Other means than discoveries can be used to precipitate complications. Natural or mechanical disasters (earthquakes, storms, airplane crashes, automobile accidents) are sometimes used, but these are likely to seem contrived if they resolve the problem (for example, if the villain is killed in an automobile accident and as a result the struggle automatically ends).

The series of complications culminates in the *climax*, the highest point of interest or suspense. It is often accompanied by the *crisis*, the discovery or event that determines the outcome of the action. For example, the title character in *Oedipus Rex* sets out to discover the murderer of Laius; the interest steadily grows as events increasingly focus attention on Oedipus, and the turning point comes when Oedipus realizes that he himself is the guilty person and becomes the pursued rather than the pursuer. Not all plays have a clear-cut series of complications leading to climax and crisis. Nevertheless, usually interest is maintained by the frequent introduction of new elements and an ongoing pattern of tension and relaxation. One way of analyzing such plays (and all others as well) is to divide them into beats, or units, the beginnings and endings of which are indicated by shifts in motivation or the introduction of some new element. One can then examine the function of each of these units both at that point in the action and in the overall development of the play.

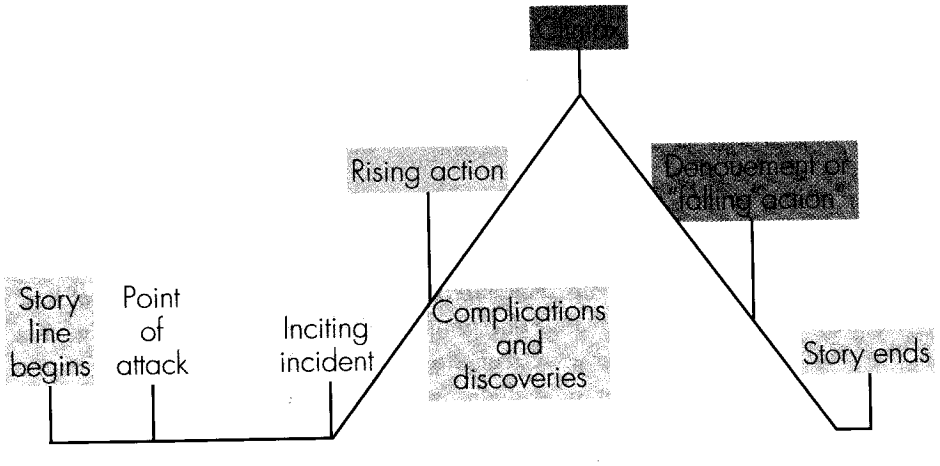
The End

The final portion of a play, sometimes referred to as the *resolution* or *denouement* (unraveling or untying), extends from the crisis to the final curtain. It may resolve the conflict, make sense of the various strands of action, answer the questions raised earlier, or solidify the theme. It typically returns the situation to a state of balance and satisfies audience expectations.

Plays may also have *subplots*, in which events or actions of secondary interest are developed, often providing contrast to or commentary on the main plot. In *A Doll's House*, the relationship of Krogstad and Mrs. Linde contrasts sharply with that of Nora and Torvald. Often a subplot becomes a major factor in resolving the main plot, as in *Hamlet*, when Laertes, a morally upright character, is provoked by the death of his father and the madness of his sister to agree to help the king in his plan to kill Hamlet.

Character and Characterization

Character is the primary material from which plots are created, because incidents are developed through the speech and behavior of dramatic personages. *Characterization* is anything



Climactic Plot Structure. Note that a play's rising action, which typically begins with its inciting incident, is composed of complications and discoveries.

that delineates a person or differentiates that person from others. It operates on four levels:

- Physical or biological—defining gender, age, size, coloration, and general appearance
- Societal—defining economic status, profession or trade, religion, family relationships and all of the factors that place a character in a particular social environment
- Psychological—defining a character's habitual responses, desires, motivation, likes, and dislikes (the inner workings of the character's mind)
- Moral—defining a character's value system (through choice and action, revealing what characters are willing to do to get what they want)

A playwright may emphasize one or more of these levels and may develop many or few traits, depending on *how the character functions in the play*. For example, the audience needs to know very little about a maid who appears only to announce dinner, whereas the principal characters need to be drawn in considerable depth. Even the major characters in a play may be depicted more through certain levels of characterization than others due to the nature of the play or the playwright's intentions. For example, Sophocles gives only very basic information regarding the physical level of characterization for his characters in *Oedipus Rex*. Because drama most often arises from conflicting desires, the psychological and moral levels of characterization are often the most essential. The moral level is developed most fully in serious plays because it shows what characters actually do when faced with making a difficult choice (as opposed to what they have said they or others should do in such situations). Moral decisions differentiate characters more fully than any other type because deliberating about such decisions causes characters to examine their values and motives, in the process of which their true natures are revealed to themselves and to the audience. (Analyzing Nora in *A Doll's House* or Misha in *Lydia* in terms of the four levels will reveal much about these characters and the plays in which they appear.)

A character is revealed through:

- Descriptions in stage directions, prefaces, or other explanatory material not part of the dialogue
- What the character says

Courtesy of the American Repertory Theatre

Nora (René Augesen) and her husband Torvald (Steven Caffrey) in *A Doll's House* at the American Conservatory Theatre (San Francisco), as directed by Carey Perloff.

- What others in the play say about the character
- What the character does

Dramatic characters are usually both *typified* and *individualized*. On the one hand, spectators would be unable to relate to a character who was totally unlike any person they had ever known. Therefore, characters can usually be placed in one of several large categories of people. On the other hand, audiences may be dissatisfied unless the playwright goes beyond this to give characters individualizing traits that set them apart from other characters of the same type. The most satisfactory dramatic characters are usually easily recognizable types with some unusual or complex qualities.

A playwright may be concerned with making characters *sympathetic* or *unsympathetic*. Normally, sympathetic characters are given major virtues and lesser foibles, whereas the reverse is true of unsympathetic characters. A character that is either completely good or bad is likely to seem unconvincing as a reflection of human behavior. Acceptability varies, however, with the type of play. Melodrama, for example, oversimplifies human psychology and clearly divides characters into good or evil. Tragedy, on the other hand, normally depicts more complex forces at work both within and without characters and requires greater depth and range of characterization.

Thought

The third basic element of a play is *thought*. Thought includes the themes, arguments, and overall meaning of the action. Thought is present in all plays, even the most lighthearted farce, because

- playwrights write from a point of view.
- playwrights react in some respect to the broader social point of view from which they emerge—though this reaction may be expressed in many different ways.

A playwright cannot avoid expressing some attitudes because events and characterization always imply some view of human behavior.

Meaning in drama is usually implied rather than stated directly. It is suggested by:

- Character relationships
- Ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters
- The conflicts and their resolution
- Spectacle, music, and song

Playwrights often use their characters to advocate a certain line of action, point of view, or specific social reform. Dramatists in different periods have used various devices to project ideas. Greek playwrights made extensive use of the *chorus*, a group representing some segment of society, just as those of later periods employed such devices as *soliloquies*, *asides*, and other forms of statement made directly to the audience. Other tools for projecting meaning are *allegory* and *symbol*. In allegory, characters are personifications of abstract qualities (mercy, greed, and so on), as in the medieval play *Everyman*. A symbol is an object, event, or image that, although meaningful in and of itself, also suggests a concept or set of relationships. In *Lydia*, Ceci's quinceañera dress is a reminder of her and her family's shattered hopes and dreams. The dress serves as a powerful symbol that visually contributes to the play's thought.

Just because plays imply or state meaning, we should not conclude that there is a single correct interpretation for each play. Most plays permit multiple interpretations, as different productions of, and critical essays about, the same play clearly indicate. Nevertheless, each interpretation should be supported by evidence found in the play.

Sound and Spectacle

Plot, character, and thought are the basic subjects of drama. To convey these to an audience, playwrights have at their disposal two means: sound and spectacle. Sound includes lan-