result in more character information that provides more complications.

-*Climax:* This is the moment in which the conflict of the main characters comes to a head...the showdown, if you will. One side will win!

-*Falling Action:* This is the direct descent of the action from right after the climax. It will lead into the denouement.

-*Denouement:* This is the result of all of the actions that have led to the climax. The action will no longer progress in an upward fashion. Either stasis has been regained or a new stasis has been formed.

The "Germ" of the idea: Playwrights get their ideas from numerous sources. When you tell your friends stories, where do the ideas come from? The old adage is to "write what you know." If a playwright is interested in folklore, history, or politics, their plays will probably be a combination of those interests. The Greeks wrote plays about heroes who made a tragic mistake because they were too prideful or too conceited. This was to educate the random audience member that being prideful came with consequences. So, does the playwright have to be a teacher? No, but the playwright has a responsibility to the audience to a) provide some sort of wise moral, and b) make it worth their while and money! So, how does the playwright do this? By making the plan, creating characters, writing dialogue, deciding on theme, and making a setting. Does this sound familiar....hello, Aristotle!!!!

Making the plan: Whether you are writing a play for your church, Broadway, or just to enjoy with friends, you **MUST** have a plan that will keep you on track. Most scripts grow out of two elements, the **throughline** and the **dramatic conflict**. The throughline is the major action of the play, the step-by-step series of events that happens in the lives of the characters. The dramatic conflict is the major struggle that the main character deals with in the play. We find that the main character's conflict is with one of the following categories: **with another person, with themselves, with society, or with the forces of nature or fate**. Once the throughline and the conflict have been decided on, the playwright will have to provide structure to the plot elements and story. The play is divided into large portions known as **acts**; each act should have a beginning, middle, and an end. The parts that an act is broken into are **scenes**. Each scene should have a beginning, and middle, and an end. The purpose of these divisions is to provide a framework to tell the story and to tie all of the story elements together at the end, so the actions of one character at the beginning of the play may affect another character at the end.

Creating Characters: There is a special word for the main character in a book, play, or movie; that is the **protagonist**. It is important that the play have a detailed protagonist because it is his/her journey that the audience must follow. The audience wants to cheer for someone, to connect with someone, and that should be the protagonist. While in ancient Greece, the protagonist was a hero or king of some kind, contemporary heroes are Everyman characters- someone to which an average person can relate. The protagonist must have someone to be in conflict with, and that is the **antagonist**. People think that this means that the antagonist needs to be a villain, a bad-guy. Life is actually more complicated than that; a good antagonist is someone that the audience can relate to as well as the protagonist. What makes the pro and antagonist similar is what the actor teacher, Constantin Stanislavski, calls the character's **objective**. The objective is what the character wants more than anything else; think about whenever someone makes a joke about actors asking, "what's my MOTIVATION." That's an objective. The antagonist is only a villain because their objective comes in conflict with the protagonist. SO, the protagonist is ALWAYS on a journey to get what they want(objective); at some point early in the play, the antagonist reveals their objective that gets in the way of the protagonist(conflict). The rest of the play is about whether or not the protagonist will get what he/she wants.

Dialogue: Once characters have been created, they have to start interacting with each other. The playwright will decide what is important about a certain scene, how it moves the story along, and what actions the characters take to try to reach their objectives. For example:

Billy and Lisa have been dating for two months. Billy wants to break up with Lisa because she is so clingy, and he wants to date other people. Lisa thinks that she has fallen in love with Billy, and she wants to ask him to move in with her. We have the objective of each character. Now, let's put them in conflict- Lisa has finally built up the courage to ask Billy to move in with her, and Billy has finally gained the strength to tell her that he wants to break up. The scene takes place in a restaurant. Here is some sample dialogue.

(LISA and BILLY sit at their table. They look at their menus, but LISA is so excited that she puts hers down.)

LISA: I am SO glad that you chose this restaurant. Its so romantic...

BILLY: They have really great steak!

LISA: Oooo, you're getting steak. I'll get that, too. I'll get a salad- I can just eat off your plate.

(Awkward pause)

LISA: There was something-

BILLY: Yeah, I wanted to say something-

LISA: Oh, what did you-

BILLY: No no, you go first!

LISA: Really...you go first-

BILLY: Lisa, you should go first-

(at the same time, they say)

LISA: I have great news-

BILLY: I have bad news-

LISA: What?

BILLY: Wait...what great news?

LISA: I want you to move in with me!

BILLY: Oh...um...Lisa...we need to talk.

Setting: According to Aristotle, setting, or SPECTACLE, is the least important element of drama. Although, spectacle is probably one of the first things that the playwright must think about. A simple definition of setting is that it is the location in space and time in which the play is set. This element can either subtly or dramatically frame the action. Looking at our example above, the location was a restaurant. Since a restaurant is a public place, Billy was probably hoping that Lisa would not cause a big scene when he broke up with her. What if he was breaking up with her in his apartment or her apartment? The dialogue might be different because the characters would speak differently depending upon where they found themselves. The setting must be as specific as possible because setting the play in North America does not help the actors. Saying that the play takes place in Chicago helps to specify the play because Chicago has different customs and cultures than Beirut.

In your journal, reflect on the reading by doing the following activity:

1- Germ of an idea: Choose a dramatic conflict in which two characters could find themselves. In two sentences, explain this conflict as a theme or moral.

2 - Creating Characters: Briefly describe the two characters. Who are they? Give whatever details will help to "flesh out" the characters and "bring them to life." You should use at least five sentences for each character.

3 - Setting: Describe in three to five sentences the setting in which a scene between the two characters would take place.

4 - Dialogue: Try to tell the story of the dramatic conflict through dialogue between the two characters. This should be at least a half a page. You may find that as you start writing, you want to make it longer. Do not censor yourself on length; just express yourself.