

Six Essential Elements of Drama

In *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies six essential elements of drama, all of which are as relevant today as they were in ancient Athens.

1. Action or Plot
2. Character
3. Thought
4. Language
5. Song or Dance
6. Spectacle or Visual Excess

Action or Plot:

For Aristotle, a play's action is of utmost importance. By the unity of action, he means that the best dramas, especially tragedies, are imitations of an action that is unified and complete. In this instance, unified means that all the scenes in the play are linked together by "probability and necessity."

Drama privileges action over character development, which actually sounds misleading. In reality, what plays seek to do is to develop a character through his or her actions and speech, as opposed to fiction, which relies upon—in most cases—heavy prose development of a character. Think about *Trifles*: we never hear or see Mrs. Wright, but through the dialogue and action of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters we learn an awful lot about the "trifles" of a woman's life. In fiction, we would likely get some description, some development of Mrs. Wright's character, depending on the type of narration. In fact, if we examine the short story "A Jury of Her Peers," we see that Glaspell converts her relatively short drama in to a 20 page short story, which much more detail—but perhaps less impact than what is achieved in *Trifles*. In drama, there is only action (which can include dialogue). Drama is the epitome of showing and not telling.

Character:

Aristotle believed that dramatic action was so significant that a tragedy "cannot exist without a plot, but it can without characters," citing the epic poems of his age as examples. Nevertheless, the history of drama since Aristotle appears to suggest just the opposite: that the most influential plays are so influential precisely because they create unique characters or "personalities"—what we might term "dramatis personae."

Harold Bloom notes, "The idea of Western character, of the self as a moral agent, has many sources: Homer and Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, the Bible and St. Augustine, Dante and Kant,... [However] Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness."

Thought and Language:

Language in drama is generally communicated in one of three forms: dialogue, monologue (including asides or direct address), and soliloquies. Dialogue frequently accomplishes several things at once: it reveals something about the character speaking; it usually reveals something about his or her attitude toward the characters with whom he or she is speaking about the topics they are discussing; it may aid in advancing the plot, either by providing necessary exposition of the past or foreshadowing of the future; it may contribute to the tone or rhythm of the play; it may help orient the audience to the fictive space in which the action occurs; it may imply a larger meaning, a topic, or issue the play will develop as the action progresses.

Asides, direct address, and soliloquies all serve to provide the audience with the inner thoughts of a character or to give information that might otherwise not be easily communicated through action.

Spectacle:

When Aristotle denigrated the “visual adornment of the dramatic persons” as the “least artistic element” of tragic drama, he seemingly was referring to excess: to violence on stage and lavish visual displays. But, in fact, drama in performance appeals to both the eye and the ear. The *mise-en-scene*, which includes the set, props, lighting, costuming, gestures, makeup, movement, and sound, is really everything on stage, and it is an integral part of understanding drama as a text that is to be performed. In Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams offers detailed information about how lighting and set-design should function, but actually seeing the play performed, as we will in class, is a different matter.