

ANALYZING A PLAY

If you've ever had to analyze poetry, you'll know how important the details are. Vocabulary, rhythm, meter, and tone are all very important. It is true that analyzing a scene or a play has some similarities to analyzing poetry but, as you'll soon see, analyzing plays has some characteristics all of its own.

Remember, plays were meant to be performed for an audience, not simply read. Try to see a live or recorded version to bring your play to life before you begin your analysis.

1. **Theme**

How has the playwright emphasized the play's theme? Through images? characters? action? and/or direct statements? Is the theme negative? How negative? Where is the theme first introduced? By whom? How does the central action of the play reveal the theme? Does the play's ending reinforce the principle theme? How? Are sub-themes important?

2. **Characters**

Playwrights often try to convey many of their messages through the way they depict characters. Consider points such as whether the character has a major or minor role in the central action of the play, how other characters react to him/her, what happens to the character throughout the play, what changes does he/she undergo, what his/her fate is, his/her place in society, as well as any strengths or weaknesses. What does a character reveal about him/herself through speech and action? How fully developed is the character? Are we led to like or dislike a character?

3. **Actions**

Are the actions physical or mental? Do they seem forced or do they appear to occur naturally? Are they coincidental or are they the result of much planning and scheming? How many people and which characters are involved in, or suffer from, the actions of the play? What are the results of the action?

4. **Plot**

How does the plot evolve from act to act and from scene to scene (do not simply retell what happens)? Is suspense used? How effectively? How do conflicts help develop the plot? What is the significance of any subplots? How unified is the plot? Where is the climax? How is the action resolved in the conclusion? Is the play a tragedy, a comedy? How can you tell?

5. **Soliloquies/Monologues**

At what point in the action do they occur? What do they reveal about the speaker? What is their tone? What is the speaker's mood? Does the speaker talk of taking action or is he/she giving you his/her philosophy of life? Is the speaker's train of thought rational? Treat the soliloquies to the same close reading as you

would a poem; for example, consider imagery, symbolism, diction. Are asides used as opposed to soliloquies? to what effect?

6. **Conflict**

Where does the conflict lie? Is it between two characters or within a character or between a character and his/her surroundings? How are they developed? How are they resolved? Is the central conflict reinforced by other conflicts - between minor characters or in the setting (a storm, perhaps.)

7. **Time**

Does the play take place over a short or a long period of time? Does a lot of time elapse between the scenes or in between the important actions? Are the characters preoccupied with time? Is the play set in actual time, where the stage time is the same as real-life time?

8. **Symbolism and Imagery**

Playwrights often use symbolism and imagery. Characters are often representations of something else. Actions, objects, and props may also be symbolic. What images are used? How powerful are they? Does the imagery extend through the entire play, an entire scene, or is it only used once? How does the imagery help bring out the theme?

9. **Key Lines**

Often an entire theme of a play can rest on a single line, as in a Shakespearean scene. The theme of deceit in MacBeth is seen clearly in the line "Look the innocent flower but be the serpent under it." The theme of guilt in MacBeth is also seen vividly in Lady Macbeth's fervent crying, "Out, out damn spot!" and in the way that the action had "murdered sleep" for her. Respond to the emotions lying beneath the written lines. They may be vital to the meaning of the play.

10. **Setting**

Does the setting have a particular significance? Does it add to the mood of the play? Does the setting change and, consequently, the mood or the symbolism involved?

The above points should not simply be applied to each and every play. Instead, think about each play and the separate actions that take place in it. Remember, the closer you read and study a play, the more you will experience its power and beauty. This experience is essential to writing a good paper.