

III. Dramatic Conventions and Author's Techniques

dramatic devices

- A SOLILOQUY is a monologue. The character is alone onstage. It is a DEVICE the playwright uses to give the audience insight into the character's thoughts and emotions.

Shakespeare uses soliloquies to allow the reader the true cause of Hamlet's melancholy and to witness Hamlet's *understanding of death and his desire to die*.

- The ASIDE is another DEVICE used by the playwright to give the audience insight into the character. Here the character is speaking either to himself or directly to the audience. There are other characters onstage who, by convention, do not hear the aside.
- An ALLUSION is an indirect reference to another event, person or work with which the writer assumes the reader is familiar.

Shakespeare uses ALLUSIONS as techniques for establishing character, building theme, and setting mood.

In *Hamlet*, there are allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, Roman history, and the Bible.

- Use of THE SUPERNATURAL is another DEVICE.
- MADNESS, either real or pretended, was another popular DEVICE in Elizabethan drama.
- One also cannot discuss Elizabethan tragedy without a discussion of the TRAGIC HERO.
- There can be no drama at all without CONFLICT. In *Hamlet*, the primary conflict is INTERNAL between Hamlet's sense of duty to avenge his father's murder and his inability to take action.

- **Meta-fiction / Meta-drama:**

Metafiction is a kind of fiction that comments on the very devices of fiction it employs. It usually involves irony and is self-reflective. **Metadrama** is similar—drama that calls attention to itself as a play or has occasion to comment on its own actions and devices.

This is most apparent when the Players arrive (Act II, Scene ii). First, there is something of a digression while Shakespeare uses Hamlet to rail against the current fashion of parading little children around on stage (although he himself used children as the fairies Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, etc. in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*):

ROSENCRANTZ ...

there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases,
that cry out on the top of question and are most
tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the
fashion ... (54)

HAMLET

What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are
they escoted? Will they pursue the quality no
longer than they can sing? Will they not say
afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common
players ... (54)

Later in the same scene, Hamlet becomes Shakespeare's mouthpiece to speak about the difference between *popular* drama and *good* drama:

HAMLET

I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was
never acted; or, if it was, not above once; for the
play, I remember, pleased not the million, 'twas
caviary to the general; but it was—as I received
it, and others, whose judgments in such matters
cried in the top of mine—an excellent play, well
digested in the scenes, set down with as much
modesty as cunning. (56)

- Since fiction was a relatively new concept (as opposed to legends and mythological stories that were believed to be, on some level, true), Elizabethans enjoyed **metafiction**; the characters in the play somehow calling attention to the fact that they are indeed *fictional* characters.
- The **tragic hero**, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high-ranking official) who rose to a high position and then fell from that high position – usually to utter desolation and death. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy, the tragic hero's tragic flaw (or hamartia), and fate.

Some tragic heroes clearly bring about their own downfall, as in the case of Creon in *Antigone* whose downfall is due to his hubris (excessive pride) – he believes his law holds precedence over the gods' sense of right.

Other tragic heroes seem to be more a pawn of Fate, like Oedipus, who has done everything in his power (as had his parents before him) to prevent the fatal prophesy from coming to pass that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. It is in the very act of trying to avoid destiny that the prophesy is fulfilled.

By the Renaissance, however, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies. The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This "waste of human potential," as it were, seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the vagaries of fate.