

Theatre History 1

Research Paper

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What's in a Play?

To quote William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "The play's the thing." While the titular character may have been referencing his plot to assess his uncle's guilt, one can agree that the "play", or the script, is the core of any theatrical production. Whether it be a straight play, musical, opera, or some hybrid of multiple genres; one cannot put on a production without a script, because that is what dictates the content. Though playwrights throughout history around the globe have surely been struck with divine intervention to inspire their writing, it is difficult to be successful in any career without a consistent technique, and theatre is no exception to that rule. Therefore, it is understandable that there have been theatre philosophers and theorists throughout history that have attempted to develop an ideal dramatic play structure in order to make the playwright's technique more consistent. One of the most influential theatrical theorists was Dr. Gustav Freytag. Freytag is still influential for his many theories about theatre, however, one could argue that many contemporary plays and playwrights lack adherence to Freytag's concepts. Compared to classical Greek and Shakespearean plays, contemporary plays are much looser in their conformity to Gustav Freytag's dramatic principles.

One of Freytag's most notable contributions to theatrical academia is his creation of a pyramid consisting of five parts: the Introduction/Exposition, Ascending/Rising Action/Movement, Climax, Returning/Falling Action, and Denouement/Resolution. Along with describing dramatic structure, the "x-axis tracks time and the y-axis, the rhythm or emotional

intensity” (“Teaching Play Analysis: How a Key Dramaturgical Skill Can Foster Critical Approaches”). This means that the pyramid goes from left to right in terms of chronological order of the sequence of events and fluctuates in intensity depending on how high or low the point is on the pyramid. Freytag says the Introduction/Exposition is used to “explain the place and time of the action, the nationality and life relations of the hero, it must at once briefly characterize the environment.” (*Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 117-118). Possibly the most important part of the Introduction/Exposition is the Exciting Force/Inciting Incident, for that is what sets the rest of the play in motion. Freytag claims that the Exciting Force/Inciting Incident in *Hamlet* is when Hamlet’s father appears to him as a ghost and pleads for justice; and in *Oedipus the King* is when the Oracle’s prediction is made, because this is the “point where, in the soul of the hero, there arises a feeling or volition which becomes the occasion of what follows” (*Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 121, 171, 190). However, Freytag also makes a specific caveat about the Exciting Force. He says that the playwright must avoid making this Force too conclusive because then the playwright would not have the rest of a play (*Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 125). This makes sense based on his definition of the Exciting Force because this force is supposed to launch the rest of the action of the play-*not* conclude it. As a lot of the action of *Hamlet* is caused by Hamlet’s hesitation, his absolute certainty of the ghost’s tale would end the play much earlier, for it would remove the very self-doubt which drives the action forward (*Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 125). To picture it visually, one can imagine the Inciting Incident being the bridge between the Exposition and the next step in the pyramid: the Ascending/Rising Action. Freytag states that this piece of

the pyramid increases dramatic tension and usually includes multiple stages (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 198). He describes the first stage in *Hamlet* as the scene where Polonius says that Hamlet is deranged through his love for Ophelia; the second when Hamlet decides to test the king through his play; the third when Hamlet warns Ophelia; and the fourth and final stage when the players perform Hamlet's play; while *Oedipus the King* has two stages: Tiresias departing "in wrath", and the "strife of Oedipus with Creon" (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 172, 190). These stages all are clearly leading somewhere, but the turning point of the play has not been reached yet. This turning point comes in the form of the dramatic Climax, which Freytag defines as the "highest point in the piece", describing the scene when Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius while he is saying his prayers, and when Oedipus hears Jocasta's story and learns the horrifying truth (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 172, 190, 199). Like the Inciting Incident being the connection between the Exposition and the Rising Action, the Tragic Force/Incident connects the Climax and the Returning/Falling Action. This occurs in *Hamlet* when Hamlet kills Polonius, prompting Claudius to send Hamlet off to England (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 190). Freytag states that Shakespeare usually didn't introduce new characters in this fourth act because this was supposed to be the point of the play where the audience starts understanding the author's purpose (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 134, 200). Shakespeare realized that the play was nearing its end and therefore he had no time to introduce new major characters/plots, for now was the time for the audience to begin finalizing their thoughts on the story. As the Falling Action mirrors the Rising Action; it also occurs in stages in *Hamlet*:

Ophelia's madness; Laertes's plot for revenge; the Queen announcing Ophelia's drowning; and Ophelia's funeral; and in *Oedipus*: Oedipus gorging his eyes out and Jocasta hanging herself (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 172, 190). Finally, a play is finished with the Denouement/Resolution. In the popular modern HBO television series *Game of Thrones*, the show is known for having its most exciting episode be the second to last episode of each season, followed by a relatively less action-filled final episode. This is not accidental—they are following Freytag's pyramid! Instead of ending at the highest, most exciting part of the story, the Resolution allows for a brief assessment of what has occurred and what will occur after the play ends. To the naked eye, the death of Hamlet and most the main cast of the play might seem like the Resolution, but it is actually the entrance of Fortinbras, because it is here that the audience is allowed the opportunity to comprehend what has just occurred in the palace. William Shakespeare's plays may have not been divided into five separate acts until after his death, but one can see that his plays, along with the Greek plays, clearly follow Freytag's five-act pyramid.

Along with his pyramid, Freytag emphasized the importance of a beginning, middle, and end in a story. Possibly the biggest distinction between Greek and Shakespearean adherence to Freytag's principles with their contemporary counterparts is their approach to this principle. Freytag claims that the curtain that modern audiences take for granted as being an obvious part of any theater is actually a huge factor in playwriting today. For example, he says, "It would now be possible to begin...and end in the midst of a situation" (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 195). In Greek and Shakespearean performances, without a curtain, every scene had to have a very clear start and finish, and any characters that died onstage needed to have their bodies dealt with accordingly (unless their

death happened off stage). This is certainly no longer a necessity in modern plays, as made apparent in Neil LaBute's *Reasons to Be Pretty*, where he literally writes the stage directions in the start of the play as "Lights burst on...Two people...already deep in the middle of...A nice little fight" (*Reasons to Be Pretty*, 7). Thanks to the modern technology of stage lights, among other factors, LaBute is able to start the play by skipping over any type of traditional prologue or introduction, and instead uses the middle of a situation to introduce the audience to his characters. Along with a lack of a curtain, Freytag also says that beginnings were important in Shakespeare's time because of the lack of basic theatre manners and rules followed by twenty-first-century audiences. Anyone who has attended a modern show at a theatre has heard some version of a speech asking all patrons to silence their cell phones, setting the tone for undivided attention to be paid to the onstage action. Freytag says that Shakespeare's prologues contained "civility, apology, and the plea for attention," and "Since it is no longer necessary to plead for quiet and attention," modern playwrights have no need for this part of the Introduction (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 116). Unfortunately for Shakespeare, he did not have any announcers quieting the crowd before the show, so he had to write it into the show himself. Like Freytag, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle also said that dramatic structure was critical to the overall audience experience. Specifically, he said that Plot was the most important element to dramatic structure and was the "soul of a tragedy" (*Norton Anthology of Drama*, 9). However, Aristotle may have longed for dramatic structure for slightly different reasons than Freytag. Greek playwrights were beholden to their circumstances within the festival Dionysia (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 146). This meant that they had to write knowing that their plays would be performed outdoors to a rowdy, drunk, (possibly) all-male

audience. Film professor Richard J. Allen says in his *Journal of Film and Video* that this helps explain why Aristotle would have praised plays with distinct “beginnings, middles, and ends” (“Beginning, Middle, End of an Era: Has Technology Trumped Aristotle?”). It would have been difficult enough to hear and see the story on the ancient Greek stage, so any extra ambiguity and confusion that has become more popular in contemporary plays would have made the play-viewing experience extremely unpleasant. Thus, both the Greeks and Shakespeare adhered to Freytag’s principles of beginning, middle, and end in ways that contemporary playwrights no longer want (or need) to in today’s theatre.

While theatrical conventions are the main dividers between Greek and Shakespearean obedience to Freytag compared to contemporary playwrights, other mediums such as film and television may be culprits as well. Purdue University Professor Dr. Marshall Deutelbaum writes in his *Film Criticism*, “clarity and coherence remain the hallmarks of Hollywood cinema” (“Storytelling in New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique”). While modern film and television productions may agree with Aristotle in their longing for clear storytelling, they differ on their affinity for beginnings, middles, and ends. Professor Richard J. Allen argues that “being an audience member is no longer a temporary state”, and therefore society as a whole does not “want or need a story that is finite and conclusive” (“Beginning, Middle, End of an Era: Has Technology Trumped Aristotle?”). Technological advancements in streaming services (such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and HBO GO) and recording services (such as TiVo and DVR) give audiences the power to watch whatever they want, whenever they want it. This has helped cause the significance placed on the strict structure as crafted by Freytag’s pyramid to diminish almost entirely in modern entertainment. This may also help explain why Freytag says that modern plays today would “scarcely occupy half an evening” for a

theatre-goer in ancient Greece or Renaissance London (*Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 167). Shakespeare and the Greeks wrote shows that could take multiple hours to perform because they knew that was probably the only entertainment their audiences were receiving for the day. Modern audiences are ready to leave after an hour and a half because they know they have a myriad of entertainment options at their disposal. Therefore, along with theatrical reasons, the advent of technology in entertainment likely has a huge impact on how playwrights write their plays now compared to hundreds and thousands of years ago.

Any master of a subject knows that one cannot break the rules before learning them. Aspiring playwrights would be wise to study how Freytag's principles applied to ancient playwrights' works. However, they should also recognize the fact that, for better or for worse, modern audiences seem to be moving away from these traditional principles, and therefore, they may strategically choose to ignore some, or all, of these principles when writing with the audience of today in mind.

Word Count: 1865

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