

Drama Interpretation

Drama, as a genre of literature, is unique in the way that it presents and develops its story, characters, and themes. Because there is no narrator or narrative in drama, as there is in the novel or the short story, the audience must rely on the setting of the play and the characters' dialogue, facial expressions, and actions to tell them the story. Readers must also consider these elements in order to develop their interpretations of the play's themes and characters. Below are some suggestions on how to analyze the different elements of drama and explore their relationships 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. What kind of conflict is dramatized in the play—is it serious, light, satirical? How is the conflict staged? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Does any important action take place off-stage or before the beginning of the play? What is the significance of this particular staging? How does the play draw our attention to particular issues by focusing on particular events or conversations? How might the nature of the conflict in the play and the play's dramatic arc (the introduction, development of conflict, and resolution) develop a theme or shed light on a particular issue?

Acts and Scenes

Although twentieth-century drama has come to include plays that are made up of only one act, plays are typically organized into separate acts and scenes within each act. It may help to construct a brief outline of each act of the play, including where it is set, 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 act that follows it? Does the particular 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's helpful to think about what the dialogue tells us about each character. The following exercises can help you work out some character analysis:

- For each primary character in the play, make a list of characteristics—"selfish," "cowardly," "generous," "condescending," "noble"—and give the lines of that character's dialogue that reflect this characteristic. It may help to complete this exercise separately for each scene or act of the play in order to see how the

character changes or develops through his or her dialogue throughout the course of the play, or how different acts of the play, containing different dialogue, reveal different aspects of the character's personality.

- Make a list of characteristics for each character as you did in the exercise above, this time using other characters' dialogue in order to consider what you learn about a character through what others say about him in the play. This helps to show how characters are developed not only through their own words but through other characters' dialogue.

As you work on this, consider how characterization in the play may contribute to the development of any themes.

Dialogue

As mentioned above, dialogue is a crucial element of drama that is used to develop the plot and characters of the play. In addition to considering what the dialogue can tell you about the characters themselves, it's also important to take note of the word choice and any metaphors, imagery, or puns that are present. Take note of any instances of verbal irony—moments when the speaker's words convey a meaning that is different or even opposite from the surface-level meaning. How does the language of the play itself work to establish a particular tone or set a mood in the play?

Stage Directions

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

Consider this example from Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

"ALGERNON: Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in heaven—[*Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich.* ALGERNON *at once interferes.*] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [*Takes one and eats it.*]"¹

The stage directions in this excerpt clue us into the bit of comedy that is taking place at this moment—Algernon's act of eating the cucumber sandwich, which we would not know about without the stage directions, contradicts the seriousness of his words and shows the audience his hypocritical nature. Make sure to examine the stage directions in the play and consider how they contribute to the dialogue or tell you something important about the characters.

¹ Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest. The Norton Introduction to Literature*. 7th ed. Ed. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998. 1757.