

Reading Drama

A play has much in common with fiction and poetry; it contains elements of each—usually a character-driven plot, as in fiction, and also close attention to evocative language, as in poetry. A play differs from fiction and poetry in that a script is primarily a blueprint for production, not intended to be read silently by a single reader; in fact, in a way, a play is incomplete until it is acted out on a stage before an audience (or filmed). With the exception of brief stage directions, plays consist entirely of the dialogue spoken between characters (and sometimes monologues). Thus, the best way to read or study a play is to imagine it in production, with a set, actors in costume, props, sound and lighting effects. A play is usually easy to follow once you picture it in your mind and begin to “hear” the voices of the characters as they interact. The following elements will assist you in that endeavor:

PLOT/STRUCTURE

Plays are written in **scenes** that are organized into **acts**. A short play is usually a single act that runs continuously for about 45 minutes. A full-length play usually consists of two or three acts, running about 45 minutes each; each act is usually divided into separate scenes, divided by blackouts and/or scene changes. Acts are often separated by intermissions of fifteen minutes, providing an opportunity to stand, use the restroom, and reflect upon the drama so far. An evening of theatre normally runs two to three hours, including intermission(s). **Most plays**, like novels, **tell a continuous single story**, often augmented by subplots (or side stories) that inform the main plot.

CHARACTER/DIALOGUE

In fiction, the author has a wide range of methods in which character may be expressed—through narration of a character’s thoughts and feelings. This luxury does not exist in theatre, where the playwright is limited to **what a character says and does**. Thus, much is communicated subtly in a play, via something called *subtext*—the underlying meanings and motivations which the dialogue may only hint at. By carefully listening to tone of voice, the audience may hear variations of mood and meaning wrapped around the actual spoken lines. *Verbal irony* is a common element in plays. Good actors can bring suggestive life to even the most mundane dialogue by communicating subtext. Also, *staging* and *body language* communicate much about character interactions.

SETTING/STAGECRAFT

The art of stagecraft is essential to theatre. Most scripts begin with a description of **the set**, with changes noted at the beginning of each scene. After carefully analyzing the script, a set designer will draw, then build a set to contain the action, often with small props, furniture, and additional pieces that add to the environment and underscore the mood of the play. **Set designs** range from minimal to lavish, with most somewhere in between; given the small budgets of most theatrical companies, the art of suggestion is usually preferred to the elaborate. Common settings include rooms and/or offices, alleyways and/or street scenes. Often **sound effects** help create the needed illusion:

traffic noise, music, or common household appliances. Pay careful attention to the **stage directions** in a play; they will help you imagine the sights and sounds that you would experience with your senses in the theatre during an actual production.

COSTUMES/PROPS

Costume designers work hard from hints in the script to find clothing appropriate to each character, since the clothing of a character speaks even when the character is silent. Historically and geographically correct **costumes** go a long way in creating a successful dramatic illusion for the audience, making it easier for them to enter the imaginary world of the play. Often, too, the story involves **props** that must be placed on stage by the *stage manager* or carried by the *actors*. Something as simple as a clipboard may speak volumes about a character and provide many opportunities to express important personality traits. A woman holding a dirty dish, a man seated behind a desk with a photo of his family, a cop with a taser strapped to his belt—these things assist the playwright in telling the story and provide the necessary touches to communicate the illusion of real-life people and situations.

LIGHTING/SOUND

In addition to actors and directors, who present the play, set and costume designers, who dress and contain the players, **lighting** and **sound** designers contribute things we often take for granted in a theatrical production. Modern theatres are equipped with very sophisticated lights, which can be filtered, colored, and pre-programmed into an engineering board and run by a single operator from a booth in the rear of the house. Sound design is often digitally pre-recorded and played in a parallel track to the lights. A honking car, a music cue, city noise, etc.—these things are commonly added *to prompt the audience's imagination and suggest the mood of a scene*. Attention to such cues in the script can bring these elements to life in the reader's imagination, enriching the reading experience almost as much as being in the theatre.

THEME/MEANING

All literary forms exist to communicate **themes**—central ideas that the author emphasizes in his/her story. Read and listen carefully for the ideas or issues raised in a drama. Watch the way these ideas are dramatized as actual lived events in the character's lives. You will find yourself prompted to analysis and interpretation. The lobby of a theatre is a stimulating place to be during intermission or at the end of the play, as audience members stop to ask questions, reflect upon the play's events and central ideas, discuss the parts of the play that moved them in some way or other. Great plays, like great poems or great novels, create a powerful synthesis of compelling ideas and heightened moments of drama or comedy, or both. They can touch us emotionally, enrich our minds, and expand our vision, suggesting connections we may not have previously considered, even create community where none existed. Ideas, embodied in the words that convey them, are the most powerful force on the planet. Individual people, communities, whole societies are shaped by writers who use their talent and imaginations to create worlds out of thin air. "We are such stuff," Shakespeare mused, "as dreams are made on."