

As a plot progresses it arouses expectations in the audience or reader about the future course of events, and how characters will respond to events. An anxious uncertainty about what is going to happen, especially to those characters whose qualities are such that we have established a bond of sympathy with them, is known as **suspense**. If what in fact happens violates our expectations, it is known as **surprise**. The interplay of suspense and surprise is a prime source of the vitality of a traditional plot. The most effective surprise is one which turns out, in retrospect, to have been grounded in what has gone before, even though we have hitherto made the wrong inference from the given facts of circumstance and character. As E. M. Forster put it, the shock of the unexpected, "followed by the feeling, 'oh, that's all right,' is a sign that all is well with the plot." A "surprise ending" in the pejorative sense is one in which the author resolves the plot without adequate earlier grounds in characterization or events, often by the use of coincidence; there are numerous examples in the short stories of O. Henry. (For one type of manipulated ending, see *Deus ex Machina*.) *Dramatic irony* is a special kind of suspenseful expectation, when we foresee the oncoming disaster or triumph but the character does not.

A plot has **unity of action** (or is said to be "an artistic whole") if it is perceived by the reader as a single, complete, and ordered structure of actions, directed toward the intended effect, in which none of the component parts, or **incidents**, is unnecessary; as Aristotle put it (*Poetics*, sec. 8), all the parts are "so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoint and dislocate the whole." Aristotle claimed that it does not constitute a unified plot to present a series of episodes which are strung together because they happen to a single character. Many *picaresque narratives*, nevertheless, such as Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, have held the interest of readers for centuries with such an *episodic* plot structure; while even so tightly integrated a plot as that of Fielding's *Tom Jones* introduces, for variety's sake, a long, digressive story by the Man of the Hill.

A successful development which Aristotle did not foresee is the type of structural unity that can be achieved with **double plots**, familiar in Elizabethan drama. In this structural form, a **subplot**—a second story that is complete and interesting in its own right—is introduced into the play; when it is skillfully managed, it serves to broaden our perspective on the main plot and to enhance rather than diffuse the overall effect. This underplot may have either the relation of analogy to the main plot (the Gloucester story in *King Lear*) or of counterpoint against it (the comic subplot involving Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Part 1). Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is an instance of a narrative romance which interweaves main plot and multiple subplots into an intricately controlled integrity, in a way which C. S. Lewis compares to the polyphonic art of contemporary Elizabethan music.

The order of a unified plot, Aristotle pointed out, is a continuous sequence of beginning, middle, and end. The beginning initiates the main action in a way which makes us look forward to something more; the middle presumes what has gone before and requires something to follow; and the end follows from what has gone before but requires nothing more. Then we are satisfied that the plot is

complete. The beginning (the "initiating action," or "point of attack") need not be the initial stage of the action which is brought to a climax in the narrative or play. The epic, for example, plunges *in medias res* (see *Epic*), many short stories begin at the point of the climax itself, and the writer of a drama often captures our attention in the opening scene with a representative incident, close in sequence to the event which precipitates the central situation or conflict. Thus *Romeo and Juliet* opens with a street fight between the servants of two great houses, and *Hamlet* with the apparition of a ghost; the necessary **exposition** of antecedent matters—the feud between the Capulets and Montagues, or the posture of affairs in the Royal House of Denmark—Shakespeare weaves rapidly and skillfully into the dialogue and action of these startling initial scenes. In the novel, the modern drama, and especially the motion picture, such exposition is sometimes managed by **flashbacks**: interpolated narratives or scenes (which may be justified as a memory or a reverie, or as a confession by one of the characters) which represent events that happened before the point at which the work opened. Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries* make persistent and skillful use of this device.

The German critic Gustav Freytag, in *Technique of the Drama* (1863), characterized the typical plot of a five-act play as a pyramidal shape, consisting of a rising action, climax, and falling action. Although the total pattern that Freytag described applies only to a limited number of plays, various of his terms are frequently echoed by critics. As applied to *Hamlet*, for example, the **rising action** (the section that Aristotle called the **complication**) begins, after the opening scene and exposition, with the ghost's telling Hamlet that he has been murdered by his brother Claudius; it continues with the developing conflict between Hamlet and Claudius, in which Hamlet, despite setbacks, succeeds in controlling the course of events. The rising action reaches the **climax** of the hero's fortunes with his proof of the king's guilt by the device of the play within a play (Act III, scene ii). Then comes the **crisis**, or "turning point" of the fortunes of the protagonist, in his failure to kill the king while he is at prayer. This inaugurates the **falling action**; from now on the antagonist, Claudius, largely controls the course of events, until the **catastrophe**, or outcome, which is decided by the death of the hero, as well as of Claudius, the Queen, and Laertes. "Catastrophe" is usually applied to tragedy only; a more general term for this precipitating final scene, which is applied to both comedy and tragedy, is the **denouement** (French for "unknotting"): the action or intrigue ends in success or failure for the protagonist, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding cleared away.

In many plots the denouement involves a **reversal**, or in Aristotle's term, **peripety**, in the hero's fortunes, whether to his failure or destruction, as in tragedy, or to his success, as in comic plots. The reversal frequently depends on a **discovery** (in Aristotle's Greek term, **anagnorisis**). This is the recognition by the protagonist of something hitherto unknown to him: Cesario reveals to the Duke at the end of *Twelfth Night* that he is really Viola; the fact of Iago's lying treachery dawns upon Othello; Fielding's Joseph Andrews discovers on the evidence of a