

Analyzing a Play

The following questions are designed to guide you, the reader/writer, as you analyze the structure of a play. Not all of the questions will apply to a specific play, nor are they an outline for writing about a play. However, answering (or even attempting to answer) the questions may help you formulate a thesis statement and outline.

Character

- 1. Who is the protagonist (main character)? What are his (or her) character traits? 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 message?
- 3. Who is the antagonist, if there is one? Is he or she complex (or “rounded”) character (a mixture of good and bad)?

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- 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 or her downfall? Is the main character noble enough to win our admiration and sympathy in spite of his shortcomings?
- 5. What technique does the playwright use to help develop the characters? Stage directions? Self-revelation by monologue or dialogue? Actions? Comments by other characters?

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- 6. Does the playwright try to give minor characters well-rounded personalities? Are there any stereotypical characters?

Plot

- 1. What are the main plot elements? Into how many "chapters of action" is the play divided, regardless of the act or scene divisions? Can you summarize each chapter of action after you have read it? Is the progress of the action clear?
- 2. Is the plot of sufficient scope and importance to engage our interest?
- 3. What brings on the dramatic conflict? Where does the play really begin?

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- 4. Are the incidents well-connected? How are gaps in time treated?
- 5. Is the resolution inevitable, or is the denouement (final play) brought about by coincidence?
- 6. Is there dramatic irony present? To what degree? What does it achieve?

Setting

- 1. Where and when does the play take place? Do the time or place change? If so, do the changes weaken the play? Are the changes 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? How do the theme, plot, and characters reflect this universal significance? Does it stimulate thought about any important problems of life? Does it supply answers by implication or by direct statement?
- 2. Does the play clearly reveal any over-all view of the universe on the part of the dramatist? Is his or her view sentimental, cynical, religious, humanist, romantic, etc.? Does the dramatist leave conclusions up to the reader or use devices to help form the reader's conclusions?

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?
- Adapted from Literature in Critical Perspectives, pp. 777-778 depts.gpc.edu/~duniss/playanalysis2.pdf