
WRITING ESSAYS
ABOUT LITERATURE

A Guide and Style Sheet
SIXTH EDITION

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Other Elements

In this chapter we have treated the elements most obviously identified with fiction. But other elements are also sometimes important in fiction: dialogue, description, metaphor, poetic use of language, diction. We will discuss these other elements in the next two chapters.

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Interpreting Drama

Drama contains many of the elements of fiction. Like fiction, drama contains plot, characters, theme, and setting. Like fiction, drama uses irony and symbolism. And indeed, you can read a play as you would a short novel, using your imagination to fill in all the "missing" material you typically find in fiction: character description, background information, vivid action scenes. Similarly, drama often contains many of the elements of poetry, and you can read the poetic passages in plays just as you read any poetry. Because of the great similarity of drama to fiction and poetry, the definitions, questions, and exercises stated in the preceding chapter on fiction and in the following chapter on poetry are all equally valid for drama. Use them to generate your own interpretations of the plays.

The Nature of Drama

Drama is different from fiction and most poetry in one essential way: It is meant to be performed. Some theorists of drama argue that a play is incomplete *until* it is performed. According to the critic Bernard Beckerman in *Dynamics of Drama*, "a play is a mere skeleton; performance fleshes out the bones" (3). When you read a play, you miss qualities the playwright intended as a part of the play. For one thing, you miss the audience, whose physical presence and reactions to the performance influence both the performance and your perception of the play. For another, you miss the set designers' vision of the atmosphere and physical world of the play. You miss the interpretive art of the actors and

the illusion they can create of real life unfolding before your eyes. You miss the physical and emotional *experience* of drama that a production can give you.

This is not to say that reading a play carefully is not worth doing. Sometimes in a performance we miss aspects of plays that most people can catch only when reading the play. This is especially true of plays written in poetry. When Romeo and Juliet first speak to each other, for example, Shakespeare has them develop a complex metaphor (a pilgrim coming to a shrine) and speak in sonnet form. It is unlikely that a playgoer, upon hearing this exchange, would think, "Aha! That was a sonnet!" Rather, we typically notice such devices by reading carefully. Even if our purpose is to produce the play, we must read carefully because productions are based on interpretations of the plays. "Literary" devices such as a sonnet may not be immediately recognizable by the audience, but they provide clues to how the playwright wanted the play performed. In fact, everything in the play is a clue to its possible performance and thus deserves studious attention.

To read a play with an eye to how the play might be produced, therefore, is to understand the play as the playwright conceived it. Since we examine the elements of fiction and poetry in Chapters 3 and 5, we will concentrate in this chapter on how you can use the possible performance of drama as a means of understanding its elements.

The Elements of Drama

Plot

Because the playwright has only a short time (two or so hours) to develop plot and because the playwright's audience experiences the play in one sitting, with little immediate opportunity to review it, the playwright must keep the plot simple and clear enough for an audience to grasp during the length of the performance. This means that the playwright cannot indulge in numerous subplots or in intricate plot complications; otherwise the playgoer would become confused. Playwrights, therefore, limit the number of characters in the play. (The fewer the characters, the simpler the plot can be.) Playwrights also emphasize conflict to keep the audience involved in the action and establish easily discernible patterns of cause and effect.

Although the playwright can present physical action without having to use words, the action (and the conflict implicit in the action) must

be understandable to the audience. The most important and almost inevitable means for doing this is *dialogue*—people talking to people. Playwrights, then, strive to make every word of dialogue help move the plot forward. The near inevitability of dialogue also means that playwrights focus largely on conflicts between people rather than conflicts between people and nonhuman forces. In contrast, fiction need not represent characters' words or thoughts and so is freer to depict conflicts between people and nonhuman forces. Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire" does give the thoughts of the protagonist; but otherwise there is no "dialogue," just the protagonist's conflict with the harsh Yukon landscape. It would be very difficult for a play to duplicate this kind of conflict. Plays sometimes do portray conflicts between people and nonhuman forces, but these conflicts are revealed through dialogue and usually through conflicts between the characters.

Because the time and space for a presentation is limited, certain kinds of action—battles and sports activities, for example—cannot be represented fully or literally on the stage. These activities must be concentrated or symbolized. A duel onstage, for example, might represent an entire battle; a plantation house that in act one is sparkling new but in act four is ramshackled might represent the activities that have brought a once-grand family to the brink of ruin. Sometimes the playwright places activities offstage. A character might describe events that have just taken place, but the audience does not see these events. It learns about them only through the dialogue.

The actions that take place during the presentation of the play—onstage or offstage actions—are usually only a part of a larger series of events. Bernard Beckerman helpfully distinguishes the two sets of actions by the terms *plot* (what occurs during the play) and *story* (what occurs before, during, and after the play) (171–172). The "plot" of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, is Oedipus's attempt to rid Thebes of a blight and his resulting discovery of who he is and the nature of his crimes. The "story" of the play is Oedipus's entire history, starting with his parents' attempt to kill him when he was an infant and ending with his death at Colonus. Some plays feature a plot that is only a small part (but usually a very important and climactic part) of a story. Other plays feature a plot that is almost equivalent to the story. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, has almost no important past and future events; nearly all the action occurs within the play itself. Thus the plot and story of *Macbeth* are nearly equivalent. The events in *Hamlet*, however, occur after a murder and a marriage and, long before that, a war between Denmark and Norway, all of which profoundly affect the action within the play

itself; the conclusion of the play, furthermore, suggests what the future of Denmark will be like under its new ruler, the Norwegian king Fortinbras.

The plotting in drama depends in part on establishing *audience expectations* of what will happen in the immediate future, as the play is unfolding. Both fiction and poetry, in contrast, focus more on what has already happened. The playwright, of course, predetermines the events in a play; but as we watch, we experience the illusion that the action is occurring in the present and that neither we nor the characters know what will happen next. This effect of expectation is heightened in drama because as we watch the play we have little time to reflect on what has happened, whereas when we read a novel we can pause and think about what we have read. Playwrights often predict our expectations about certain kinds of action and certain kinds of characters and fulfill our expectations or surprise us by thwarting them.

The *structural divisions* of plays affect plot. Playwrights usually provide structural divisions to give playgoers physical relief—a few moments to stand up, walk about, stretch, or reflect (however briefly) on what they have seen. Structural divisions also serve to allow set changes. In addition to such performance considerations, structural divisions also mark segments of the plot. *Formal structural divisions* are those specified in the play or the program—acts and scenes. *Informal structural divisions* can be smaller units within an act or scene, units not identified as such by the playwright but that nonetheless have a self-contained quality. In formal structural units, the playwright might call for the curtain to come down, the lights to go off, or the characters to leave the stage to signal the end of a unit. Shakespeare often ends his units with a couplet. In informal units, none of these things may happen; instead, the units may just flow together. Characteristic of all of them, however, is a rising action, a climax, and possibly a brief falling action. The climax of these units is usually a moment of revelation, either to the main characters, to other characters, or to the audience. An example is Hamlet's recognition at the climax of the play-within-a-play scene that King Claudius has murdered his father, the former king. All of the units of a play contribute to the rising action of the entire play and lead finally to its main climax.

Questions about plot

Simplicity: We said that plot in drama needs to be relatively simple and clear. In the play you are studying, is it? If not, why would the playwright want to create confusion about the important conflicts and

cause-and-effect relationships? Sometimes the playwright *tries* to create such confusion. Congreve in *The Way of the World*, for example, creates a pattern of relationships so confusing that an audience is hard pressed to figure out who has done what to whom, especially at the breakneck speed the play is usually performed. He probably does this purposefully to indicate the complicated texture of Restoration upper-class society and the difficulty of finding one's way through it safely and honorably. Basic questions are: What are the main conflicts? What has caused the conflicts existing at the beginning of the play? What causes the conflicts that emerge during the course of the play? Who is in conflict with whom? Why? Are any of the characters in conflict with forces larger than just individuals—society, for example, or fate? How are the conflicts resolved?

Location of action: What actions occur offstage? Why does the author elect to place some actions offstage and other actions onstage? In *Macbeth*, for example, Shakespeare has the murder of King Duncan (at the beginning of the play) occur offstage, but later he has the murder of Banquo and, in another scene, the murder of Macduff's family (or part of it) occur onstage. Why, then, does he choose to put one murder offstage and other murders onstage? Questions that should lead to answers to this are: How do the characters react to the offstage events? Shakespeare probably places Duncan's murder offstage because he wants the audience to focus attention on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's reaction to the murder. Related questions are: What does the playwright use to represent or symbolize action that occurs offstage? When Macbeth returns from killing Duncan, he carries the murder weapons, all covered with blood. His hands are covered with blood. When Lady Macbeth returns from smearing blood all over the sleeping guards, *her* hands are covered with blood. The more we see of this blood and the more they talk about it, the more grisly and physical and sticky the murder seems. Without actually describing the murder, Shakespeare uses a physical image—blood—and the characters' reaction to it to signal what the murder was like.

Plot versus story: What is the "plot" of the play? What is the "story"? If the plot is only part of the story, why does the playwright choose this part? What has happened before the play begins? What will happen afterward? As Beckerman points out, if the plot is only part of a larger or continuing story, the characters are more likely to seem at the mercy of forces beyond their control; whereas, if the plot and story are roughly

equivalent, the characters will seem more free to choose and mold their own fate (172). The plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is only one episode—the final episode, we hope—of a generations-long, murderous, and irrational family feud. Romeo and Juliet are therefore “star-crossed” and “death-marked”; try as they will, they cannot escape the undertow of their families’ history. Even Prince Escalus, the only person in the play with both power and good sense, can do nothing to avert the concluding tragedy. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in contrast, choose to do evil at the beginning of the play and thus give rise to the forces that destroy them.

Audience expectations: What expectations does the plot call up in the audience? Does the playwright fulfill those expectations? If not, how and why not? Most traditional comedy, for example, offers young lovers as staple characters. We expect the lovers, after suitable complications, to find happiness together, usually signaled at the end by betrothal or marriage. But sometimes the playwright introduces potential lovers, gives us something like a light comic tone, creates comic complications, but thwarts our expectations that they will marry. Examples are Etherege’s *The Man of Mode*, Molière’s *The Misanthrope*, and Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Another example is Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, which he called a comedy, even though it is not always played as such. In this play, the main character, Lopakhin, and the adopted daughter of the family he is trying to rescue from economic disaster, seem meant for each other. There is much talk throughout the play of their marrying. Such a marriage would seem to be good for both of them. They agree to marry, and since they are sympathetic characters, the audience wants them to marry. Yet they never do. Why does Chekhov create the expectation and even hope of their marriage and then abort it? The answer to this question provides insight into Chekhov’s purposes in *The Cherry Orchard*; and since he uses the same device in other plays—*Three Sisters*, for example—the answer throws light on his entire dramatic method.

Formal and informal divisions: What are the formal structural divisions of the plays? How many are there—three acts? four? five? How do the formal divisions reflect the playwright’s purposes and materials? Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, is divided into three acts. The first act takes place in London, the second and third in the country. This division reflects the double-identity motif in the plot because the main character pretends to have two identities: a city

identity and a country identity. The first two acts reflect these opposing identities. The third act, however, synthesizes the first two. Events and revelations allow the main character to blend his city and country identities into one happy whole. The structure of the play, then, neatly reflects a “thesis, antithesis, synthesis” pattern of oppositions and resolution of oppositions.

What are the informal units of the play? For *all* the units, what are the climaxes of each? What is revealed in the climax—to the main character featured in the unit, to other characters, to the audience? How is a particular unit important to the whole play? What is the main climax of the play? What do you learn from it?

■ Thinking on Paper about Plot

1. List the conflicts revealed in each major section of the play (usually acts, but sometimes scenes).
2. Explain how one or more of these conflicts is first made evident. Pay close attention to dialogue.
3. Summarize how a conflict is developed throughout the whole play and how it is resolved.
4. Summarize the events, either in the past or present, that cause conflict. If there is one event that caused or causes all the conflicts, summarize it in detail and explain why and how it is so important.
5. List the external conflicts. How are they represented on stage? Through dialogue? Through physical action? Through symbolic stage props?
6. List the events that precede the action of the play. Explain the effect, if any, of these prior events on the action.
7. Summarize the events in each major structural unit of the play. Explain the relationship of the play’s units to the plot’s structure. Show how the action in each unit rises to a climax.
8. Mark some informal structural divisions in the play. Note the rising action and climax of these units.
9. Describe one important scene in detail. Explain how the characters’ actions and dialogue reveal conflict. Explain the importance of the scene to the whole play.
10. Describe the climax of the play. Explain what conflicts are resolved.

11. List the main plot and the subplots. Explain the relationship of the subplots to the main plot.
12. List the events that occur offstage. Explain why the playwright has one or more of these occur offstage rather than onstage.
13. Summarize the situation at the beginning of the play and state what you expect to happen. Explain how the play does or does not fulfill those expectations.

Characterization

As with plot, the playwright must keep character portrayal simple enough for an audience to understand during the course of a single performance. The playwright must therefore rely heavily on flat characters, especially stereotyped (“stock”) characters, whose personalities and moral traits are easily caught and remembered by the audience. The playwright may even use unobvious stratagems of dress, dialect, physical movements, and names to communicate these traits. In Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy, for example, the names signal the traits of comic flat characters: Mrs. Loveit, Sir Fopling Flutter, Snake, Pert, Mr. Oldcastle, Lady Wishfort, Lady Sneerwell, Smirk, Handy. The playwright must also rely on static characters more heavily than dynamic characters because time-restricted performance limits the opportunity to make character changes plausible.

Edward Pixley has pointed out that when the play is dominated by flat characters, the plot hinges mainly on external conflicts; the focus is on action. When the play includes round characters, the plot deals largely with internal conflicts, the focus is on characterization (12). In Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, all the characters are flat; the charm of the play lies not in character development but in the witty language, in the mild satire rippling through the dialogue, and in the plot complications resulting from the confusion of identities. In contrast, Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* presents a complex, round character, Hedda herself; and the interest of the play lies in what she will do next and why she will do it. Hedda does not change during the play, but her character traits intensify and become clearer to the audience. Round characters, therefore, hold the audience’s attention by changing or, if they don’t change, by becoming more intense. In either case, continual revelations about the characters grip the audience’s interest.

Although the playwright may depend to an extent on exterior details to reveal character traits, the playwright’s most important device for character development is dialogue—what the characters say and what they say about one another. But performance time is limited; the words of the dialogue cannot describe the character fully. Playwrights, therefore, rely heavily on implication in the dialogue and on “gaps”—information left out—to indicate what characters are like and what physical things they might be doing. Some critics mark this distinction with the terms *text* for the written dialogue and *subtext* for the implications and gaps. All literary genres make use of implication and gaps, but drama and poetry almost *must* rely on them because both genres are such compressed forms of communication.

A simple example of text and subtext is the scene near the beginning of *Hamlet* in which Hamlet, after a long absence, meets his university friends Horatio and Marcellus. The night before this meeting, Horatio and Marcellus have seen the ghost of Hamlet’s father. But Hamlet doesn’t know about the ghost; instead, he complains about his mother’s marrying so soon after his father’s death:

- HAMLET: Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day [the wedding day], Horatio!
My father—methinks I see my father.
- HORATIO: Where, my lord?
- HAMLET: In my mind’s eye, Horatio.
- HORATIO: I saw him once. ‘A was [he was] a goodly king. (1.2. 182–188)

If you were the actor playing Horatio, how would you say the line “Where, my lord?” The “gap” here is the nature of Horatio’s response to Hamlet’s statement, “My father—methinks I see my father.” To fill the gap, you have to determine from the context how Horatio takes that statement (Shakespeare does not tell you how, as a novelist might), and you have to communicate his reaction to the audience by the way you say the line and by your physical demeanor. You might phrase the line as an incredulous question: “What? You see your father? But how could you, he’s dead?” Or you might say it as a reflection of what you take to be Hamlet’s witty mood: “I know you’re joking, Hamlet. But tell me anyway. Where do you see your father?” But another possibility is that you would say it in astonishment, as if you take it literally. After all, *you* had seen the ghost of Hamlet’s father just a few hours before. You probably think Hamlet has now spotted the ghost, and so you say,

“Good Lord, do you see it, too? Where?” And you look fearfully around, trying to see the ghost too. When Hamlet indicates that he is only remembering his father, you calm down. At this point you might pause and make appropriate gestures to indicate your shift from fear and astonishment to calmness. The fact that you *have* made such a shift is indicated by your response to Hamlet: “Yes. Once, when the king was alive, I saw him too. He was an impressive-looking king.” This last statement shows that Horatio has moved from thinking about a supernatural phenomenon (the ghost) to thinking about a natural one (Hamlet’s father when he was alive).

This brief example illustrates the greatest value of understanding a play’s subtext. By “reading” the implications and the gaps in the play, you uncover the inner states of the characters—what is going on in their minds and what their hidden nature is. You also establish a correspondence between the character’s inner state and what the character says and does (the character’s outer state). Interpretation of subtext is essential for actors, who must figure out how to say the dialogue and what to do onstage. But it is important for readers, too, even though a reader may not work out intonation and physical movements in as much detail as actors do. The reason for this importance is that a character’s inner world is the key to the character’s makeup and actions. Horatio, in the example above, is a flat character, and the problem of exposing his inner state is relatively uncomplicated. But doing so gives the performance—whether seen by an audience or imagined by a reader—vividness. Horatio springs to life. He is not just an automaton reading lines; he is a real person. As for round characters, the difficulty of uncovering their inner states is much greater, yet their complexity and hiddenness of inner state makes them fascinating. Great characters like Oedipus, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Hedda Gabler grip our imaginations just because their inner states are complex and mysterious. The only way we can expose these inner states is by interpreting the subtext of the play.

Closely related to subtext in drama is *mask wearing*. Nearly every play employs the mask as a device for developing plot and characterization. Juliet wears a “mask”—pretends to be different from the way she really is—in order to fool her parents and run away with Romeo. Hamlet puts on a mask of madness to root out the murderer of his father. Hedda pretends to be the contented housewife in order to secure the wealth and social status she thinks she deserves. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be the loyal servants and gracious hosts of King Duncan while plotting his murder. The audience may be fully aware of the mask and thus the disparity between appearance and reality, as, for example, in Juliet’s case. Or the audience may at first be as unaware of the mask as are the other

characters in the play, as in Hedda’s case. And sometimes the mask wearers are themselves unaware or partially unaware of their masks; that is, they deceive themselves. Oedipus, for example, does not know that he is masking his true identity of king murderer. In all cases, both plot and characterization turn on revelation—the tearing away of the mask. At these moments of revelation, the audience and at least some of the characters see the reality behind the mask. Often the final unmasking comes at the climax of the plot. In *Othello*, for example, the climax occurs when Iago’s mask is ripped away before Othello’s shocked eyes.

Questions about characterization and plot If the characters are flat, what are their dominant traits? their function in the plot? How do they help establish the conflicts in the plot? If the characters are dynamic, how do they change—from what to what? If they are static, do their traits intensify or become clearer as the play moves on? If the characters are round, what can you learn from the subtext of the play about their inner states?

What “masks” are the characters wearing? Who is hiding what from whom? When are the masks removed? What causes their removal, and what are the results? In general, how would you play a particular character if you were the actor? What physical devices would you use? Hedda Gabler, for example, is aristocratic, proud, and forceful; she seems strong but has an inner fragility. Her rival, Thea, is hesitant, unsophisticated, and afraid; she seems weak but has an inner strength. If you were acting these characters, how would you present yourself physically to convey these qualities? How would you show that Hedda seems strong but is in fact weak? You may not actually act Hedda, of course, but determining a physical presence for her helps you analyze her and thus understand her better.

■ Thinking on Paper about Characterization

1. List the character traits of each major character.
2. List the devices, such as dress, names, and gestures, that help establish the traits of a character.
3. Describe in detail the traits of a complex character, especially contradictory and seemingly inexplicable traits.
4. Explain a character’s motivations for doing the things he or she does. Focus especially on what the character seems to want. Explain the situations from which the character’s motivations seem to emerge.

5. Describe the strategies a character devises for getting what he or she wants. Explain how effective those strategies are.
6. Describe the miscalculations a character makes and the effect they have.
7. Summarize how a character intensifies, changes, or comes into sharper focus for the audience. Trace the intensification, change, or focus through each major unit of the play. Explain what causes it.
8. Summarize a scene in which a major character faces a crisis. Explain what we learn about the character from the character's words and actions.
9. Summarize a scene in which a major character has a startling or affecting revelation. Explain what the revelation is, what causes it, and its effect on the character's future.
10. Explain how you would portray one of the characters in an important scene. Show how your performance would reveal the character's inner state.
11. Explain the relationship a major character has with the other major characters. Describe the alliances and conflicts the character has with the other characters. Describe the attitudes the character has toward the other characters and their attitudes toward him or her.
12. If there is one character who exerts control—intentionally or unintentionally—over other characters, describe that character in detail and explain the source and nature of that control. Describe the other characters' reactions to that control.
13. List the masks characters wear. Explain why a character wears a mask.
14. Trace one or more of these masks throughout the play. Explain how effectively the mask accomplishes the character's purpose.
15. Summarize the scene in which the mask is dropped. List the effects of the mask being dropped.

Setting

Because of the limited time and space of dramatic productions, a play cannot create a "world" in the same detail and breadth a novel can. The worlds of novels like Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Hugo's *Les Misérables*, with their multitude of characters, scenes, physical places, and battles, are impossible to show in drama. Rather, such worlds can be represented only fragmentarily. The playwright must use a shorthand method

of presenting the setting so that the playgoer grasps enough information about it to understand whatever relationship it might have to characterization and theme. Sometimes the relationship is minimal, sometimes very close. *Setting* in drama is the same as in fiction: the social mores, values, and customs of the world in which the characters live; the physical world; and the time of the action, including historical circumstances.

The playwright has three main ways of communicating setting to an audience. First, we learn about setting from the characters' dialogue, dress, and behavior. In Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, we know immediately that the world of this play is leisured upper-class English society. We know this from the elaborately polite and mannered way in which the characters carry themselves and from the names they so freely drop—Sir Harry Bouquet, Lord Spindle, Captain Quinze, Lady Frizzle, the Dowager Lady Dundizy. In *Hedda Gabler* the conversations between Hedda and Judge Brack let us know that they are aristocrats and that Hedda's husband and his family are middle class. Second, we learn about setting from the sets produced by the set designer. Sheridan doesn't tell us what the interiors for *School for Scandal* should look like. He says simply that throughout the play the setting is "London" and that in act one it is "Lady Sneerwell's house." A set designer, however, would do research on the interior design of fashionable homes in late-eighteenth-century England and produce that image on stage. The set, in short, should "say" that these people are aristocrats.

Third, we learn about setting from the knowledge we *bring* to the performance. The playwright alludes to the nature of the setting and assumes we will fill in the details. As Americans, for example, we have relatively little trouble understanding the setting of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, even though it is set in seventeenth-century New England. Miller expects us to know something about the Salem witch trials and about the McCarthy "witch-hunts" of the 1950s, and most Americans who see that play do know about them.

A problem surfaces, however, when the audience does not have the supplemental information to complete the setting of the play—audiences from other cultures or other time periods. Chekhov's plays are a case in point. *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, plays against a background of Russian history that Chekhov assumes we know: the reform acts of Czar Alexander II (1855–1881), including the freeing of the serfs in 1861 and the establishing of the *zemstvo* system of local self-government; Alexander's assassination by anarchists in 1881; the rigid autocracy of the next czar, Alexander III (1881–1894); and the ineffectual and repressive reign of his successor, Nicholas II (1894–1917),

which revived revolutionary movements in the late 1890s. *The Cherry Orchard* focuses on the passing of a decrepit aristocratic order and the rising of a vigorous middle class and financial order. For us even to recognize this concern, it helps to know a little Russian history. Otherwise, we may be confused about why the aristocrats are so nostalgic, whimsical, and impractical in the face of imminent financial disaster. Chekhov wants us to see that their attitude is both a result and a cause of this historical change.

Playwrights and set designers can choose to give their sets symbolic value. Sets need not be symbolic. The sets in *School for Scandal* will usually be a literal suggestion of aristocratic drawing rooms and mean nothing more than that. To create the illusion of real rooms, the set designer can use physical detail lavishly—furniture, wallpaper, decorative doodads, architectural features, paintings, and clothes. But aspects of sets can take on symbolic or representational meaning. The simplest representational set is a bare stage, which can represent anything the playwright wants—a battlefield, a heath, a forest, or a gothic cathedral. The playwright can be blatantly symbolic, assigning obvious meanings to physical objects. Thornton Wilder does this in *Our Town* when he uses stepladders to represent houses. The playwright can also combine a realistic with a symbolic method. In *Hedda Gabler*, for example, Ibsen calls for solidly “real” things to be put in the two rooms we see of the Tesman house—an armchair, footstools, sofa, tables, French windows, and flowers in vases. But certain objects—Hedda’s pistols, the portrait of General Gabler (Hedda’s father), and the piano—become closely associated with her and her psychological disorders. Equally suggestive are the two rooms: one a large, elegant drawing room located in the front part of the stage and the other a smaller sitting room located in back. In act one Hedda’s piano is in the drawing room, but in act two it is out of sight in the back room. In fact, as the play proceeds, the back room becomes more and more “Hedda’s room” and the drawing room “Tesman’s room.” Even the portrait of General Gabler is in the back room. At the end of the play, Hedda retreats to the back room, pulls the curtains, frantically plays the piano, and shoots herself. It is as if the back room represents an increasingly restricted physical and emotional space for Hedda, until at last it becomes her prison and coffin.

Questions about setting What do you learn about the setting from characters’ behavior and dialogue? What kind of sets does the play seem to call for? What costumes would you have the actors wear? What costumes would best fit particular characters? Does the play seem to re-

quire background knowledge on your part to understand its setting? What are the symbolic possibilities in particular objects or in larger portions of the set? What relationships does the setting have to characterization? What emotional feel—atmosphere—does the setting have? What relationships does the setting have to theme?

■ Thinking on Paper about Setting

1. For each major unit of the play, describe the place where the action occurs. If the playwright gives a description of the place, summarize the description. If the playwright does not give a description, use information from the dialogue to construct a description. Explain the relationship of place to action, characterization, and theme.
2. Identify the time of day of each unit of the play. Explain how the time of day is represented on stage and its effect on the characters and the action.
3. Identify the time of year of each unit of the play. Explain the relationship of time of year to action, characterization, and theme.
4. Identify the historical period of the play. Give any background information that would be useful for understanding the play. Explain the relationship of the historical period to action, characterization, and theme.
5. Describe the atmosphere of each major unit of the play.
6. Describe the costumes the characters wear. Explain the relationship between costumes, characterization, and theme.
7. Describe your design for the physical world—sets, costumes, sounds, lighting, the works—of one major unit of the play. Explain the reasons for your choices.
8. List the details of setting that have symbolic value. Explain what each symbolizes. Explain the relationship of symbolism to characterization and theme.
9. Explain each major character’s attitude toward the setting.

Theme

Playwrights build themes into their plays through the development and interrelationship of all the elements of drama, most of which are the

same as for fiction. Three methods of developing theme, however, are particularly noteworthy: repetitions, symbols, and contrasts. All three lend themselves well to drama. Audiences can pick up on them easily during performances.

Repetitions can take many forms—a character's performing the same gesture over and over again, repeating the same phrase, stating the same idea, or appearing at regular intervals. But for repetitions to relate to theme, they must develop ideas. Shakespeare does just that in *Hamlet* by repeating and intertwining three concepts: Denmark as "rotten," human beings as sinful, and the king's role as crucial to the health of the state. He characterizes Denmark by repeatedly comparing it to a garden overrun with weeds and to a diseased body, analogies borne out by Hamlet's partial madness and Ophelia's complete madness and suicide. He has key characters dwell on the sinful nature of humankind. The queen says that her own soul is "sick," "as sin's true nature is" (4.5.16). The king says that his "offense is rank, it smells to heaven" because it has "the primal eldest curse" upon it (Cain's murder of Abel, 3.3.36-37). And Hamlet says that even the best people seem to have "some vicious mole of nature in them" that leads them from purity to corruption (1.4.24). (All three of these statements connect sin to sickness.) The corrupt state of Denmark, Shakespeare implies, is the result of the king's sin. For, as one character says, the king is like the hub of a wheel whose spokes connect to "ten thousand lesser things" (3.3.11-23). Whatever the king does affects everyone in the state.

As we noted, *symbolism* can enrich setting; but, in fact, symbolism bears on both characterization and theme as well. It is often hard to separate the effect of symbolism on all three elements. In *Hedda Gabler*, for example, Ibsen contrasts Hedda's and Thea's hair to symbolize their different character traits. Hedda's hair is thin and dull; Thea's is thick and luxuriant. Hedda dates her long-standing rivalry with Thea from their school days, when Hedda threatened to "burn off" Thea's hair. Hedda seems at times to want to inspire people to create, but her efforts end up as destructive; whereas Thea has an innate and unconscious gift for inspiring creativity. This wellspring of inspiration and fertility is symbolized by Thea's hair, which helps explain Hedda's animosity toward it. It's hard to say just what Ibsen's themes in *Hedda Gabler* are; he may simply be trying to present, not explain, Hedda's mysterious perversities. But one implication of the hair symbolism may be that creativity is a mysterious quality existing even in someone as innocent and nonintellectual as Thea and that it may not have anything to do with the intellectual sharpness and forcefulness of people like Hedda. What-

ever Ibsen's themes are, they are inextricably bound up with his characterization of Hedda and Thea.

A simpler—that is, easier to interpret—example of thematic symbolism occurs in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Mrs. Younger, the main character, is the mother of a large extended family, but her environment—a stultifying, roach-infested, inner-city tenement—has kept her from giving the best of life to her children. The house she wants to buy in the suburbs becomes equivalent to new "earth" in which her children and grandchild can "grow," because, as she says, they are her "harvest." To emphasize the analogy between the house and a garden, Hansberry shows Mrs. Younger constantly dreaming of working in the garden at the new house, and, as a moving present, her children give her garden tools. The most visible symbol of Mrs. Younger's frustrations and aspirations, however, is a sickly houseplant she has been trying for years to nurture. The audience sees the plant sitting in the window. Mrs. Younger fusses over it. Her children chide her for messing with it, but she persists. The last thing we see her do is say goodbye to the oppressive apartment and carry the plant out the door. At the new house, it will revive in the sunshine and clean air of a better world. The message seems clear: People are like plants; they become healthy—mentally, morally, and physically—only in hospitable environments.

Like symbolism, *contrast* helps develop not just theme but characterization and plot. We have already seen many examples of contrast in the plays we have discussed so far: romantic love (Romeo and Juliet) versus social requirements (the Montagues and the Capulets), Thea versus Hedda, Macbeth versus Duncan, old Russia versus new Russia, Hamlet's father versus the new king. Often, playwrights repeat situations but vary them in such ways that the differences have thematic implications. In *Macbeth*, for example, Shakespeare places nearly identical events at the beginning and end. At the beginning, Scotland has just defeated Norway. The traitorous Thane of Cawdor is executed, and Macbeth triumphantly displays the head of another rebel by putting it on a stake. As a reward for valor, the king designates Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor. At the end of the play, another battle is fought; Macbeth is killed as a "usurper," and his head is cut off and held aloft as a sign of revenge and victory. Ironically, Macbeth has changed places with the first Thane of Cawdor in both name and nature, and the circumstances of their deaths are almost identical.

A more far-reaching example of contrast is the Surface brothers in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. Joseph Surface pretends to be good, but he

is in fact selfish and destructive. Charles Surface leads a carefree and careless life; he seems to be a wastrel, but he is in fact generous and honest. Their uncle and benefactor, Sir Oliver Surface, a brusque but warmhearted man, has just returned to England after a long absence and wants to ferret out the true nature of his two potential heirs. To do this he visits each brother separately, disguised as someone else. Both scenes are so similar that an audience cannot fail to notice the similarity; Sheridan uses the similarity to contrast the brothers. The first scene, with Charles, does indeed expose his good qualities. The audience now knows how the scene will go and gleefully awaits the second scene, in which the despicable Joseph will unwittingly reveal his selfishness and pride. This contrast not only develops plot and character, it also points a moral—that the appearance of goodness is worthless without the practice of goodness.

Questions about theme What repetitions occur in the play? What meaning can you draw from these repetitions? What symbols does the author deliberately establish? How do you know they are symbols? What do the symbols seem to mean?

What contrasts does the playwright establish? Which are the obvious contrasts and which are the not-so-obvious contrasts? In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, we easily spot the contrast between the lovers and the parents, but other contrasts are suggestive: Romeo is different from Juliet and is perhaps partly to blame for their deaths; Prince Escalus is different from the parents; the nurse's attitude toward love contrasts starkly with Juliet's; the friar's attitude toward love is different from Romeo's. Any one or a combination of these contrasts would make a good focus for interpretation. How is contrast related to the conflicts in the plot? Hedda and Thea are not only different from each other, they are in conflict. What values, then, do the contrasting sides of a conflict manifest?

■ Thinking on Paper about Theme

1. List the subjects of the play (the issues or problems the play seems to be about). State themes for each of these subjects (what the play seems to be saying about these issues and problems).
2. Mark speeches and sections of dialogue that help develop a particular theme. Look especially for "the big speech," which will typically be longer than most and will forcefully state a theme. Hamlet's "To

be or not to be" speech is an example. There may be more than one "big speech." Summarize them and explain how the actions of the play develop their ideas.

3. Explain in detail how an important scene helps develop themes.
4. Trace the development of one theme throughout the play. Mark all the passages that help develop this theme. Summarize the plot as it relates to this theme.
5. List the images (sensuous images, metaphors) that recur in the play. Explain the ideas they seem to develop.
6. List other repetitions (characters' actions and words, characters' ob- sessions, scenes, details of setting). Explain their relationship to characterization and theme.
7. List the symbols in the play. For each symbol, list its meanings.
8. Describe the important contrasts in the play (of characters, scenes, values, actions, physical objects). Explain how these contrasts help expose character traits and develop theme.

Irony

The presence of an audience at performances of plays affects profoundly the way plays are written and the way productions are conceived. The actors, of course, pretend to be real people involved in real human relationships. But unlike real life, these fictional activities are witnessed by an audience of total strangers. It is as if the front wall of your neighbor's house were taken away and the whole neighborhood were standing outside watching everything your neighbors are doing, hearing everything they are saying. The playwright or producer must decide whether to exclude or include the audience as participants in the play. If the choice is to exclude the audience, the production assumes that no one is watching. The production establishes a physical and psychological distance between the performance and the audience (the performance lighted, the auditorium dark; the performance up on stage, the audience down and away from the stage), and the actors pretend the audience is not there. If the choice is to include the audience, then measures are taken to bring the audience "into" the play. The physical distance between performance and audience may be reduced (by building the stage out into the auditorium or by having the actors circulate among the audience). The actors may look at the audience,

gesture to it, or talk to it as if the audience were another person. Shakespeare's drama includes these possibilities with its numerous asides and soliloquies.

One prominent device that relies entirely on the presence of an audience, and on what the audience is thinking, is dramatic irony. *Dramatic irony* in effect does acknowledge the presence of the audience because it gives the audience the privilege of knowing things that one or more characters do not know. Dramatic irony occurs when characters say or do something that has meaning the audience recognizes but the characters do not. The concept of dramatic irony can be extended to all situations in which characters are blind to facts the audience knows. Sometimes only the audience is aware of the ironic contrast between the character's words or actions and the truth; sometimes the audience shares this knowledge with other characters onstage.

In the two parallel scenes in *School for Scandal*, for example, the audience knows that Sir Oliver Surface is wearing a mask to test his nephews—and, of course, Sir Oliver knows—but the nephews do not. So the audience recognizes as ironic everything the nephews do and say that works for or against their self-interest, particularly in the case of Joseph, who would treat Sir Oliver with meticulous courtesy if only he knew who he was. In another scene from this play, Lady Teazle hides behind a screen while her husband, unaware of her presence, talks about her. When he says that he wants to leave her a lot of money upon his death, but that he does not want her to know about it yet, we recognize his statement as ironic because we know—and he does not—that Lady Teazle has heard everything.

A powerful example of dramatic irony occurs in the last scenes of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Before Desdemona goes to bed, she sings a song about a man who accuses his love of being promiscuous. She asks Emilia, her lady-in-waiting, if any woman could so treat her husband. Emilia says that some might for the right "price," but Desdemona says that she could not do so "for the whole world." The audience recognizes her comments as ironic, because Othello, unbeknownst to Desdemona, is nearly insane with the belief that she is a "whore" and plans to kill her for it. Later, when Othello is strangling Desdemona, he boasts that even if he is "cruel" he is at least "merciful" because he will kill her quickly without allowing her to "linger in . . . pain." But his "mercy" contrasts horribly with our knowledge of her innocence and the quality of mercy she justly deserves. When he defends his murder to Emilia, he says,

Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband [Iago] else.
O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell
But that I did proceed upon just grounds
To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all. (5.2. 137–140)

We know, and poor Othello is about to find out, that Iago has betrayed him and that he has in truth had no "just grounds" for the "extremity" of his deed.

Questions about irony To what extent does the playwright seem to want the audience involved in the action? How would you perform such audience-involving devices as soliloquies and asides? To whom, for example, would you have the actors make asides? What advantages are there in performing the play as if the audience is not there?

Like fiction and poetry, drama uses all kinds of irony. Verbal irony is very prevalent simply because drama relies so heavily on dialogue. Sometimes the director and actors themselves must decide whether particular lines are ironic. When Thea, for example, tells Hedda about inspiring Loeborg to write his book, Hedda interjects comments such as "Poor, pretty little Thea"; "But my dear Thea! How brave of you!"; "Clever little Thea!" (284–289) It is almost certain that Hedda means these statements ironically. The actress would probably say them, then, with enough sarcasm to let the audience know how Hedda really feels about Thea's successes, but not with enough bite to let the slow-witted Thea pick up on the irony.

What are the ironies, then, in the play you are studying? How do they relate to characterization and theme? Most important, what dramatic ironies does the playwright build into the play? Do the dramatic ironies—such as Othello's repeated description of Iago as "honest"—create a pattern of revelation or meaning? Why do the dramatic ironies appear where they do in the play?

■ Thinking on Paper about Irony

1. Explain the extent to which the play seems to invite audience participation.
2. Mark the instances in the play of dramatic irony. Explain what the dramatic irony reveals about characterization and theme.

3. Mark the instances of verbal irony. Explain what the verbal irony reveals about the characters who use it.
4. List the instances of situational irony. Explain the importance of situational irony to characterization and theme. (For a definition of situational irony, see Chapter 3.)
5. List the instances of attitudinal irony. Explain the importance of attitudinal irony to characterization and theme. (For a definition of attitudinal irony, see Chapter 3.)

Subgenres

The best-known subgenres of drama are tragedy and comedy, but there are many others: melodrama, theater of the absurd, allegory, comedy of manners, the spectacle, the masque, modern drama, farce, and tragicomedy. Some, like musicals, opera, and ballet, shade into other art forms.

Definitions of subgenres can lead to fruitful interpretations of individual works. The definition of *tragedy*, for example, began with the first and most famous discussion of it, that in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle based his definition on an inductive examination of Greek tragedy, and he seems in particular to have had Sophocles's plays in mind. His definition focuses primarily on the effect of the play on the audience and on the nature of the tragic hero. The hero, he says, inspires "pity" and "fear" in the audience: pity because the hero doesn't deserve his fate and fear because the hero's fate could be anyone's. The audience, in other words, identifies deeply with the tragic hero. The hero is noble but flawed. He has one principal flaw—in Sophocles, usually the flaw of pride. This flaw Aristotle called a *hamartia*, literally a "miscalculation." Because of the hero's flaw, he suffers emotionally and experiences a reversal of fortune, moving abruptly from a high place (high social position, wealth, responsibility, purity) to a low place. Before this reversal occurs, the hero understands for the first time his flawed state and his error-filled ways. This moment is the "recognition" and usually occurs at the climax of the play. The hero recognizes that he is responsible for his deeds and that they contradict a moral order inherent in the entire cosmos. The effect of the play on the audience is to induce a *catharsis*, a feeling of emotional release and exuberance.

Aristotle planned to write as comprehensively on *comedy* as on tragedy, but either that part of the *Poetics* was lost, or he never got around to it. It is hard to see, however, how he could have made comedy any less enigmatic than it still appears to us, for the nature of com-

edy is difficult to pin down, both artistically and psychologically. Numerous essays have been written trying to explain why people laugh, and all are speculative. Laughter is only one of the puzzling aspects of comedy. Most people would agree on some of the aspects of comedy. Comedy is the depiction of the ludicrous; that is, a gross departure from the serious. Therefore, in order to see something as comic, you must first understand what is "serious." Drama communicates to a community of playgoers, so the comic in drama is closely related to what the community *thinks* is serious. If the community thinks that proper attire for men is a business suit, tie, and polished shoes, then a gross distortion of that dress—by a clown in a circus, for example—would be comic. The basic methods of signaling the ludicrous are incongruity and exaggeration. It is incongruous for a haughty, spiffily dressed man, walking nose in the air, to slip and fall face first into a mud hole or to be hit in the face with a cream pie. Further, comedy must cause no pain to the audience. This means that the audience cannot identify as deeply with comic figures as it does with tragic figures and that the method of presentation—language, acting, setting—must communicate an air of "fantasy." Through its methods and style, the production constantly says, "This isn't true. It's only a joke." The fantasy element in comedies helps explain why they almost always end happily, whereas tragedies end unhappily. Finally, the characters in comedy are more "realistic" than in tragedy. They are more like us, whereas in tragedy they are, even in their flawed state (sometimes *because* of their flawed state), far nobler than we are.

Questions about subgenres Definitions of genres and subgenres are useful only if they help you understand specific works. Aristotle was trying to understand Greek tragedy, so it does non-Greek tragedies an injustice to rigidly apply his definition to them. The same goes, really, for anyone's definition of a subgenre because literature is too varied and complex a phenomenon to fit neatly into categories. You should use definitions like Aristotle's as insights into the probable nature of a work and base your questions on those insights. You can take every part of these definitions of tragedy and comedy and turn each into a probing question aimed at a specific work: What is the character's major flaw? Does he or she have more than one flaw? When does the recognition scene occur? What does the character recognize? What incongruities cause the comedy? What do the incongruities reveal about the playwright's attitude toward the characters and setting? Are there hints of satire in these incongruities? How does the playwright establish the detachment necessary for us to laugh?

You might also apply definitions like these to works that do not quite fit the categories and see what you come up with. Some people regard *Hedda Gabler* as something like a “tragedy” but not exactly an Aristotelian tragedy. Will any parts of Aristotle’s definition apply to *Hedda Gabler*? Which fit well? Which do not? Does Hedda have a “tragic flaw”? Is she responsible for her actions? Is she to blame for the harm she causes? Does she have a moment or moments of recognition? Is she nobler than we are? Does she experience a “reversal”? How does the audience feel after seeing or reading the play? Does the audience experience pity and fear for Hedda?

Some of the most interesting questions about subgenres emerge from plays that mix subgenres. Why, for example, are there comic elements in Shakespeare’s tragedies? Is *The Cherry Orchard* a comedy? a tragedy? both? Are we supposed to laugh or cry at the fate of Chekhov’s ineffectual aristocrats? If Aristotle’s definition or someone else’s provides no explanation for some feature of a play, can you invent an explanation of your own?

■ Thinking on Paper about Subgenres

1. If you know the subgenre to which the play belongs (tragedy, comedy, farce, and so forth), find a good definition of the subgenre. List the characteristics of the subgenre.
2. Take one item from the list and explain how well it applies to the play. If Hamlet is a tragic character, for example, what might be his tragic flaw? What constitutes his reversal? When does he experience a recognition? How does the audience respond to him?

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