

Drama Interpretation

Drama, as a genre of literature, is unique in the way it presents and develops its story, characters, and themes. Because there is no narrator or narrative in drama, as in a novel or a short story, the audience must rely on the setting of the play and the characters' dialogue, facial expressions, and actions to tell the story. Readers must consider these elements in order to develop their interpretations of the play's themes and characters. Below are some suggestions for analyzing different elements of drama and their relationship with one another. As you proceed through the following steps, take notes, highlight, or underline what you notice in the play.

Plot

Begin by considering what happens in the play. A play has a dramatic arc showing the course of action through an introduction, development of conflict, and resolution of that conflict. What kind of conflict (serious, light, or satirical) is dramatized? How might the conflict and dramatic arc develop a theme or shed light on a particular issue? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Does any important action take place off-stage or before the beginning of the play? How does the play draw our attention to specific issues by focusing on particular events or conversations?

Acts and Scenes

Although twentieth-century drama has come to include plays made up of only one act, typically plays are organized into separate acts and scenes within each act. It may help to construct a brief outline of each act of the play including the setting, what happens, and which characters are introduced. How is the dramatic arc of the play divided among the acts? How does each act provide a particular context for the following act? Does the specific organization of the play's events contribute to the play's themes?

Character

In drama, characters are portrayed through what they say and do rather than through narrative descriptions, so it is helpful to consider what the dialogue tells us about each character. The following exercises can help work out some character analysis.

- For each primary character in the play, make a list of characteristics (e.g., selfish, cowardly, generous, noble), with lines of that character's dialogue that reflect this characteristic. It may help to complete this exercise separately for each scene or act in order to see how the character changes or develops through his or her dialogue. How do the acts of the play, containing different dialogue, reveal various aspects of the character's personality?
- Characters are developed not only through their own words but through other characters' dialogue. Make a list of traits for each character, using other characters' dialogue to consider what can be known about a character by what others say.
- Reflect on how the portrayal of the characters may contribute to the development of themes in the play.

Dialogue

As mentioned, dialogue is a crucial element used to develop the plot and reveal the characters. One can also note word choices and any metaphors, imagery, or puns. Notice instances of verbal irony—moments when the speaker's words convey a meaning that is different or even opposite from the surface meaning. How does the language of the play establish a particular tone or set a mood?

Stage Directions

Stage directions are parenthetical comments that give further descriptions of the setting, characters, and action. These comments, typically placed within brackets, contain information that supplements the dialogue.

Consider this example from Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*.

WILLY. Oh, Biff! [Staring wildly.] He cried! Cried to me. [He is choking with his love and now cried out his promise.] That boy—that boy is going to be magnificent! [Ben appears in the light just outside the kitchen.] (1732)

In this scene, the salesman, Willy Loman, speaks about his son, and the stage directions convey the intense emotions Willy has for him. We might not have known the depth of his feelings without these directions. Make sure to examine the stage directions in the play and consider how they contribute to the dialogue or tell something important about the characters.

*Note:

Begin each part of the dialogue with the character's name in all capital letters, indented half an inch from the left margin. Follow the name with a period and then start the quotation. Indent all subsequent lines in that character's speech an additional amount. When the dialogue shifts to another character, start a new line indented half an inch. [from the *MLA Handbook*, 8th Edition, p. 80]

In multiple editions of literary works such as plays, novels, or poems, it is often helpful to provide division numbers in addition to, or instead of, page numbers, for example, (1732; act 2). In this way, readers can find your references in any edition of the work. [from the *MLA Handbook*, 8th edition, p. 57]

In Shakespearean or classical plays, the stage directions are primarily exits, entrances, and locale.

[*Exeunt* KING and POLONIOUS.]

[*Enter* HAMLET.]

HAMLET. To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles.
And by opposing end them. (3.1.56-60)

Sources:

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, edited by Kelly J. Mays, shorter 11th ed., W. W. Norton, 2013, pp. 1669-1735.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, edited by Kelly J. Mays, shorter 11th ed., W. W. Norton, 2013, pp. 1309-1458.

The Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed., The Modern Language Association of America, 2016.

Drama Questions

Use any of these questions you need to help you understand the play.

1. What is the playwright's name? Are the playwright's nationality and dates of birth and death significant for understanding the play?
2. What is the title of the play? When was its first performance?
3. Who is the central character (or characters)? Give a brief description that includes leading traits.
4. How are any other characters described?
5. What is the setting (time and place) of the play's action?
6. What is the dramatic question? This question is whatever the play leads us to ask ourselves: some conflict whose outcome we wonder about, some uncertainty whose resolution we await.
7. How would you briefly summarize the play's principle events in the order in which the playwright presents them? If you are reporting on a long play, you may find it simplest to sum up what happens in each act or, perhaps, in each scene.
8. What is the tone of the play, as best you can detect? Describe the playwright's apparent feelings toward the characters or what happens to them.
9. What language is spoken in the play? Try to describe it. Does any character speak with a choice of words or with figures of speech that strike you as unusual, distinctive, poetic—or maybe dull and drab? Does language indicate a character's background or place of birth? Brief quotations, in what space you have, will be valuable.
10. How would you summarize, in one sentence, the play's central theme? If you find none, say so. Plays often contain more than one theme. Which of them seems most clearly borne out by the main events?
11. Are there any symbols you notice and believe to be important? Try to state in a few words what each suggests.
12. What did you think of the play? Give a concise evaluation of it.

Source:

Kennedy, X. J., and Dana Gioia, editors. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, 11th ed., Longman, 2010.