

ANALYZING A PLAY

The following questions are intended to direct a reader/writer on what to look for in a play. They are general questions and not all of them will apply to a specific play. The questions will not serve as an outline for writing about a play, but answering (or even attempting to answer) them should help you to formulate your own thesis statement and outline.

CHARACTER

1. Who is the protagonist or main character? What are his/her character traits? What are his/her chief weaknesses? Virtues?
2. What are the functions of the other characters? Do any serve to bring out certain aspects of the main character? How? Is there a character who seems to be the special vehicle for the author's one comment on the play?
3. Who is the antagonist, if there is one? Is he/she a complex character, a mixture of good and bad?
4. If the play is a classical tragedy, does the main character have a "tragic flaw" (weakness, moral defect, or an error in judgment)? What part does chance play in his/her downfall? Is he/she of sufficient nobility of character to win our admiration and sympathy in spite of his/her shortcomings?
5. What means does the playwright use to characterize? Stage directions? Self-revelation by monologue or conversation? Actions? Comments by other characters?
6. Does the playwright try to give characters well-rounded personalities? Are there any type or stock characters in the play?

PLOT

1. What are the main elements? Into how many "chapters of action" is the play divided, regardless of the act divisions? Can you summarize each chapter of action after you have read it? Is the progress of the action clear or confused?
2. Is the plot of sufficient scope and importance to engage our interest?
3. What event or thing initiates the dramatic conflict? Where does the play really begin?
4. Are the incidents well and plausibly connected? Is there sufficient causation? How are gaps in time treated?
5. Is the resolution sufficiently inevitable, or is the dénouement brought about by arbitrary coincidence?
6. Is dramatic irony present? To what degree? What does it achieve?

SETTING

1. What is the setting? Does it change? If so, does the change weaken the play? Is the change necessary and natural?
2. How does the setting contribute to the theme and characterization? Is the particular setting important to the play?

THEME

1. What is the moral or human significance of the play? Does the play have universal significance through its theme, plot, and characters? Does the play stimulate thought about any important problems of life? Does the play supply answers by implication or by direct statements?
2. Does the play clearly reveal any overall view of the universe on the part of the dramatist? Is his/her view sentimental, cynical, Christian, humanist, romantic, etc.? Does the dramatist leave conclusions up to the reader? On the other hand, does he/she use devices to help form the reader's conclusions?

LANGUAGE

NOTE: Before discussing language, be sure to note if the play is a translation

1. If verse, what kind? Does the dramatist seem hampered by the verse form?
2. Is the language elevated or close to that of real life?
3. Does the language contribute significantly to the enjoyment of the play?
4. Does each character use language that is especially adapted to him/her? Does that language help characterize him/her?

GENERAL

1. What is the genre of the play (tragedy, melodrama, etc.)? How well does this play fit the definition of the genre?
2. Would you like to read the play a second or third time? Why or why not?
3. Are some groups of people stereotyped or "marginalized" (reduced in importance)? What would one of the "minor" or silent characters say if given a chance?