

Walch Toolbook Series

Drama: A Comprehensive Guide to Dramatic Elements and Style

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Conflict

At the center of all drama—tragedy or comedy—is **conflict**. Conflict is the “skeleton” on which any drama is built. Without conflict there is no central action to hold the interest of the audience.

Different types of conflict can be dramatized. Most often, there is conflict *between characters, or between groups of characters.*

Example	In Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , the love between Romeo and Juliet is threatened, and finally destroyed, by the conflict between their families.
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Conflict Between Characters

If the central conflict between characters involves characters who are not evenly matched, audiences tend to side with the underdog. In this way, the playwright draws the audience into caring about the outcome.

Example	In Tennessee Williams's <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> , the audience sympathizes with shy, crippled Laura.
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Some dramas clearly involve a conflict between a “good” hero we identify with and a “bad” villain we dislike. The main character in such a drama is called the **protagonist**. The character who opposes the main character is called the **antagonist**.

Conflict Between a Character and Outside Forces

Second, conflict can also occur between one character and outside forces such as fate or destiny, society, or the supernatural.



Example	In Sophocles's <i>Oedipus the King</i> , Oedipus, without knowing who they are, kills his father and marries his mother. He is trapped by a fate he cannot control.
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Conflict Within a Character

Third, there can be conflict within a character. This involves a struggle between a character and himself, such as a conflict of desires, values, or motives.

Example	In Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> , Hamlet learns that his father was killed by his own brother. His inner conflicts keep him from taking revenge during the whole course of the play.
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Mixed Conflict

Of course, many dramas include more than one type of conflict. For example, a character could hate another character (conflict between characters) and also hate herself for how she feels (conflict within a character).

Consider the mixture of conflicts in Arthur Miller's drama, *Death of a Salesman*. The main character, salesman Willy Loman, faces the outer conflict of rejection by former business contacts. He also faces the inner realization of the decay of his life dreams. In addition, his sons Happy and Biff must grapple with their own conflicts about accepting—and forgiving—the weaknesses of their father.

Name _____ Date _____



Exercise 2.1

Conflict in Television Scripts

Directions: Think about episodes of three different TV shows (drama or comedy) that you have watched recently. Name the program and briefly describe the central **conflict** in the episode you have chosen.

Then list the category that each central conflict best fits into:

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conflict between characters 2. Conflict between one character and outside forces 3. Conflict within a character 4. Mixed conflict |
|---|

Program 1

Title: _____

Description of Central Conflict: _____

Conflict Category: _____

Program 2

Title: _____

Description of Central Conflict: _____

Conflict Category: _____

Program 3

Title: _____

Description of Central Conflict: _____

Conflict Category: _____

Name _____ Date _____

**Exercise 2.2****Plot Your Own Conflicts**

Directions: Make up *two* examples of each of the four types of conflict described in the reading as they might be dramatized in your own original play, film, or TV script.

Conflict 1: Between characters

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Conflict 2: Between one character and outside forces

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Conflict 3: Within a character

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Conflict 4: Mixed conflict

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Discussion Question: Which category of conflict do you think makes the most interesting drama? Explain your answer to the class.



Name _____ Date _____

Imagery and Symbolism

In many ways, a dramatic script shares similarities with a poem. Like poetry, drama presents a concentrated version of reality. Drama focuses on the most essential parts to present its story.

Imagery

Like poets, dramatists sometimes use imagery to communicate complex feelings and ideas. **Imagery** can be defined as

descriptive language that makes use of similes or metaphors.

One way that dramatists use imagery is to portray elements of the setting. Dramatists can use poetic language to expand the scope of the actual stage settings.

For example, the theater of Shakespeare's day had little scenery or special effects. Shakespeare used the power of word images to help his audience picture an imagined backdrop.



Exercise 3.2

Imagery

One challenge for the dramatist who wants to use imagery in a play is that it needs to be given in dialogue. A novelist can describe a beautiful scene using picturesque language. A playwright has to use words that a character can say and still sound believable.

Directions: These two descriptions are written the way they might appear in a novel. Rewrite them so that they could be spoken in a play or movie.

Example	<p>The setting sun stained the water blood-red and cast lurid shadows around Jem and Anya. The argument continued.</p> <p>In dialogue:</p> <p><i>Anya:</i> Jem, let's go in. I don't want to sit here any more.</p> <p><i>Jem:</i> I'm not going in till I get an answer.</p> <p><i>Anya:</i> It's creepy out here at this time of day. The water looks like blood. And your shadow—it looks as if you're bleeding to death on the sand.</p>
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(continued)

Name _____ Date _____

Imagery (continued)

Description 1

They had been walking through the forest for what seemed like hours. The thick canopy of leaves overhead blocked out all sight of the sun. In here, all was twilight. The air was hot, humid, motionless. Gradually, they realized that all the forest sounds had stopped. The clicks, squeaks, screeches of birds and other animals could no longer be heard. In the silence, their fear grew.

Description 2

Paula was led into the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Late-afternoon sunlight streamed in through what looked like dozens of floor-to-ceiling windows. The sheer drapes swayed in the gentle breeze as if dancing to the song of the birds outside. The ceiling was high, with complex scenes in white plaster against a glorious deep blue. As she crossed the carpet to the welcoming figure before her, Paula felt she had at last come home.

Name _____

Date _____

Imagery and Symbolism *(continued)*

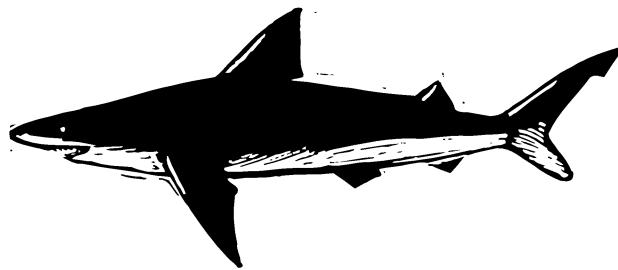
Symbolism

A second way that dramatists, like poets, use images is to communicate ideas and feelings that can be understood on more than one level at the same time. This concentrated use of language can add great power to the experience of a drama.

Some words have more than one kind of meaning, or **denotation** and **connotation**. A word's denotation is its literal meaning. The denotation of the word "knife" is "a tool that cuts." A word's connotations include related ideas that might be associated with it. For the word "knife," the reader might associate such ideas as "blood," "violence," and even "murder."

Powerful examples of combined denotative and connotative meanings can often be found in titles. Like the titles of many short stories or novels, drama titles often contain both literal and symbolic ideas. These ideas may be important to the meaning of the drama.

Consider the title of the film *Jaws*. Besides its literal meaning, what other thoughts and feelings do you associate with the word? Combined with the advertisement image of the



shark swimming up from the deep to attack a swimmer, the title of the film instantly communicated a compelling sense of what the film was about.

Dramatists also use symbolism in their writing. A **symbol** is a real object that is used to represent an abstract idea.

In many drama plots, specific objects on stage take on symbolic meanings. For example, an American flag displayed on stage can symbolize the idea of patriotism.

Similarly, objects in a plot—such as a ring, gun, or piece of clothing—can take on symbolic meanings. The objects remind the audience of key ideas that are important to the plot's themes. Sometimes the same images and symbolic objects recur throughout a play, often changing meaning as the plot grows.

In Tennessee William's play *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura's collection of fragile glass animals is used symbolically. Near the end of the play, Laura dares to allow Jim to hold her favorite glass piece, a unicorn. Later, when they begin to dance, it is knocked off the table and is broken. The broken glass unicorn suggests both fragility and vulnerability.



Name _____ Date _____



Exercise 3.3

Analyzing Effective Titles

Directions: In the space below, choose three play, film, or TV drama titles that contain an image you believe effectively relates to the meaning of the work as a whole.

First, underline the image in the title. Then, in your own words, write the *denotative* and *connotative* meanings of the image. Finally, explain how you believe this image makes the title particularly effective.

Title 1: _____

denotative meaning: _____

connotative meanings: _____

This image is effective because _____

Title 2: _____

denotative meaning: _____

connotative meanings: _____

This image is effective because _____

Title 3: _____

denotative meaning: _____

connotative meanings: _____

This image is effective because _____