

# Analyzing Drama

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Studying the text of a play calls for an active imagination. Plays are written to be performed, to be seen and heard, not simply read. The art of drama is representational as well as literary, giving us a direct presentation of action, rather than action presented through a narrator as fiction does. So, if you are reading a play, you must use your imagination to recreate the full spectacle in your mind's eye. Seeing a play in performance is enormously helpful: the set, costumes, props, movements, gestures, and pace and tone of the dialogue will bring the play to life for you. Remember, however, that what you have seen is one director's interpretation of the play, and that another director might interpret it in a completely different way. Try to put *yourself* in the place of a designer, director or actor, asking yourself how you would design the set, where you would place the actors on the stage, what shade of expression you would give a particular line.

If you are developing your own topic for an essay about drama, you may focus on a particular scene, and ask why it is important to the play as a whole. Or, you may focus on a particular character. Alternatively, you may choose to study one element of the entire play, in order to understand how it contributes to the overall effect.

Here are some general questions you can ask about drama, classified under the various elements of drama as art.

## **PLOT:**

- What is the overall importance of the plot or pattern of action? Does the play arouse suspense? Is the plot intricate, perhaps including a subplot as well as the main plot? How is the subplot related to the main plot?
- Does the plot of the play cover a broad span or a narrow segment of time? Why has the playwright chosen to depict these particular events, and not others that occur before and after? What significant events occur before and after the action of the play, and how are they conveyed or suggested to the audience?
- What main conflicts are depicted in the play? Are they primarily conflicts between characters, within characters, or between characters and other non-human forces? Do you see parallels or contrasts between the various conflicts? Are the conflicts resolved?

## **CHARACTERIZATION:**

- What is the overall importance of characterization in the play? Are the characters complex, and do they absorb your main interest as you watch or read the play?
- How are the characters revealed—by what they say, what they do *not* say, what others say about them, what they do or choose not to do? Do the stage directions throw any light on the characters?
- Do the characters resemble or contrast with each other; is one character a “foil” to another because they have obvious similarities but significant differences?
- What motivates the characters? What are their goals?
- How far does a particular character change or develop, and why?
- Does the character adopt a mask, or appear to be other than he or she really is?
- Does the character reach a significant recognition or insight?

#### **STRUCTURE:**

- Does the play have formal structural divisions (acts or scenes)? If so, how are they related to each other? If not, where do the main divisions or breaks in the action fall?
- If the playwright has departed from chronological order in structuring the play (using the technique of flashback, for example), why has she/he done so?
- Can the play be analyzed in terms of the traditional sequence of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution? Does the play have one climax, or more than one?

#### **SETTING:**

- How essential is the setting to the play? Is the world of the play limited to a particular place or time, or to a particular social class (the leisured upper class in eighteenth-century London, for example)? Could a director choose to set the play in a different place or time, as directors of Shakespeare plays often do?
- What do you learn about the setting from the characters’ language, dress, and behaviour?
- Do the stage directions specify a set design? If so, is it realistic or symbolic?
- What is the characters’ relationship with the setting? Do they feel influenced by it, or trapped by it?

- How does the setting of the play contribute to its atmosphere?

### THEME:

- What images recur in the play and what associations are built up around them?
- Does the play include discussions or debate about ideas?
- Do the specific characters and action appear to represent more general, perhaps universal characters, forces or qualities?
- How does the atmosphere of the play convey the playwright's view of life?

For further discussion and examples, see:

Griffiths, Jr. Kelley. *Writing Essays about Literature*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. San Diego: Harcourt, 1994.

or

Barnet, Sylvan, and Reid Gilbert. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*. 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian ed. Don Mills, ON: Addison, 1997.

### QUOTING DRAMA:

When you quote dialogue between two or more characters in a play, indent the first character's name one inch or ten spaces. Write the character's name in capital letters, add a period, and then start the quotation. Indent all additional lines in the character's speech by three spaces. Start a new line when the next character speaks. As with the first character, you should indent by ten spaces.

The two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* are, in fact, committed to keeping their appointment:

ESTRAGON. I'm asking you if we're tied.

VLADIMIR. Tied?

ESTRAGON. Down.

VLADIMIR. But to whom? By whom?

ESTRAGON. To your man.

VLADIMIR. To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause) For the moment. (16)