



# Some concepts of British Drama

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## PLOT

The concept of **plot** in English drama is central to understanding how a play generates meaning. Plot is not merely a sequence of events arranged in time; rather, it is the carefully structured pattern of actions that gives those events coherence and significance. When Aristotle described plot as the “soul of tragedy” in his *Poetics*, he emphasized that the arrangement of incidents is more important than character alone, because it is through action that character is revealed. A “story” may tell us what happened first, next, and last, but plot explains why these events occur and how each action produces consequences. In a well-crafted drama, nothing is accidental. Every scene, dialogue, and turning point contributes to a chain of cause and effect that moves the play toward its inevitable conclusion.

A traditional way of understanding dramatic structure is through Freytag’s Pyramid, developed by the nineteenth-century critic Gustav Freytag. Although originally formulated with classical tragedy in mind, the model remains useful for analyzing many English plays. The structure begins with the **exposition**, where the playwright establishes the setting, introduces the principal characters, and presents the existing social or emotional situation—the “status quo.” This equilibrium is soon disturbed by an inciting incident, an event that sets the central conflict in motion. From this point, the **rising action** develops as complications intensify and conflicts deepen. These conflicts may be external—between individuals or between the individual and society—or internal, emerging from psychological struggle or moral weakness. The rising action builds suspense and emotional investment, guiding the audience toward the **climax**, the moment of greatest tension when the decisive turning point occurs.

After the climax, the drama moves into the **falling action**, where the consequences of the protagonist’s choices begin to unfold. The tangled threads of the narrative gradually unravel, leading to the **resolution**, or **denouement**, in which a new order is established. In classical tragedy, this often involves suffering, loss, or death; in comedy, it frequently culminates in reconciliation or marriage. What is crucial is not the specific outcome but the sense of structural completion. The ending should feel both surprising and inevitable—surprising in its emotional force, yet inevitable because it logically arises from what has preceded it.

The power of plot depends upon conflict and unity. Conflict is the driving force of drama; without opposition—whether between characters, values, or desires—there can be no dramatic tension. Equally important is unity of action, a principle associated with classical dramatic theory. Unity of action demands that all subplots and episodes ultimately contribute to the central narrative. Even when a play appears episodic or fragmented, a strong underlying design ensures coherence. The audience’s engagement relies on plausibility—the sense that events follow naturally from character and circumstance—combined with moments of reversal or revelation that sustain interest.

The structure and force of plot can be clearly observed in the tragedies of William Shakespeare. In *Macbeth*, the plot unfolds with striking linearity, governed by the logic of ambition and moral consequence. The exposition introduces Macbeth as a valiant soldier, but the witches’ prophecy acts as the inciting incident that awakens his latent ambition. The rising action traces his internal struggle and eventual decision to murder King Duncan, an act that sets off a chain reaction of violence and paranoia. The banquet scene, in which Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost, functions as the climax—a psychological and political turning point marking his descent into tyranny and

isolation. From that moment, his downfall becomes unavoidable. The falling action reveals his increasingly desperate attempts to secure power, and the resolution restores order to Scotland through his death at the hands of Macduff. The tragic unity of the play lies in the clear causal relationship between Macbeth's "vaulting ambition" and his destruction; his fate emerges not from random misfortune but from the consequences of his own choices.

A different yet equally compelling use of plot appears in twentieth-century drama such as J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. Unlike the expansive historical world of Shakespearean tragedy, this play is tightly structured around a single evening in one dining room. The exposition presents the Birling family celebrating an engagement, embodying social confidence and complacency. The arrival of Inspector Goole disrupts this harmony and initiates the rising action, as each family member is interrogated about their connection to Eva Smith. With each revelation, tension intensifies and the moral implications deepen. The climax occurs when the full extent of the family's collective responsibility is exposed, particularly through Eric's involvement and Mrs. Birling's refusal of aid. The resolution famously introduces a twist: just as the family believes the crisis has passed, a phone call announces the arrival of a real inspector. This circular ending reinforces the play's social message and demonstrates how plot can be used not only to entertain but to provoke ethical reflection. Thus, whether in the grand tragic arc of Shakespeare or the concentrated social drama of Priestley, plot remains the dynamic principle that shapes dramatic experience. It is not merely the framework upon which a play is built but the living movement through which themes, character, and conflict are realized. A carefully constructed plot transforms isolated incidents into meaningful action, guiding the audience toward insight and emotional response. In studying English drama, therefore, attention to plot is indispensable, for it is through structure and causality that the deeper truths of human experience are revealed.

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## CHORUS

The Chorus is a dramatic device that originated in Ancient Greek theatre, where a group of performers commented on the action of the play through speech, song, and movement. They did not usually participate directly in the main events but stood slightly outside the story, offering background information and moral reflection. When this idea entered English drama during the Renaissance, the form of the Chorus changed. Instead of a large group, it was often presented as a single speaker who introduced the play, explained events, or highlighted its deeper meaning. Even though its structure evolved, its main purpose remained the same: to guide the audience's understanding of the action.

One important example appears in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In this play, the Chorus speaks in both the Prologue and the Epilogue. At the beginning, it introduces Faustus as a scholar whose ambition pushes him beyond the limits of human knowledge. By comparing him to Icarus, the Chorus prepares the audience for his tragic fall. It makes clear from the start that the play is not just about magic or adventure, but about the dangers of pride and overreaching ambition. At the end of the play, the Chorus returns to remind the audience of the moral lesson, urging them to learn from Faustus' downfall. In this way, the Chorus frames the entire drama and shapes its interpretation.

Another well-known example is found in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Chorus appears at the beginning of the play and delivers a sonnet that summarizes the main plot. It tells the audience that

two "star-crossed lovers" will die and that their deaths will end the feud between their families. By revealing the tragic ending in advance, the Chorus creates dramatic irony. The audience watches the events unfold with the knowledge of what will happen, which intensifies the emotional impact of the play. Here, the Chorus does not interrupt the action repeatedly, but its opening speech sets the tone and mood for everything that follows.

A later revival of the Chorus can be seen in twentieth-century drama, particularly in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. In this play, a group of women of Canterbury functions as a collective Chorus. They speak together, expressing fear, anxiety, and spiritual reflection as they anticipate the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. Unlike the Renaissance Chorus, which mainly provides explanation, Eliot's Chorus represents the voice of the common people and the spiritual mood of the community. Their speeches add emotional depth and highlight the religious themes of sacrifice and faith.

Thus, in English drama, the Chorus serves as a bridge between the audience and the action. Whether in the moral framing of *Doctor Faustus*, the poetic introduction of *Romeo and Juliet*, or the collective spiritual voice in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the Chorus shapes how the audience understands the play. Even though it is not present in every drama, its function as commentator, interpreter, and guide remains an important part of the theatrical tradition.

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## CHARACTER

In English drama, character is the essential element that brings the plot to life, serving as the vehicle through which themes, emotions, and conflicts are explored. While the plot provides the structure, characters provide the human element that allows the audience to engage with the story. A character is defined not just by what they do, but by their motivations, internal struggles, and moral choices.

The most critical figure in any drama is the protagonist, or the lead character. In English tragedies, such as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist is often a person of high status who possesses a "tragic flaw" (hamartia), such as indecision or pride. This flaw drives the character toward their downfall, creating a sense of pity and fear in the audience. Opposing the protagonist is the antagonist, who provides the primary conflict. For example, in *Othello*, the character of Iago serves as a complex antagonist whose manipulation and malice reveal the vulnerabilities of the hero. The dynamic between these characters is what creates the dramatic tension necessary to sustain a play.

Characters in English drama are often categorized as "flat" or "round." Flat characters are one-dimensional and often represent a specific trait or social type, such as the "boastful soldier" or the "meddling parent." These are common in comedies, like the stock characters in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In contrast, round characters are complex, multi-layered, and undergo significant development or change throughout the play. The psychological depth of characters like Lady Macbeth or King Lear allows playwrights to explore universal human conditions, making the characters feel like real individuals rather than just symbols.

Finally, characters serve a symbolic or functional role in the narrative. Some characters act as "foils," designed to highlight the qualities of the protagonist through contrast. For instance, the fiery Laertes acts as a foil to the contemplative Hamlet. Other characters, like the "Fool" in Shakespearean drama, often provide comic relief

while simultaneously offering wise, hidden truths that other characters fail to see. Ultimately, the role of character in English drama is to reflect the complexity of human nature, ensuring that the play's message resonates with the audience long after the final curtain falls.

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## IMPERSONATION

**Impersonation** in English drama refers to the practice of an actor taking on the identity, voice, appearance, and behaviour of another person on stage. It often involves disguise, cross-dressing, or imitation, and it raises important questions about identity, gender, and social roles. In the history of English theatre, impersonation became especially important because women were not allowed to act on public stages until 1660. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, all female roles were performed by young boys or men. This means that when audiences watched a play by William Shakespeare, characters such as Juliet, Desdemona, or Portia were actually played by male actors. These boys were trained apprentices who used costumes, wigs, and voice control to appear feminine. This system was not simply a theatrical choice but a social rule based on beliefs about modesty and morality.

Shakespeare made creative use of this convention. In many of his comedies, female characters disguise themselves as men. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia disguises herself as a young male lawyer in order to save Antonio in the courtroom scene. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind disguises herself as a young man named Ganymede. On the Elizabethan stage, this created multiple layers of impersonation: a boy actor played a woman, who then pretended to be a man. Similarly, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola disguises herself as Cesario, leading to confusion and dramatic irony. The audience knew the true identity of the character, which made the situation both humorous and meaningful. Through such disguises, Shakespeare shows that gender roles can be performed and changed, rather than being fixed or natural.

After the Restoration in 1660, when theatres reopened under King Charles II, women were finally allowed to act on stage. This change ended the regular practice of boys playing female roles. However, impersonation did not disappear completely. It continued in comic forms such as pantomime, where men still play exaggerated female characters known as "dames." At the same time, women sometimes performed male roles, especially in "breeches parts," where actresses dressed as men. These performances were often popular and added a new dimension to ideas of gender on stage.

Impersonation is important because it helps us understand how drama explores identity. When a character disguises themselves, the play often questions what is real and what is performed. It also draws attention to the artificial nature of theatre itself. The audience is reminded that what they see is an illusion created by actors. At a deeper level, impersonation shows how society defines roles for men and women—and how easily those roles can be challenged or reversed. It is, therefore, more than a historical practice. It is a powerful dramatic tool that shapes themes of disguise, identity, gender, and performance. From the all-male stages of Shakespeare's time to modern productions that experiment with cross-gender casting, impersonation continues to influence how drama represents human identity and social norms.