

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

ENG 3060: INTRO TO LITERARY STUDY

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PLOT & STRUCTURE

The structure or staging of the play is concerned with questions about the elements that unify the play's structure and questions about the formal devices of plot organization.

- What principles unify the play into a cohesive structure? Around what conflicts, story lines, or themes does the action center?
- Are there any symbols, metaphors, or images that support the development of the central ideas?
- How is the action of the play organized? Are there traditional act and scene breaks? Does the play continue to its conclusion with no intermission? Has the playwright devised alternative methods of dividing and breaking the action? Why might the playwright have chosen this organizational technique?
- How does the organization contribute to the overall effect of the play? Is it appropriate for the play's subject matter or theme?
- Does the play maintain unity of time and place, or does it move freely between past and present or across geographic space? What devices does the playwright use to facilitate that movement?

CHARACTER

We learn about a dramatic character in much the same way that we form impressions about someone whom we meet in the world, by observing a variety of behaviors associated with that person.

- What does the audience learn about the characters from the content of their speech, the quality of their speech, the tone of their speech?
- What do the characters' actions and the reactions of others reveal about them?
- What do other characters say about a particular character?
- What does the audience learn from the appearance, demeanor, and movement of a character?

STAGES, SETS, AND SETTING

Plays are intended for performance and a full recognition of the play's intentions must include consideration of its physical and technical aspects; be sure to look at the stage directions to find clues to the author's intentions.

- Does this play call for a traditional proscenium arch staging to maintain the illusion of reality, or would an alternative arrangement, such as an arena stage, have a more powerful effect?
- How do you envision the sets, props, costumes, and lighting? Perhaps design your own vision of a particular scene from the play.
- Is anything about the setting or staging of the play essential to the central theme or to character development? Why, for instance, does Quiara Alegría Hudes insist on the “two worlds” of the stage (the “real world” and the “online world”) in *Water by the Spoonful*?



TONE AND STYLE

Because of the performative nature of drama, how an actor speaks his or her lines may be as important as the meaning of the words themselves. Unless you have the opportunity to see a performance of a play, you may miss important connotations embedded in the tone of delivery. Like poetry, you might want to read the dialogue aloud.

- How might you describe the tone or attitude of the first reading of the passage? How does a change in tone change the meaning of the passage? How does it change your overall perception of the character?
- What clues does the playwright provide to signal the tone of the play or the tone of a particular passage in the play? Are there explicit stage directions to guide the director and actors, or is the tone largely a matter of interpretation?



THEME

Essentially, analysis of a play requires looking at each clue, each piece of evidence created by the playwright, building in the process a deeper understanding of the play's overall thematic concerns.

- After you have considered all the elements of the play, what broader subject does a synthesis of those elements suggest?
- Can that subject be expressed in a single statement against which the evidence of the play can be compared?
- What other interpretations are possible based on an analysis of the elements of drama?