

The MAJOR Art and Theory of Drama HANDOUT

The IB Examiner's Definition of the Art of Drama

"The study of the ways in which dramatists handle the different aspects of their chosen medium in order to achieve the most telling expression of their vision."

Remember about the nature of drama:

- ◆ Drama is an art of words, like fiction and poetry, but the words are in dialogue. That dialogue or interaction between characters must be both highly structured (given the constraints of plot) and a simulated spontaneous reflection of human experience.
- ◆ Drama is designed for presentation in a theater (but must balance its two audiences: the viewing audience and the reading audience [of the published product]). In order for us to evaluate a dramatic work of art we must rely not merely upon the witnessed performance but also upon a thorough analysis of the text to determine if the action, characters, and techniques are effectively employed.
- ◆ In reading, always visualize the action of the play. You must read imaginatively and perceptively. The writer makes "conscious use of vocabulary, punctuation, tone, and pace to communicate a message to the reader."
- ◆ The ultimate success of a drama depends on the way it works for the theater (perhaps not in the abstruse hidden meanings the critic can find). Without an audience, there is no theater.
- ◆ Dramatists in different periods have used various devices to project ideas (soliloquies, asides; and, in modern drama, allegory and symbols).
- ◆ The entrance into the dramatic world created by the playwright requires (to differing extents) a leap of imagination or a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge).
- ◆ Drama, like life, is ephemeral because each episode in drama is experienced and then immediately becomes part of the past that can be imitated but never recaptured. The strengths and weaknesses of drama come from its inherent qualities: lifelikeness, ephemerality, objectivity, complexity, and psychological immediacy.
- ◆ Drama is "an art of theatre which is concerned with creating a scenario, overall plan, or complete script (including all dialogue and directions for action and stage effects) as a basis for performance, which may or may not achieve literary excellence."

Good DRAMA THEORY Quotes AND IB-type issues to consider:

- ❖ 'the most moving scenes seem to be those in which we know and can anticipate exactly what will happen, do not want it to happen, but are forced to watch it happen.'
- ❖ Oscar Wilde said that "The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts, but is also the return of art to life".
- ❖ Jacques Maritain once wrote that "Art awakens the dreams of man, and reveals to him some of the abysses he has in himself".
- ❖ "The theatrical artist serves the same function in society that dreams do in our subconscious life...we are the dream makers of society."
- ❖ One playwright called the words "only the outer skin of the play." – AGREE?
- ❖ "The centerpiece of all drama is language – the words delivered on the stage." – AGREE?
- ❖ a play should lead up to a central crisis, and this crisis should consist of a discovery by the leading character which has an indelible effect on his thought and emotion and completely alters his course of action.
- ❖ ON catharsis: The playwright must so arrange his story so that it will prove to the audience that *men pass through suffering purified*, that, animal though we may be, despicable though we are in many ways, there is still in us all some divine, incalculable fire that urges us to be better than we are. Sacrifice leads us to redemption and renewal. Purgation is also a good term to use in the discussion of catharsis.
- ❖ As audiences change, the standards of good and evil change, though slowly and unpredictably, and the meanings of plays change with the centuries. One thing is certain: that an audience watching a play will go along with it only when the leading character responds in the end to what it considers a higher moral purpose than moved him at the start of the play, though the audience will, of course, define morality as it pleases and in the terms of its own day.
- ❖ theater as its best is an age-old rite restating and reassuring Man's belief in his own destiny and his ultimate hope
- ❖ "The playwright may attempt to deliberately lead an audience to an expected conclusion or reaction, but may find their play has a completely different effect or impact." – AGREE?
- ❖ "With a decrease in total time span of the play comes an increase in the power of the drama." – AGREE?
- ❖ Drama presumes that "Man can understand himself by understanding others."
- ❖ "Tragedy is a play in which a central character faces, and is finally defeated by, some overwhelming threat or disaster."
- ❖ "Tragedy concerns not only the self under ultimate pressure but the necessity for the protagonist if not to justify his own existence then to accept his responsibility for his actions."

- ❖ “The successful dramatist knows, instinctively as well as consciously, that what matters is the posing of a problem in a way which will compel the audience to think for themselves.” – AGREE?
- ❖ “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” – Does the character or play prove that “man may start a course of events but can neither calculate or control it.”
- ❖ Does the play reaffirm that life is worth living regardless of pain + suffering? A good criticism of some of these plays is that the answer is an unsatisfying NO.
- ❖ "The dramatist is bound by plot...because the first response an audience in the theatre makes to a play is to the events of the plot." – AGREE?
- ❖ “The moment drama ceases to be about us, it ceases to be drama.” – AGREE?
- ❖ Note – The shift to the common man or woman as the tragic protagonist has led to a concurrent shift from poetry to colloquial and conversational dialogue.

Drama Theory Quotes

- “Man is what he believes.”
- Ibsen always asked: “What does it really mean to be yourself?”
- Nietzsche said that we possess art less we perish of the truth
- **“Art tells the truth** because it expresses the highest feelings of man.”
- Most playwrights now accept (apparently) the nowadays almost universal literary assumption that “truth” is identical with “unpleasantness”, and that once the veil of socially acceptable appearances has been ripped away, the underlying reality consists entirely of things which are sordid, ugly, and cruel.
- Shaw on the purpose of drama: “to force the public to reconsider its morals”
- I insist on making them (my audiences) think in order to bring them to a conviction of sin. (Shaw)
- “To borrow from Nietzsche, it is not that the pain is meaningful but that the meaning itself becomes painful in this play.”
- For the stage at its best is only a mirror held up before the face of the watching house
- *All great art is propaganda*, Shaw insisted, by which he meant it was for the propagation of ideas.
- It is your favorite jibe at me that what I call drama is nothing but explanation.
- The average man clings fondly to two ancient delusions: (a) that wisdom is always solemn, and (b) that he himself is never ridiculous. Some playwrights outrage both of these ideas.
- “It is right to demand that an artist approach his work consciously, but not to confuse two concepts: the solution of a problem and the correct formulation of a problem. Only the second is required of the artist.”
- “All I wanted was to say honestly to people: ‘Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are.’ The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life.”
- “Love, friendship, respect, do not unite people as much as a common hatred of something.”

Four Common Elements of Theatre

- 1) What is performed (script, scenario, or plan)
- 2) The performance (including all the processes involved in preparation and presentation)
- 3) The product (a combination of the first two elements)
- 4) The audience (the perceivers)

Four Elements in the Total Situation of a Work of Art

- 1) The work itself
- 2) The work’s content, form, language, imagery, the artist who produced it, the world that affected the artist
- 3) The subject of the work – includes people, actions, feelings; in other words, the total world of the work
- 4) The audience – the readers or spectators who establish contact with the work

Six Elements in a Play/Tragedy

Plot – most important

Character – most important

Thought - themes, arguments, the overall meaning, focus, or significance of the action; it is one of the major sources of unity in drama; it has universal and individual significance (normally implied rather than directly stated)

Diction – functions of diction are: to impart information, to characterize, to direct attention to or away from, to reveal themes and ideas, to establish tone, to set the tempo and rhythm so as to increase pace or delay movement.

Music (song) – functions of music are: to set mood or cause expectation, to characterize, to provide a medium for ideas, to condense a transition, to add variety, to provide pleasure

Spectacle (scenic effect, lighting, costume, makeup, effects, stage movements) – functions of spectacle are: to provide information, to characterize, to set mood and atmosphere

The Product

“By using living humans in the form of actors to communicate, and taking its subject from human action and experience, theatre is the art that comes closest to life as it is lived day to day ... Theatre is also the most objective of the arts because it presents both outer and inner experience through speech and action.”

“Watching a violent crime on stage is not the same as in real life. While the first may cause a degree of sorrow or anguish, at no time would we attempt to call the police or intervene. **Aesthetic distance** is this desired state of semi-objective detachment from a work of art that forms a bond by means of **empathy** without being allowed to become so great as to cause indifference. Thus, the audience watches a play with a combination of both concern and detachment.”

Process of Discovery (of a play's meaning)

- ♣ Define the setting (the physical world of the drama)
- ♣ Define the time
- ♣ Define the atmosphere
- ♣ Attempt to define a statement of what the play is about

Purpose of Drama

- ✓ tell a story
- ✓ reveal a character
- ✓ illustrate an idea
- ✓ or build interest in some other way
- ✓ “a play either directly or indirectly comments on human experience even as it creates human experience”

Types of Irony *(assignment – find one quote for each type from one of the 4 plays)*

- ☺ *Verbal irony* – discrepancy between what is said and what is meant
- ☺ *Dramatic irony* – discrepancy between what the character knows and what the audience knows OR audience shares with playwright certain knowledge to which a character is uninformed (most frequent type)
- ☺ *Situational irony* – discrepancy between what one anticipates and what actually comes to pass OR when something unexpected happens in an ironic sense
- ☺ *Tragic irony* – a play based on material or plots whose story the audience already knows (derivative of ancient Greek tragedy)
- ☺ *Romantic irony* – playwright builds up an illusion only to shatter it by telling the audience of his/her intent

Character Labels

Consider: (1) protagonist, (2) antagonist, (3) minor characters' roles and functions

Flat characters – are two-dimensional or type or stock character; few details and sketchy attributes given

Round characters – has complex mixture of motivations and thoughts, constructed in subtle fashion like real man

Dynamic characters – are active; outlook of character changes during course of play action

Static characters – are passive; outlook of character DOES NOT change during course of play action

Characterization

*The characters of a play are the personages imbued by the dramatist with moral and personal qualities that they reveal to the audience in two ways: through **dialogue** (the words they speak) and through **action** (the things they do).*

- ❑ Physical description – age, sex, size, etc. (external traits)
- ❑ Social description – economic status, profession or trade, religion, family relationships (establishes environment or context, which may have a direct effect upon the theme)
- ❑ Psychological description – character's responses, attitudes, desires, motivations, emotional and intellectual inner workings of mind (most essential aspect)
- ❑ Moral description – ethical standards, personal motives and values

Four Forms of Dialogue

- 1) *Naturalism* – closes to talking; realism; appeals to audience desire for the actual, but must be accurate; considers that life is what art is about
- 2) *Rhetorical prose* – elevated above the colloquial by intentional artificial speech, relies on the rhythms of speech, is more free than writing in verse, but the dramatist's difficulty is in setting the limits to that freedom
- 3) *Rhetorical verse* – much like prose rhetoric, but maintains meter
- 4) *Poetry* – is not seeking authentic speech, does not take language as it is; in writing, word-finding and thought-thinking occur together creating a new language

OTHER GREAT DRAMA STUFF

- FYI – **Spectacle** is the visual element of the play; after dialogue, spectacle is the playwright's principal means of expression. Spectacle may involve lighting, setting, costumes, make up, stage properties, etc.
NOTE: IB often has a question that poses words vs. spectacle OR verbal elements vs. visual elements OR dialogue vs. actions/appearance/etc.
- The scenery (the set, if any, and the stage furniture), the objects that decorate the set, sound effects, music, the props the characters handle – all may be used to communicate meaning in the medium of the theatre. In addition, there are the clothes the characters wear, their general appearance, the style in which the action is lit by the person in charge of lighting and the use of the theatrical space. (Note: Blocking is the patterns actors move about the stage according to) Meaning is communicated by a combination of all these aspects of performance in a theatre. They provide a writer for the theatre with additional form of language that is non-verbal.
- **Drama:** the word itself is derived from the Greek word dran, which means “to do” or “to act”. Drama is therefore an imitative, or mimetic, art.
- **A stage convention** is a traditional or customary method of presentation that is accepted by audiences or readers and allows a playwright to limit and simplify material. Most stage conventions reflect either the physical conditions of the theater or the prejudices of society in a given age.
- **Realism** in the theatre emerged from a desire to reject excessive theatrical artificiality. It represented everyday reality in a style that would seem familiar to the audience that came to see these new plays. The dramatic language was meant to be close to everyday speech, the situations and setting akin to the kind of social problems and milieus familiar to contemporary audiences. Realism had an influence on the American stage in the period, but mainly in terms of elaborately realistic sets. Theatrical artificiality, including exaggerated acting styles and ‘unrealistic’ language, was replaced with an attempt to represent faithfully the lives of the characters the plays were representing.
- In realistic drama, the playwright seeks to put a perfect and detailed illusion of real life in the play and on the stage. The goal is **verisimilitude** – to be true to life. A major goal of realistic plays is to eliminate traditional but artificial dramatic conventions – such as disguises, overheard conversations, asides, soliloquies, and verse – that do not occur in daily life.
- Realistic drama at its best is a close examination of character in conflict.
- Acting style changes in realistic theatre were due, in large measure, to Konstantin Stanislavsky, one of the founders of the Moscow Arts Theater (1898) and the inventor of what we now term method acting. Stanislavsky argued that actors had to build characterizations on a lifelong study of inner truths and motivation. He taught actors to search their own lives for the feelings, motivations, and behavior of the characters they portrayed.
- In **nonrealistic drama**, the structure of the plot is more fluid than realistic drama. Action can shift from the present to the past with little or no transition; flashbacks can be mixed with present action, or the entire play can dramatize the past through a present perspective. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, recollected past action is revealed through the present memories of the narrator. Similarly, the action in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* constantly shifts between present and past action and fantasy.
- There may be differences in plot, characterization, and language as well as production techniques between realistic and non-realistic dramas. Whereas the staging of a realistic drama must be as true to life as possible, nonrealistic drama can be staged with few or no realistic effects. This lighting can indicate instantaneous shifts of location, flashbacks or changes in mood. Spotlights may illuminate and emphasize specific objects and characters in ways that never happen in reality. Settings (or the sets) may be symbolic and expressive of mood, employing lighting and semitransparent painted cloth (scrim) to create the effect of multiple places or times on stage simultaneously. Such expressionistic settings are described in the stage directions for *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- Perhaps the most important difference between the realistic and modern nonrealistic drama concerns the play's relationships to the theater, the audience and the world at large. In realistic drama, the play presents a self-contained action in a self-contained world that imitates reality. The illusion of reality is never compromised. The actors never drop out of character, the audience is never addressed, and the play never acknowledges that it is a play. But modern nonrealistic drama tends toward the other extreme; it can be full of devices that break through the illusion on the stage (or the page) and scream out that the play is a play, a work of art, a stylized imitation of something like life. These devices include symbolic characters, poetry, music, minimalist or expressionistic settings, that flows off the stage into the auditorium, and speeches made directly to the spectators or the reader. All these and other devices produce the same general effects: they break the illusion of reality, and remind us that we are reading or watching a play.
- Remember though, most plays are not purely realistic or nonrealistic – they use elements from both extremes.
- **Expressionism** was a movement in painting at the beginning of the 20th century in which artists, rather than attempting to create a version of “reality”, created a highly personal vision of the world that included distorted images symbolizing inner psychological states. Expressionist drama is the expression of what dramatists see of the world from within themselves.
- **Naturalism** was the logical development of realism. In a sense, naturalism is a more extreme form of realism in that it involves an attempt to put real life on stage. Realism produces plays that have clearly defined plot, climaxes and

resolutions of the social problems that are represented. Naturalism is not so tied to conventional plotting and resolutions, because, it argued, life itself does not obey such well-ordered rules. Naturalism could be described usefully as an attempt to put a 'slice of life' on stage.

- Exposition is how a dramatist, through language, informs the theatre audience about the characters and their dramatic situation. Exposition helps an audience understand the background to the drama and motivations of the characters.
- **NOTE:** Aristotle's Three Unities (needed in tragedies): Unity of Time, Action, Place
- Also, **NOTE** that reading a play, as opposed to watching a performance, carries both advantages and disadvantages. The major disadvantage is that you lack the immediacy of live theater. You do not hear the whispers of the murderer and the ranting of the madman... you do not have the splendor of the palace or the shock of an emptied stage, the spotlight that rivets the audience's attention on a single defiant gesture, the blare of trumpets, or the pathos (emotional outpouring) of the beggar's rags. The major advantage of reading is that you may consider each element in the play at length, and may "stage" the play in your own imagination and at your own pace. In the theater, the action rushes at the director's pace. There is no opportunity to turn back to an interesting scene or to reconsider an important speech. In addition, a performance always represents someone else's interpretation (director, actors, etc.). **TRY** to use the advantages of reading and study to compensate for the disadvantages. **IB** likes to ask questions about this tension/dynamic.

CONSIDER:

- **Juxtaposition of scenes** – use to create audience reaction or manipulation of mood; for example in Streetcar ending a sensitive (Blanche) scene and contrasting it with a violent (Stanley) start to next scene [examine Streetcar scene 10 to 11]
 - **Juxtaposition within scenes** – used to create audience reaction or manipulation of mood, for example, the end of Act I of DOAS in which Willy's positive talk with Linda is cut against Biff's simultaneous action of discovering the rubber tube or in Act II of The Visit in which Ill's experiences are cut against Claire's simultaneous but separate actions above him
 - Examine the work's desire to reestablish equilibrium (in a society, in a character, etc.) after the disruption (the plot's conflict)
 - Examine the balance struck with each playwright between the two broad categories of drama: popular entertainment aimed at a mass audience and theatre as an art form.
 - **Examine how the situation, desires and motivations of the characters from which the later events will develop is established in the opening scenes.**
- * entrances & exits of characters for dramatic effect
* audience's role (how active a participant are they) – and how does it contribute to the impact of each play

Dramatic Structure – [Aristotle – a play should have a beginning, middle, and end (complete and self-contained)]

Dramatic action – purposeful, varied, interesting, probable [The success of dramatic action depends on the organization of incidents to accomplish a purpose.]

Conflict – with another character, environment, personal desires, or ideologies; action is usually arranged in climatic order

Plot: Exposition (Shakespeare has an early point of attack since his plays follow chronological order and require little background information); dramatic situation; complications (discoveries, each has a beginning, middle, and end); crisis; climax; resolution (denouement)

Terms Used on Previous IB English Essay Drama Prompts; Advice: define the possibilities of each term

Dramatic logic

Dramatic force

Dramatic tension

Dramatic presentation

"Discuss the breaks in dramatic action and the effects achieved by their occurrence(s)"

"What is the total effect of each play..."

"list some theatrical techniques..." – [be aware of the above lists of appropriate dramatic terminology]

NOTE for definition of Drama 1945-1960s on answers.com:

World War II and its attendant horrors produced a widespread sense of the utter meaninglessness of human existence. This sense is brilliantly expressed in the body of plays that have come to be known collectively as the theater of the absurd. By abandoning traditional devices of the drama, including logical plot development, meaningful dialogue, and intelligible characters, absurdist playwrights sought to convey modern humanity's feelings of bewilderment, alienation, and despair—the sense that reality is itself unreal. In their plays human beings often portrayed as dupes, clowns who, although not without dignity, are at the mercy of forces that are inscrutable. Probably the most famous plays of the theater of the absurd are Eugene [Ionesco's](#) *Bald Soprano* (1950) and Samuel [Beckett's](#) *Waiting for Godot* (1953). The sources of the theater of the absurd are diverse; they can be found in the tenets of [surrealism](#), Dadaism (see [Dada](#)), and [existentialism](#); in the traditions of the music hall, [vaudeville](#), and [burlesque](#); and in the films of Charlie [Chaplin](#) and Buster [Keaton](#). Playwrights whose works can be roughly classed as belonging to the theater of the absurd are Jean [Genet](#) (French), Max [Frisch](#) and [Friedrich Dürrenmatt](#) (Swiss), Fernando [Arrabal](#) (Spanish), and the early plays of Edward [Albee](#) (American). The pessimism and despair of the 20th cent. also found expression in the existentialist dramas of Jean-Paul [Sartre](#), in the realistic and symbolic dramas of Arthur [Miller](#), Tennessee [Williams](#), and Jean [Anouilh](#), and in the surrealist plays of Jean [Cocteau](#).

THEORY OF DRAMA ISSUES – find what you believe from this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

1) The greatest power of the theater is in how it:

- Engages the subconscious of the audience, utilizing literary and social devices to instill a message without the audience even really knowing it
- Involves the viewer emotionally as well as physically through words and other dramatic tools not available in other forms of literary expression
- Incorporates the mind and emotion into the action of a play
- It gives to the audience the purest form of storytelling (and forces the audience to reconcile the relationship and divide between life and art)
- Theatre is an interactive art form, drawing the audience to think critically and empathize with the situation
- Can take complete “strangers” and allow us to connect into a certain time of their “lives”; none of the characters are real but when they become real in our minds it makes us wonder “that could be me” and so fear/pity/catharsis is achieved
- How it utilizes the stage and how that affects the audience (blocking, lighting, sound, and on/off stage actions are key factors in a play of significance; The greatest power is how it is limitless; you can do anything on the stage
- The power of the theatre comes in its flexibility of interpretation and how each audience member can connect in their own way
- Is able to emotionally move an audience to the point where they come out of the experience transformed or with a new view of reality/existence
- Is able to draw such a powerful catharsis of mind, body, spirit and soul from the audience by appealing to all of our 5 senses

2) The primary concern of the modern playwright is:

- To achieve the desired emotions from certain scenes (the “gasp” as Miller said)
- To assert stylistic mastery over the elements of story, considering the implications of time and three-dimensional space
- The poor state of morality that exists in modern people
- Address a societal or emotional conflict and present it in a way that is both meaningful and understandable
- To justify their own existence (is there a need for plays anymore?) and relevance in the modern world

3) The most significant difference between modern tragedy and classic (Shakespearean or Greek) tragedy is:

- The movement to the common man figures as protagonists
- The forces of the downfall are typically located inside oneself or in society instead of with fate/the gods as they were with the classics
- It seeks to question the pervasive human-experience values which the classics took for granted
- Classic tragedy is more tangible and simple in its construction: here is the happiness, here is the ruin of that happiness. Whereas modern tragedy works on different levels and attempts to weasel itself into the everyday lives of the audience members
- The movement to a relative lack of a specific villain in modern tragedy

4) At its essence, the purpose of any play is to:

- Be worthy of thought after the final curtain has fallen (on spiritual, emotional, view of universe type of levels)
- Create, instill, or manifest some feeling, emotion, or idea into the heart of the audience
- The purpose of any play is to find an element of the audience’s collective identity and use this element to instigate conflict, producing catharsis and self-evaluation
- A reflection of one person’s view of reality presented to an audience

5) My definition of drama is:

- Entertainment (or uses the façade of entertainment to educate, inform, and move the people involved with it)
- Literature in motion ; Raw human emotion placed on the stage
- Is a theatrical experience in which tension/character conflict is visually portrayed and therefore subjected to the evaluation of the audience
- Something that makes you laugh, cry, is suspenseful and drives you crazy all at the same time; it hooks you so strongly that you want to know the end but aren’t sure you can face what the end might be
- A piece of literature written to be realized on the stage and for the hearts of the audience
- A literary masterpiece that utilizes the stage to entertain, express and explain central issues of life, love, and everything else
- A play should stir the soul and force the audience to wonder “why?”
- The combination of lighting, staging, costuming, words, actions and a powerful message to create a play that leaves the audience astounded