

Analyzing Drama (plays)

Overview

Drama tends to differ from other literary works by its reliance upon dialogue and characters. An analysis of a play is not a summary. An analysis requires an interpretation (explication) by the reader. An analysis may focus upon a single element of a play (plot, character, dialogue, etc.). An explication (or interpretation) of a work may concentrate on a specific part of the play (line-by-line or word-by-word). An explication entails not only what the work means, but how it accomplishes the author's purpose.

The General Process

1. **Examine the title:** Is it indicative of a conflict or a human condition? Is it symbolic of something else? Is it sarcastic, satiric, humorous, or serious? Is it descriptive? Why do you think the author chose it?
2. **Read the play:** Are there any indications of the meaning? What is the topic? The setting? The voice (the speaker)? Is there a historical or cultural link?
3. **Study the ending:** Where has the play taken you?
4. **Examine the play by parts:** Are the acts or scenes symbolic? Is there a purpose for breaking the acts or scenes at specific points?
5. **Determine the tone:** What is the author's attitude toward the subject of the play?

Analyzing Drama

Approach a play by looking for clues. The following questions might help you discover a playwright's purpose and how he or she attempts to convey meaning. When writing your paper, you may concentrate on only one of these "clues" or several of them. The first clue (theme), however, is usually the most critical.

Read the play several times before starting your analysis. A slow, careful reading of the work is essential.

1. **What is the theme?** What is the author trying to say? What is the play about? What is the significance of the play? How is the theme revealed through the characters? The plot? The dialogue? The acts or scenes?
2. **What happens?** Are conflicts introduced? Resolved? Is the play tragic? Humorous? Insightful? Is the conflict external (man vs. man) or internal (man in conflict with self)?

3. **Who are the characters?** Who is the protagonist? Antagonist? How do the characters relate to one another? What is their function within the plot? What are the “points of view” or perspectives of the characters? A perspective might be social, intellectual, political, or even physical.
4. **What is the setting?** What is the time and place? How do they relate to the theme?
5. **Are there any key statements?** Are there any critical lines expressed by the characters that indicate the theme or provide clues to personalities?
6. **How does language contribute to the meaning?** Dialogue drives any play. How does the author use speech to develop the characters? Advance the plot? What kind of words are used? Are there words with double meanings? Are characters revealed by their dialects or jargon?
7. **Does the play refer to other literary works?** For example, is there a Biblical reference?
8. **Is there a historical, ideological, or cultural aspect?** Does the play relate to a world event, period of time, or particular aspect of culture (race, status, gender, class)? Does the play reflect any aspect of human condition or experience (love, hate, orderliness of the universe, etc.)?
9. **What qualities or emotions does the play evoke?** How does it make you feel? Happy? Sad?

Writing the Analysis

1. Write a clear introduction of the play, indicating the title and author. Follow the introduction with a precise thesis statement that tells the reader “the point” of your essay.
2. Move point by point through your paper, making certain that each paragraph has a topic sentence and the other sentences in the paragraph support or expand upon the topic sentence.
3. Write a conclusion that ties the paper together: It should re-state the thesis in different words.