

Plot Structure Drama

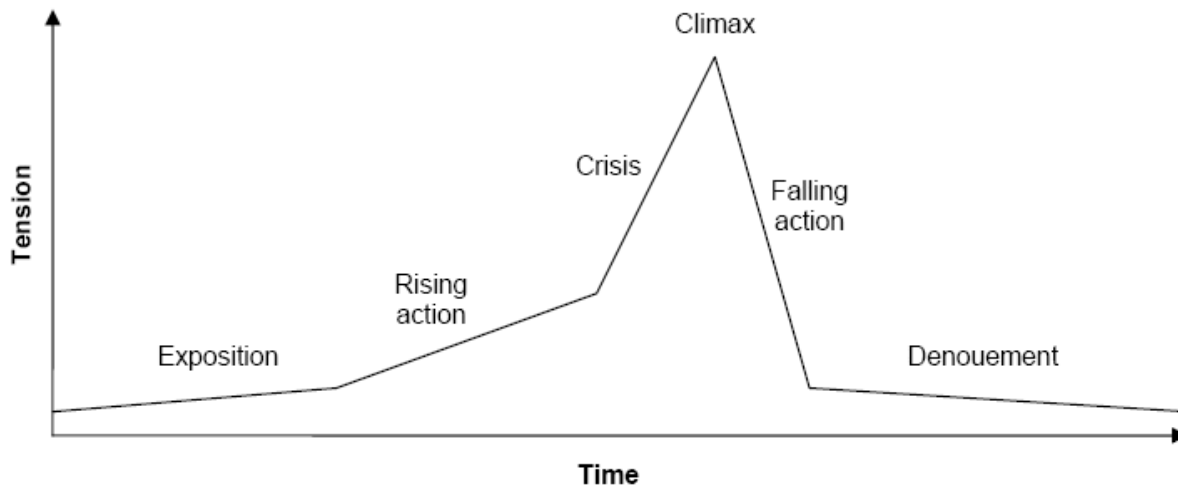


Figure 1.1. Aristotle's dramatic arc.

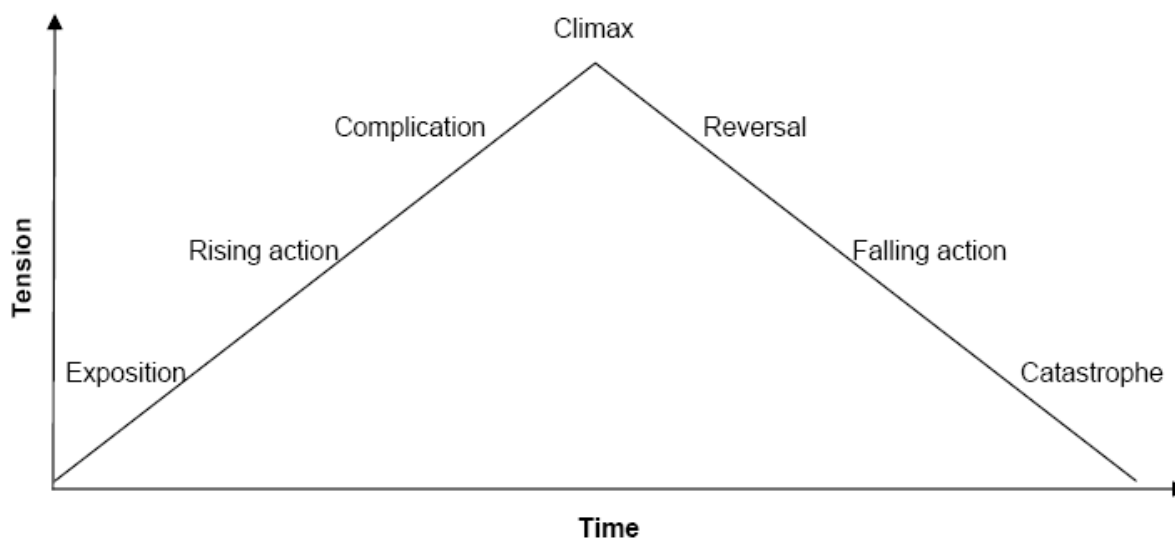


Figure 1.2. Freytag's pyramid.

The German critic Gustav Freytag, in *Technique of the Drama* (1863), introduced an analysis of plot that is known as Freytag's Pyramid. He described 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 of prose fiction as well as drama. As applied to *Hamlet*, for example, the rising action (a section that Aristotle had 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 (III.ii.). Then comes the crisis, the reversal 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 conflicts are settled, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding cleared away. A frequently used alternative term for the outcome of a plot is the resolution.

In many plots the denouement involves a reversal, or in Aristotle's Greek term, *peripety*, in the protagonist's fortunes, whether to the protagonist's failure or destruction, as in tragedy, or success, as in comic plots. The reversal frequently depends on a discovery (in Aristotle's term, *anagnorisis*). This is the recognition by the protagonist of something of great importance hitherto unknown to him or to her: Cesario reveals to the Duke at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* that he is really Viola; the fact of Iago's lying treachery dawns upon Othello; Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, in his comic novel by that name (1742), discovers on the evidence of a birthmark—"as fine a strawberry as ever grew in a garden"—that he is in reality the son of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. (source: Abrams – *Glossary of Lit Terms*)