

Core B | Shakespearean Play Vocabulary

PLAY STRUCTURE

Act: Shakespeare's plays are usually divided into five acts - which are subdivided into scenes. There was not necessarily any clear division between the acts in a performance.

Epilogue: Usually spoken by a main character at the end of a play, the epilogue concludes the play and is often an apology for the play - or a request for applause.

Prologue: The introduction to/ presentation of the play. Often given to the audience by the character "Chorus". Often in verse.

Scene: The subdivision of an act. There was no marked division between the scenes in an Elizabethan performance.

THE ACTING: LINES & DIRECTIONS

Aside: A line spoken to one or more characters which cannot be heard by the remaining characters. An aside can also be addressed to the audience.

Dialogue: When two or more characters talk with each other.

Exit/Exeunt: "He/she leaves." "They leave."

Monologue: A line spoken by one person.

Prop: Shakespeare's plays made use of many props on stage. Among the props were swords, shields, crowns, blood bags, cut off limbs etc.

Soliloquy: A line in which a character talks to him/herself and reveals his or her private thoughts. Convention dictates that other characters on stage cannot hear the soliloquy, but usually the character is alone on stage.

Stage direction: The kind of dramatic discourse that gives the director and/or actors information relating to the performance of the play. (Who is on stage? What does the character do? How is a line delivered? etc.)

CHARACTERS

Chorus: The character who speaks the prologue - and often the epilogue.

Clown: In Shakespeare's plays, the term "clown" is most often synonymous with "fool".

Fool: A type-character often kept at court to entertain the nobles. There were "wise" fools, intelligent men hired for entertainment purposes, and natural fools - idiots kept for amusement. Shakespeare's fools are usually "wise".

WRITING STYLE

Antithesis: An opposition. Shakespeare often used antitheses (pl.) to express confusion and conflict.

Blank verse: Unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Comedy: A drama that is light, humorous and satirical in tone and often ends happily.

Metafiction: Metafiction is when fiction talks about fiction. When Shakespeare's characters talk about "the stage" etc., these lines are essentially metafictional. The Puritans in London criticized the plays for being manipulative and illusionist. Metafictional lines were among Shakespeare's ways of showing the Puritans that his plays were merely stories - and not "trickery" or "The Devil's work".

Pathos: Strong emotion. Often used as a comic device, because exaggerated emotions are often funny. In Shakespeare's works this comic device is most often employed in connection with lower class characters who accidentally make themselves appear hilarious.

Prose: Shakespeare moved between verse and prose in his plays. Prose is characterized by run-on-lines of varied length, no rhyme and no meter. Shakespeare usually has the lower classes speak in prose. Prose is also used when the characters talk about the menial things in life.

Pun: Word play that makes use of a word that has several meanings.

Rhyming couplet: Shakespeare often used a rhyming couplet (two rhymed lines) to indicate something important in a play - or a shift on stage, for instance an important character entering the stage, a scene/act ending etc.

Verse: Shakespeare moved between verse and prose in his plays. Verse is characterized by rhythm and meter. Shakespeare's verse is written in iambic pentameter. Sometimes the lines are rhymed - usually to indicate a particularly important point, or the end of a scene/act. Verse is usually reserved for the higher classes among the characters - or for people who speak about lofty topics such as love.

OTHER TERMS

Carnival: A masquerade in which people dress up. Kings dress up as beggars - and peasants dress up as kings. In literature the Carnival Motif is when roles are inverted - often with a humorous effect. In Romeo and Juliet, for instance, the nurse dresses up as a Lady - and appears ludicrous because she does not know how to behave in that role.

Groundling: A condescending term used to refer to the standing audience in the open courtyard. The groundlings' tickets were the cheapest around. They usually cost one penny.