

Drama is any story told in dialogue form and performed by actors for an audience. Since ancient times, people have been entertained and instructed by plays and other types of drama. Today, you experience drama every time you watch a play, a movie, a video, or a story on TV. Yet even though dramas are meant to be performed, they also make good reading. You can create a theater in your mind by visualizing the action and the characters. All dramas share the same elements of **stage direction**, **plot**, **character**, and **dialogue**. Use the following passages from *The Devil and Daniel Webster* by Stephen Vincent Benét to learn more about the elements of drama.

Stage Directions

A play usually includes **stage directions**, which are often printed in italic type and separated from the dialogue by parentheses. Stage directions describe

- background on the characters' lives, the historical period, or action that took place before the play begins
- the scenery or setting and the props—the furniture and other objects used on stage
- costumes, lighting, music, and sound effects
- how the actors should look, speak, and behave

YOUR TURN Read the stage directions that begin *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. What scenery and props would be needed to create the setting?

Plot

In drama, as in fiction, the **plot** is a series of events that make up the story. A conflict begins, grows in intensity, reaches a peak, and is finally resolved. The standard elements of plot are **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **resolution**. (For more on plot, see page 23.) In drama, the action is often divided into scenes, with each scene having a different time or place. In long plays, scenes are grouped into acts.

YOUR TURN In this excerpt Mary and Jabez reveal their deepest feelings. What conflict does this scene suggest?

STAGE DIRECTIONS

The scene is the main room of a New Hampshire farmhouse in 1841, a big comfortable room that hasn't yet developed the stuffiness of a front parlor. . . . There is a fireplace, right. Windows, in center, show a glimpse of summer landscape. Most of the furniture has been cleared away for the dance which follows the wedding of Jabez and Mary Stone, but there is a settee or bench by the fireplace, a table, left, with some wedding presents upon it, at least three chairs by the table, and a cider barrel on which the Fiddler sits, in front of the table.

PLOT

Mary. How proud I am of you. Ever since I was a little girl. Ever since you carried my books. . . .

Jabez (uncomfortably). A man can't always be proud of everything, Mary. There's some things a man does, or might do—when he has to make his way.

Mary (laughing). I know—terrible things—like being the best farmer in the county and the best State Senator—

Jabez (quietly). And a few things, besides. But you remember one thing, Mary, whatever happens. It was all for you. . . . (He takes both her hands.) Mary, I've got something to tell you. I should have told you before, but I couldn't seem to bear it.

Characters

In a play, the **main** and **minor** characters are listed in the cast of characters at the beginning of the script, or the written form of the drama. The central character of the play—the one the audience usually identifies with—is called the **protagonist**. The **antagonist** is a character who struggles against the protagonist. Usually the main conflict of the drama involves these two characters. Some characters, acting as **foils**, provide a sharp contrast to the qualities of the main characters. For instance, if the main character is serious, the foil character is light-hearted and funny.

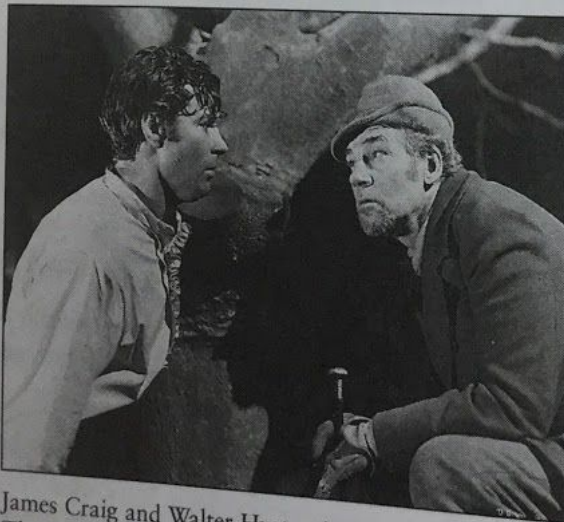
YOUR TURN Read this passage from the play. How does Mary serve as a foil for Daniel Webster? What qualities do the two characters show?

Dialogue

Dialogue, or conversation between characters, is everything in drama. Through dialogue you know each character's thoughts and feelings and learn about every twist and turn of the plot. Benét also uses **dialect**, or regional speech, to emphasize his characters' New England roots (*'lect* instead of *elect*). Playwrights often include stage directions telling actors how to play their parts and describing the action as characters talk.

YOUR TURN

How does Benét use dialogue and stage directions to reveal character and to guide the actors in this scene from *The Devil and Daniel Webster*?



James Craig and Walter Huston in a version of *The Devil and Daniel Webster*

CHARACTERS

Mary. Oh, Mr. Webster, can you save [Jabez]? . . .

Webster. I shall do my best, madam. That's all you can ever say till you see what the jury looks like.

Mary. But even you, Mr. Webster—oh, I know you're Secretary of State—I know you're a great man—. . . But it's different—fighting the devil!

Webster (*towering*). I've fought John C. Calhoun, madam. . . . And, by the great shade of Andrew Jackson, I'd fight ten thousand devils to save a New Hampshire man!

Jabez. You hear, Mary?

DIALOGUE

The Crowd. Jabez Stone—Jabez Stone. Where did you get your money, Jabez Stone?

(Scratch [the devil] *grins and taps his collecting box*. Jabez cannot speak.)

Jabez. I—I—(*He stops*.)

The Crowd. Jabez Stone—Jabez Stone. What was the price you paid for it, Jabez Stone?

Jabez (*looking around wildly*). Help me, neighbors! Help me!

(*This cracks the built-up tension and sends the Crowd over the edge into fanaticism.*)

A Woman's Voice (*high and hysterical*). He's sold his soul to the devil! (*She points to Jabez.*)

Other Voices. To the devil!