Freytag's Pyramid

Another model frequently used to describe the overall structure of plays is the so-called **Freytag's Pyramid**. In his book *Die Technik des Dramas* (*Technique of the Drama*) (1863), the German journalist and writer, Gustav Freytag, described the classical five-act structure of plays in the shape of a pyramid, and he attributed a particular function to each of the five acts. (For a schematised version of Freytag's Pyramid see **Animation**.)

Act I contains all introductory information and thus serves as **exposition**: The main characters are introduced and, by presenting a conflict, the play prepares the audience for the action in subsequent acts. To illustrate this with an example: In the first act of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, the protagonist Hamlet is introduced and he is confronted with the ghost of his dead father who informs him that King Claudius was responsible for his death. As a consequence, Hamlet swears vengeance and the scene is thus set for the following play.

The second act usually propels the plot by introducing further circumstances or problems related to the main issue (**complicating action**). The main conflict starts to develop and characters are presented in greater detail. Thus, Hamlet wavers between taking action and his doubts concerning the apparition. The audience gets to know him as an introverted and melancholic character. In addition, Hamlet puts on "an antic disposition" (*Hamlet*, I, 5: 180), i.e., he pretends to be mad, in order to hide his plans from the king.

In act III, the plot reaches its climax. A crisis occurs where the deed is committed that will lead to the **catastrophe**, and this brings about a turn (**peripety**) in the plot. Hamlet, by organising a play performed at court, assures himself of the king's guilt. In a state of frenzy, he accidentally kills Polonius. The king realises the danger of the situation and decides to send Hamlet to England and to have him killed on his way there.

The fourth act creates new tension in that it delays the final catastrophe by further events (**falling action**). In *Hamlet*, the dramatic effect of the plot is reinforced by a number of incidents: Polonius' daughter, Ophelia, commits suicide and her brother, Laertes, swears vengeance against Hamlet. He and the king conspire to arrange a duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Having escaped his murderers, Hamlet returns to court.

Animation

The fifth act finally offers a solution to the conflict presented in the play. While tragedies end in a catastrophe, usually the death of the protagonist, comedies are simply 'resolved' (traditionally in a wedding or another type of festivity). A term that is applicable to both types of ending is the French **dénouement**, which literally means the 'unknotting' of the plot. In the final duel, Hamlet is killed by Laertes but before that he stabs Laertes and wounds and poisons the king. The queen is poisoned by mistake when she drinks from a cup intended for Hamlet.
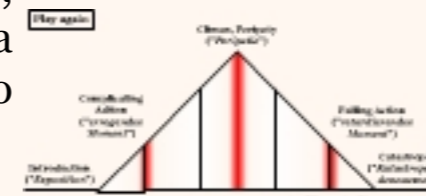
Open and Closed Drama

While traditional plays usually, albeit not exclusively, adhere to the five-act structure, modern plays have deliberately moved away from this rigid format, partly because it is considered too artificial and restrictive and partly because many contemporary playwrights generally do not believe in structure and order anymore (see **poststructuralism**).

Another way to look at this is that traditional plays typically employ a **closed structure** while most contemporary plays are **open**. The terms 'open' and 'closed' drama go back to the German literary critic, Volker Klotz (*Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama*, 1978), who distinguished between plays where the individual acts are tightly connected and logically built on one another, finally leading to a clear resolution of the plot (closed form), and plays where scenes only loosely hang together and are even exchangeable at times and where the ending does not really bring about any conclusive solution or result (compare **open** and **closed endings** in narrative texts).

Open plays typically also neglect the concept of the **unities** and are thus rather free as far as their overall arrangement is concerned. An example is Samuel Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot*. Belonging to what is classified as the **theatre of the absurd**, this play is premised on the assumption that life is ultimately incomprehensible for mankind and that consequently all our actions are somewhat futile. The two main characters, the tramps Estragon and Vladimir, wait seemingly endlessly for the appearance of a person named Godot and meanwhile dispute the place and time of their appointment. While Estragon and Vladimir pass the time talking in an almost random manner, employing funny repartees and word-play, nothing really happens throughout the two acts of the play. Significantly, each of the acts ends with the announcement of Godot's imminent appearance and the two characters' decision to leave, and yet even then nothing happens as is indicated in the stage directions: "They do not move". The audience is left in a puzzled state because what is presented on stage does not really seem to make sense. There is no real plot in the sense of a sequence of causally motivated actions, and there is hardly any coherence. The play does not provide any information on preceding events that could be relevant, e.g., with regard to that mysterious Godot (Who is he? Why did Vladimir and Estragon make an appointment to see him?), and it does not offer a conclusive ending since the audience does not know what is going to happen (if anything) and what the actual point of the 'action' is. Hence, there is no linear structure or logical sequence which leads to a closed ending but the play remains open and opaque on every imaginable level: plot, characters, their language, etc.

The fact that some authors adhere to certain **dramatic conventions**, i.e. follow certain known practices and traditions (see genre conventions), and others do not, is obviously an interesting factor to consider in drama analysis since this may give us a clue to certain ideological or philosophical concepts or beliefs expressed in a play. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, enacts the absurdity of human existence. Just as the plot does not seem to move anywhere and the characters' actions or rather, inactivity, do not make sense, life comes across as purposeless and futile, and the audience's bewilderment in a way reflects mankind's bewilderment in view of an incomprehensible world. Plays with a **closed structure**, by contrast, present life as comprehensible and events as causally connected. Moreover, they suggest that problems are solvable and that there is a certain order in the world which needs to be re-established if lost.

The fact that in many plays all the 'baddies', for example, are punished in the end follows the principle of **poetic justice**, i.e., every character who committed a crime or who has become guilty in some way or another by breaking social or moral rules, has to suffer for this so that order can be reinstalled. Needless to say that life is not necessarily like this and yet, people often prefer closed endings since they give a feeling of satisfaction (just consider the way most mainstream movies are structured even today). If plays move away from the closed form, one then has to ask why they do it and one should also consider the possible effect of certain structures on the audience. Sometimes, for example, open forms with loosely linked scenes rather than a tightly plotted five-act structure are used to break up the illusion of the stage as life-world. Viewers are constantly made aware of the play being a performance and they are thus expected to have a more critical and distant look at what is presented to them. This can be found in Bertolt Brecht and other authors such as Edward Bond, John Arden and Howard Brenton.