

## Questions to Ask When Reading a Play p. 1389

In reading drama as in reading fiction, you can begin to understand a text by asking some basic questions about the elements of drama.

**Expectations:** What do you expect...

- From the title? from the first sentence, paragraph, or speech?
- After the first events or interactions of characters? as the **conflict** is resolved?

**Characterization:** Who are the characters? Is there a list of characters printed after the title of the play? What do you notice about their names or any identification of their roles, character types or relationships?

- Who is / are the **protagonist(s)**?
- Who is / are the **antagonist(s)** (villain, opponent, obstacle)?
- Who are the other characters?
- What does each character know at any moment in the action? What does each character expect at any point? What does the audience know or expect that is different from what the characters know or expect?

**Plot:** What happens in the play?

- Do the characters or situations change during the play?
- What are the differences between the beginning, middle and end of the play? Is it divided into acts? Would there be an intermission in a performance?
- Can you summarize the plot? Is it a recognizable kind or genre such as **tragedy, comedy, farce**, or mystery?

## Questions About Character p. 1416

1. Who is the protagonist? Why and how so? Which other characters, if any, are main or major characters? Which are minor characters?
2. What are the protagonist's most distinctive traits, and what is most distinctive about his or her outlook and values? What motivates the character? What is it about the character that creates internal and for external conflict? Which lines or stage directions reveal most about the character?
3. What are the roles of other characters? Which, if any, functions as an antagonist? Which, if any, serves as a foil? Does any character function as a narrator or **chorus**, providing background information and commentary? Why and how so?
4. To what extent are any of the characters in the play "types"? How might this affect an audience's experience of the play? In what ways might a director or actor choose to go against the expected types, and how would this complicate the play's overall effect and meaning?
5. Which of the characters, or which aspects of the characters, does the play encourage us to sympathize with or to admire? to view negatively? Why and how so? Are there characters who might be more or less sympathetic, depending on how the role is cast and interpreted?
6. If you were directing a production of this play, whom among your friends and acquaintances would you cast in each role, and why? If you were directing a movie version, what professional actors would you cast?

**Questions About Plot** p. 1418

1. Read the first scene or the first few pages and then stop. What potential for conflict do you see here? What do you expect to happen in the rest of the play?
2. How is the play divided into acts, scenes, or episodes, if at all? What is the effect of this structure? Does the division of the play correspond, more or less, to the five stages of plot development - exposition, rising action, climax, resolution, conclusion?
3. Does the play show a relatively clear progression through the traditional stages of plot development, or does it seem to defy such conventions? If so, how, and what might the playwright achieve through these departures from tradition?
4. What is the inciting incident or destabilizing event? How and why does this event destabilize the initial situation? How would you describe the conflict that develops? To what extent is it external, internal or both?
5. What is the climax, or turning point? Why and how so? How is the conflict resolved? How and why might this resolution fulfill or defy your expectations?

**Questions About Setting and Staging** p. 1420

1. Does all the action occur in one time and place, or in more than one? If the latter, what are those times and places? How much time tends to pass between scenes or episodes?
2. How important do the general time and place seem to be, and in what ways are they important? What about the plot and characters would remain the same if a director chose to set the play in a different time and place? What wouldn't?
3. What patterns do you notice regarding where and when things happen? Which characters are associated with each setting? When, how and why do scenes change from one setting to another? Are there significant deviations?
4. Do the stage directions describe particular settings and props in detail? If so, what seems significant about the details? How might they establish mood, reveal character, and affect individual characters and their interactions with one another? Is there anything in the stage directions that seems to be intended more for readers than for a director staging a production?
5. Does the date of the play tell you anything about the way it was originally intended to be staged? Does the representation of time and place in the play implicitly call for a certain type of stage? If you were staging the play today, what kind of stage, sets, and props might you use, and why? How might your choices affect how the play works on audiences and what it means to them?

**Questions About Tone, Language and Symbol** p. 1422

1. Which lines in the play strike you as most ambiguous when it comes to the tone in which they should be spoken? Why and how so? What is the effect of that ambiguity, or how might an actor's or reader's decision about tone here affect the play as a whole?
2. How would you describe the overall tone of the whole play? Do any moments or entire scene or acts in the play seem interestingly different in terms of their tone?
3. How do the play's characters differ from one another in terms of their tone? Does any character's tone change over the course of the play?
4. Are any details - such as names; actions or statements; references to objects, props, or other details of setting; or allusions, metaphors, or other figures of speech - repeated throughout the play? Do any of these repeated details seem to have special significance? If so, what might that significance be?
5. What types of irony, if any, are at work in the play? What is the effect of the irony?

### **Tips for Identifying Theme** p. 1422

Because theme emerges from a work in its entirety and from all the other elements working together, there is no one-size-fits-all method for discovering theme. Here are some things to look for and consider as you read and re-read a play:

- Pay attention to the title. A title will seldom indicate a play's theme directly, but some titles do suggest a central topic or a key question. Probe the rest of the play to see what insights, if any, about that topic or answers to that question it ultimately seems to offer
- Identify any statements that the characters make about a general concept, issue, or topic such as human nature, the natural world, and so on, particularly in monologues or in debate's between major characters. Look for statements that potentially have a general meaning or application beyond the play, even if they refer to a specific situation. Then consider whether and how the play as a whole corroborates, overturns, or complicates any one such view or statement.
- If a character changes over the course of the play, try to articulate the truth or insight that he or she seems to discover. Then consider whether and how the play as a whole corroborates or complicates that insight.
- Identify a conflict depicted in the play and state it in general terms or turn it into a general question, leaving out any reference to specific characters, setting and so on. Then think about the insight or theme that might be implied by the way the conflict is resolved.