

Support for writing about drama as drama on GCSE and International GCSE English Literature

Some key questions to ask about the drama you're studying

- Plot structure: Chronological or non-chronological order? 3 or 5 acts? Resolution or cliff-hanger?
- Layered central conflict: What happens to the main character (protagonist)? Who or what do they come into conflict with? How do they deal with this? Do they succeed?
- Multi-layered, self-conflicted characters: What other characters (or adversaries) are introduced? How do they interact/ conflict with the protagonist? Are they a dramatic foil for the protagonist? If so, who wins? Do they have inner problems/conflicts of their own? If so, do these affect the action / success of the protagonist?
- Disguise / deceit: Are the characters reliable or do they deceive others and the audience? Does the playwright use the theme of appearance versus reality to create dramatic tension in the plot? Does the playwright use dramatic irony so that the audience knows more about the characters' motives and feelings than the protagonist? Do we trust the protagonist or is the audience manipulated?
- Unexpected Complications/ outcomes: Does the play end as we expect or is there a turn in events? In a 5 act play this usually happens in Act 4 so that either the conflicts are resolved or left unresolved in Act 5. Does any character change or go through an epiphany which allows the problems to be resolved? Are there any reunions or revelations which allow reconciliation?

Dramatic Techniques

Dramatic Irony

Occurs when the audience knows a secret, but the characters in a play do not. Therefore, the words or actions of a character carry a special meaning for the audience but are understood differently by the character. The characters are blind to facts, but the audience is not.

Dramatic Tension

Dramatic tension is a state of uncertainty and lack of knowledge, sometimes also referring to the state of waiting. Tension creates a calculated vagueness over the outcome, an uncertain expectation of an event.

Dramatic pauses and cliff-hanger

Dramatic pauses in dialogue create tension for the audience. Cliff-hangers are used not only to build drama, but to give the audience space to contemplate and question their own actions, and opinions on the actions of the characters. For example, in 'An Inspector Calls' the ending is unresolved.

Dramatic Conflict

Dramatic conflict is a situation in which characters are involved in conflicts that solicit the audience's empathetic involvement in their predicament.

Paradox

Is a device used to attract the audience's attention. It is a statement that seems contradictory or absurd, but well-founded and true at the same time.

Soliloquy

Is a speech given by a character in a play when the speaker is alone. This is presented to inform the audience of what is happening in the mind of a character and to give information about the action of the play.

Pathetic Fallacy

Is a device used by writers whereby nature mirrors the political condition of society or the characters. Pathos is a situation that elicits pity from the audience.

Aside

A speech made by an actor DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE, but seemingly to himself or herself. It is always a true reflection of the character's thoughts. Its function is to reveal character.

Foreshadowing

A hint or warning of things to come, making specific events in the plot seem more probable as they unfold.

Flashback

A flashback interrupts the chronological sequence, the front-line action or "present" line of the story, to show an audience a scene that unfolded in the past.

Imagery

Using images to describe or compare something, so that the audience forms a picture in their mind.

Dramatic foil

A dramatic foil, or foil character, is a character with qualities that highlight another character's (usually but not necessarily the protagonist's) quality or qualities, usually by having contrasting qualities.

Hamartia

Is an ancient Greek theatre term meaning the error, frailty, mistaken judgment or misstep through which the fortunes of the hero of a tragedy are reversed. Hamartia must express itself through a definite action, or, failure to perform a definite action. Hamartia can result from bad judgment, a bad character, ignorance, inherited weakness, or accident. This error does not always result from an error in character.

Tragic hero

The tragedy is about waste, a waste of people and a waste of unrealized potential. Hamlet has high individual potential, which is wasted by an individual weakness that significantly affects others. If Hamlet's potential had been realized, he would have been a hero. Unrealized potential is the difference between a successful versus an unsuccessful quest. Often a tragic hero is battling against his fate which he cannot overcome.

Nemesis

Is applied to justice, which comes about when an evil act brings about its own punishment and poetic justice prevails.

Epiphany

A moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation which leads to a change in viewpoint or character.

Dramatic structure

The structuring of the action is commonly described using the following terms: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

Exposition (or Introduction)

The exposition brings the audience up to date as quickly as possible, giving the setting (year, time of day, locale, etc.), the atmosphere (mood) and the main characters.

Rising action (or complication)

Rising action in literature refers to all the events that happen in a story on the way to the climax. The rising action pushes the plot along, building tension to keep us invested in the story as it moves forward. It is the second stage in the plot, after the initial exposition.

Dramatic Climax

This is the highest point of tension or drama in the plot. Often, climax is also when the main problem of the story is faced and solved by the main character or protagonist.

Falling action (or second complication: return or fall?)

Falling action is everything that takes place immediately after the climax. The purpose of falling action is to bring the story from climax to a resolution. This is the point where the outcome is decided: does the conflict get resolved or is there a second complication which will lead to tragedy?

Denouement

The final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved.

Types of Drama

Tragedy

A type of drama of human conflict which ends in defeat and suffering. Often the main character (dignified, noble) has a tragic flaw (weakness of character, wrong judgment) that leads to their destruction. Sometimes the conflict is with forces beyond the control of the character – fate, or evil in the world.

Comedy

Comedy is a genre of dramatic performance having a light or humorous tone that depicts amusing incidents and in which the characters ultimately triumph over evil/adversity.

Farce

Farce is a comedy that seeks to entertain an audience through situations that are highly exaggerated, extravagant, ridiculous, absurd, and improbable.

Melodrama

A sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions. It may be interspersed with songs and orchestral music accompanying the action.

Romantic drama

Romantic drama is a genre that explores the complex side of love. The plot usually centres around an obstacle that is preventing love between two people. The obstacles in romantic drama can range from a family's disapproval, to forbidden love, to one's own psychological restraints.

Tragicomedy

A tragicomedy might be a serious drama interspersed with funny moments that periodically lighten the mood, or a drama that has a happy ending. Shakespeare's later plays began as tragedies then turned out happily as a reconciliation occurred in acts 3 or 4.

Writing about Drama

When writing about a play you should consider:

Characterisation

How the characters have been created and what they might represent/symbolise. How do they introduce and develop the main themes of the play?

How might they represent the playwright's views?

Which do we empathise with?

Setting

Where is the play set? Does it have multiple settings which contrast each other or is the action set in one location?

What might these settings symbolise? Has the playwright used pathetic fallacy to make the settings reflect the moods / feelings of the characters and events?

How does the staging/ lighting affect the atmosphere? How does this change throughout the play?

Stage Directions

Has the playwright used detailed stage directions? If so, what do they tell the audience about the characters and the way they speak/act?

Has the playwright used minimal stage directions so that the audience can judge for themselves?

What do the stage directions tell us about the way the characters interact (entrances and exits/asides to the audience/tone and mood)?

How does the playwright's use of sound effects, lighting and staging affect the dramatic tension on stage?

Dialogue

How do the characters speak and how does this affect the way the audience judges them. For example, do they use dialogue to gain power/ control over others?

How do characters interact with each other? What tone or mood do they use? Do they use any gestures / facial expressions which tell us what they are thinking?

What type of language do they use: formal, colloquial, do they have an accent/dialect (non-standard speech)?

Do they use imagery, sarcasm, hyperbole (exaggeration for effect), humour or double entendre (implied meaning)? How does the way they speak affect the way other characters and the audience view them?