

Analysis of Drama

This is a short guideline for the interpretation of drama. Of course you might need to go more into detail or ask further questions – it can also be helpful to concentrate on one level. If you analyze a single scene from the play, keep in mind it cannot be understood without looking at its particular context. You should always read the full text.

Inhalt

1	Words in a Drama.....	1
2	Characters.....	2
3	Dramatic Action, Story, Plot.....	2
4	The Setting: Place and Time	3
5	Further Questions.....	3

1 Words in a Drama

- What does the title mean? Is there ambiguity, are there any allusions?
- Are there any stage directions commenting the play?
- Is there an epic narrator outside the play who introduces or mediates the play?
- What do prologue and epilogue do with the play – do they frame it, is there any foreshadowing, is there retrospective or is the audience addressed directly?
- Is there any reference to what happens offstage, before or beyond the present scene?
- Are there any asides / ad spectatores? What is their function in this particular context?
- Who says what in which way for which reasons and to which effect?
- How do figures characterize themselves or others? Is there explicit characterization (self-description or description of others) or implicit characterization (content, behavior, styles of reply)?
- What do the figures want to achieve with what they say? Retrospectives, foreshadowing, exchange of information, negotiation of meanings and relationships, planning and performing of actions?
- How do the perspectives in the play relate to each other, why are these points of view selected and combined in a specific manner?
- What is the sequence of monologue, dialogue, polylogue? Is there any development? Is there line-by-line exchange? How are the parts connected?
- What to utterances look like with regard to other figures' utterances – quality, quantity?

2 Characters

- Which ideas or concepts do generally shape the figures in the play?
- Are there flat (simple) types or round (complex) characters?
- Are the characters transparent (fully explained) or opaque (open, enigmatic)?
- Are the characters dynamic (developing) or rather static (unchanging)?
- Are the characters psychological (ordinarily self-aware) or transpsychological (overly conscious of what their feelings are)?
- How are characters designed?
- What do characters mean in the context of the play?
- Which psychological dispositions do characters have in the play?
- How do stage directions define characters?
- How are characters performed by actors? Is there impersonation or role distance?
- How and when do characters enter and exit the stage?
- What do characters look like: stature, costume, physiognomy, mask, hair-style, make-up?
- What do characters behave like: choreography, grouping with others, gesture, mime?
- What is their voice like: timbre, pitch, volume, speaking style?
- How do characters deliver their speeches with regard to rhythm, pace, intonation, emphasis, tone?
- What are the characters' positions towards other figures in the play – socially (servant – master, maid – mistress) and dramatically (antagonist – protagonist)?
- Are groups confronted with individuals?
- How do constellation (general setting of characters in a play) and configuration (arrangement on stage) interact?
- Which particular places (in the setting / on stage) do characters belong to?
- Do characters' words agree or disagree with what they do on stage?

3 Dramatic Action, Story, Plot

- What is the structure of the action – is it closed (coherent, linear) or open (fragmentary, episodic)? If it's a closed form of plot in five acts, do you find the regular structure: exposition – complication, climax, reversal, catastrophe?
- What are the basic functions of action in the play?
- How is activity vs. inactivity (passivity) represented in the play?
- What is the relationship between the story of the play (chronological order of actions and events) and the plot (logical order)?
- How does action relate figures and the circumstances they are in?
- Is the play mainly about action or about circumstances?
- If there are sub-plots, how are they connected to the main plot – are there any similarities, differences, links or overlaps with regard to motifs, characters, actions? Does the sub-plot mirror the main plot?
- Is there any play-within-the play? Is it simply meant for entertainment, does it mirror the play or does it reflect on dramatic conventions?

- Is there dramatic irony?

4 The Setting: Place and Time

- Where is the story set? Why?
- Is there a single setting or are there multiple settings?
- Is there any tension between objective location and perceived atmosphere?
- What is the relationship between internal space (home) and external space (the public, the exterior world)?
- What boundaries are observed or violated in the play?
- In how far does the setting reflect the action or individual characters?
- When does the play take place – has a contemporary or historical setting been selected? Why?
- How is (the flow of) time conceived in the play? Why?
- How does the objective measure of time relate to the subjective perception of time – is there any pressure or suspense?
- Is the sequence of time linear, cyclical, inverted or completely achronic?
- What is the relationship between performance time and the fictional time of the play?
- What sense of rhythm and space is created by the change of scenes, movements, and actions?
- Does the performance stick to the play's original setting or does it change it?
- Is the stage design realistic, neutral or symbolic? What about the props?
- In how far does lighting influence the interpretation of what's happening on stage?
- What do music and sound effects add to the play?
- What special effects (fog, explosions, projections) are used and to what effect?

5 Further Questions

- How does the play deal with dramatic conventions (Aristotelian drama, epic drama)? Is it illusionist or non-illusionist, anti-illusionist, experimental or a well-made play?
- How does the composition (structure) of the play relate to its topic / content? Why?
- How does the play deal with cultural context?
- How do and did spectators respond to performances? Is there identification, catharsis, release from concern? Do the spectators feel pity and fear? Why?
- How does the architecture of the theatre relate to what's happening inside? Is it an open-air theatre or an indoor theatre?
- What kind of stage is it – an apron stage, a picture frame stage?