Analyzing a Play

In analyzing a play, it is critical that you are able to answer each of the questions in each category listed below. If you are studying to take a test over a play, you might use this sheet to help write your study notes. That is a subtle hint. A more obvious hint is: my tests often ask you these very questions about the play(s) on which you are being tested. Don’t say I never gave you anything.

# Questions about Character

* Who is the protagonist? Why and how so? Which other character, if any, are major or main characters? Which are minor characters?
* What are the protagonist’s most distinctive traits, and what is most distinctive about his or her outlook and values? What motivates the character? What is it about the character that creates internal and/or external conflict? Which lines or stage directions reveal the most about a character?
* What are the roles of other characters? Which, if any, functions as an antagonist? Which, if any, functions as a foil? Does any character function as a narrator or chorus, providing background information and commentary? Why and how so?
* To what extent are any of the characters in the play “types”? How might this affect the audience’s experience of the play? In what ways might a director or actor choose to go against the expected types, and how would this complicate the play’s overall effect and meaning?
* Which of the characters, or which aspects of the characters, does the play encourage us to sympathize with or admire? To view negatively? Why and how so? Are there characters who might be more or less sympathetic depending on how the role is cast and interpreted?
* If you were directing a production of this play, whom among your friends and acquaintances would you cast in each role, and why? If you were directing a movie version, what professional actors would you cast?

# Questions about Plot

* Read the first scene or the first few pages and then stop. What potential for conflict do you see here? What do you expect to happen in the rest of the play?
* How is the play divided into acts, scenes, or episodes, if at all? What is the effect of this division? Does the division of the play correspond, more or less, to the five stages of plot development—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action (resolution), and denouement (conclusion)?
* Does the play show a relatively clear procession through the traditional stages of plot development, or does it seem to defy such conventions? If so, how, and what might the playwright achieve through these departures from tradition?
* What is the inciting incident or destabilizing event? How and why does this event destabilize the initial situation? How would you describe the conflict that develops? To what extent is it internal, external, or both?
* What is the climax or turning point? Why and how so? How is the conflict resolved? How and why might this resolution fulfill or defy your expectations?

# Questions about Setting and Staging

* Does all the action occur in one time and place, or in more than one? If the latter, what are those times and places? How much time seems to pass between scenes or episodes?
* How important do the general time and place seem to be, and in what ways are they important? What about the plot and characters would remain the same if a director chose to set the play in a different time and place? What wouldn’t?
* What patterns do you notice about where and when things happen? Which characters are associated with each setting? How do different characters relate to the same setting? When, how, and why do scenes change from one setting to another? Are there significant deviations?
* Do the stage directions describe particular settings and props in detail? If so, what seems significant about the details? How might they establish mood, reveal character, and affect individual characters and their interactions with one another? Is there anything in the stage directions that seems to be intended more for readers than for a director staging a production?
* Does the date of the play tell you anything about the way it was intended to be staged? Does the representation of time and place in the play implicitly call for a certain type of stage? If you were staging the play today, what kind of stage, sets, and props might you use, and why? How might your choices affect how the play works on audiences and what it means to them?

# Questions about Tone, Language, and Symbol

* Which lines in the play strike you as most ambiguous when it comes to thee tone in which they should be spoken? Why and how so? What is the effect of that ambiguity, or how might an actor’s or reader’s decision about tone here affect the play as a whole?
* How would you describe the overall tone of the whole play? Do any moments or entire scenes or acts in the play seem interestingly different in terms of their tone?
* How do the play’s characters differ from one another in terms of their tone? Does any character’s tone change over the course of the play?
* Are any details—such as names; actions or statements; references to objects, props, or other details of setting; or allusions, metaphors, or other figures of speech—repeated throughout the play? Do any of these details seem to have special significance? If so, what might that significance be?
* What types of irony, if any, are at work in the play? What is the effect of the irony?