

Kenneth Thorpe Rowe Through Structure to Meaning

Kenneth Thorpe Rowe (1900 – 1988) was a renowned teacher of drama whose students included playwright Arthur Miller and teacher Robert McKee. Said McKee: “[When I teach] I’m repeating what I was taught, and then adding some little insights I’d had – but basically recycling Kenneth Rowe and John Howard Lawson and Aristotle and putting it into a contemporary context for these people. I’m putting the obvious into a new context.” (Quoted The New Yorker, 20 October 2003.) McKee cites these authors throughout his 1997 book Story, and in his “Suggested Readings” to that volume also includes William Archer and David Mamet. (Emphasis below has been added.)

The basic structure of drama has developed out of the simple fact that the first business of any play at any level is to get and **hold with final satisfaction the attention of an audience** in a theater. People respond to a story, not to any story in the sense of a simple chronological sequence of events, but to a story of a conflict with its generation of suspect and tension as to outcome. For the purpose of a play a unified conflict within the compass of the play is necessary. If the attention of the audience is to be arrested and drawn forward, not thrown back, the conflict will not be under way when the play opens; rather, **the play will open on a situation in which the audience is led to see the potentiality of conflict. Then something happens which precipitates the potential conflict, sets it in motion. The course of the conflict follows as a unified sequence, one situation giving rise to the next, until the conflict is resolved, the tension and suspense satisfied by answer to the question of outcome. Thus we have Aristotle’s beginning, middle and end.** At the simplest level of drama, that is, melodrama, the only concern is the attention of the audience, creating and sustaining suspense for the outcome of events to a resolution. When we move into the more complex levels of drama of communication of the mind or inner experience of the author, or revelation of life, suspense and tension expand from focus on the events to the meaning of the events in their nature and sequence, or the effect of events on the characters, and their responses. **Tension acquires revelatory function. Under tension surfaces break and what is beneath is exposed. Under the tensions of the situations in which they are involved in the play the characters are revealed. Especially, in dramatic conflict the characters are confronted by situations of choice, and what a man chooses or avoids, as Aristotle notes, is the basis of revelation of character. As plot grows out of interaction of character and situation the question of outcome, the suspense, for the audience can become focused not on the event of what will happen to a character, but on what the character will do in the situation that has arisen.** Just as powerfully, the inner consciousness of the audience is opened and exposed to itself in response to the tension of the play.

In order to talk conveniently about the structure of drama it is necessary to adopt some terminology. **A play opens on a situation of unstable equilibrium. We recognize, more or less definitely, that the status quo of someone on the stage, the principal character, or protagonist, is vulnerable. Then some new element enters, something happens, which precipitates a conflict. The protagonist is confronted by a choice: either some desired end seems to become available against obstacles, or something undesirable will happen to him except as he opposes it. If he does not choose to fight, there is, of course, no play. Assuming that the character undertakes the conflict, he must exercise his will and faculties against an opposing force to avert disaster or gain a desire. From now on a dramatic movement is inescapable. The question of outcome for the play as a whole, the answer to which will end the play, has been opened. This question is most commonly termed the *major dramatic question*.**

The point of inception of the conflict has been designated in various ways: initiation of the conflict, precipitation of the conflict, projection of the question, inciting moment, and attack. Attack is the most generally recognized and the most inclusive and convenient. **The *attack*, then, is the point of precipitation of the conflict and projection of the major dramatic question. It is the point at which an inescapable action becomes evident to the audience, and a question of outcome demanding an answer is created in their minds.** It should be noted that, while the playwright knows where he is going from the start, the audience does not. Consequently, while the person experiencing the play for the first time will feel the grip of conflict and a significant question of outcome at the attack, he does not necessarily realize at that moment that it is the *major* dramatic question, the over-all question of the play. **There may be introductory *minor* dramatic questions leading up to the attack. Also, as the play advances the major dramatic question may undergo development, a rise to a higher level of intensity or of more significance to the character, so that the member of the audience sometimes may even not be situated to formulate by analysis precisely what is the major dramatic question to which the author has constructed his play until he has experienced the final outcome, the resolution.**

The *resolution* of a play has now been frequently referred to: it is the best general term for the point at which the major dramatic question, either in its initial or a developed form, is answered, satisfying the tension of the audience. “Catastrophe” and “denouement” are sometimes used in the general sense, but the one is so widely applied specifically to tragedy and the other to comedy that it is better to keep them so and to use *resolution* as the general term.

There is a third principal point of basic structure, the *crisis*, which is fully as significant as the attack and resolution for opening the way to meaning. **The plot of a play from attack to resolution progresses by successive complications.** A complication is any new element that enters the situation after the story starts and affects the way the conflict will go. New element does not mean extraneous. The conflict itself either determines what is a complication or generates the complication. In the former case the element is there and revealed as relevant by the conflict as a touchstone. In the latter, as **plot grows out of the conjunction of character and situation, what a character does in response to one situation creates a new situation which in turn becomes a complication.** Each complication is a dramatic unit around what is called in relation to the play as a whole a *minor dramatic question* with its attack, tension and resolution. The entire course of an effective play from attack to resolution is a climatic movement, rising in tension to the culmination of the resolution. The rise is not a smooth rise but a rhythmic advance by the series of climaxes of the successive complications, each gathering momentum from and rising higher than the preceding, and together constituting the over-all climatic movement of the play. Mechanically this structure corresponds to the necessities of audience attention, which would break under a continuous line of tension but can be carried forward by the rise and fall of a succession of minor climaxes, and which similarly would weaken if the over-all movement were not climatic, each complication carrying the play higher in tension than the preceding. However, the same principles work inwardly and this is the structure for generating the highest degree of revealing tension within the play.

From *A Theater in Your Head*, Kenneth Thorpe Rowe (1967) (pp.112 – 4)

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