

## How to study a play

Plays differ slightly from prose and poetry, in their construction, their reading and their interpretation. You must consider a play in performance, which you do not need to consider when studying a novel or poem - most importantly, how it will be presented on stage and what techniques the playwright has used (sometimes not immediately obvious on the page itself) to create effect, drama and suspense. The key aspect of this is dramatic techniques, which are outlined below. You should be aware of the effect of these techniques and be prepared to comment on them.

### Dramatic techniques

Dramatic techniques are used by the playwright to enhance meaning and understanding amongst the audience. Dramatic techniques include:

#### **Stage directions**

They tell us what should be happening on stage and will often include clues, e.g. the darkening of the stage may suggest something bad approaching. They can be used for a whole spectrum of things - instructions to directors about set, costume, props etc and instructions to actors about movement, gesture, facial expression, tone of voice etc. They are very revealing, as they often show us mood, link scenes, aspects of characterisation and theme. It is crucially important that you read them carefully and consider their significance, in the same way that you consider the dialogue itself.

#### **Asides**

When a character temporarily turns away from another character and speaks directly to the audience.

#### **Entrance and exits**

It is important to notice when characters exit and enter a scene. Pay particular attention to what is being said as they enter or what they say as they leave.

#### **Scenes and Acts**

It is important to pay attention to when a playwright chooses to end a scene and an Act (a number of scenes). It is usually significant in building audience expectations of what is to come. This is sometimes a cliff hanger. Or sometimes they will link a scene with lighting, a prop or with a character remaining on stage.

#### **Symbolism**

When an object is used to represent something else, e.g. a broken vase may symbolise a broken relationship.

#### **Off-stage**

Noises off-stage may indicate the coming of conflict, of something bad likely to happen.

### **Recurring imagery**

Look out for repeated words, phrases and images. Together, these create a sense of mood or a key theme.

### **Style of writing - Prose & verse**

In older plays (Shakespeare, for example), it is possible to tell the status of a character or the mood of the scene by whether it is written as poetry or in everyday speech, e.g. characters of low status do not speak in verse and comic scenes are often written in prose.

### **Style of writing - dialect & language**

In more modern plays, playwrights will often use dialect (a way of speaking particular to an area) and colloquialisms (words or phrases common to that particular area) to demonstrate the differences in social status or origin of a character. In Singaporean plays, Singlish is often used to show the diversity of tongues (different languages - e.g. Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay) and it is often contrasted with the use of Standard English, as is encouraged by the government. The use of a local dialect can add authenticity to a play, as it more effectively captures the voices of the local people in the play. In some plays, this may even mean that whole sections of the play will be spoken in another language (such as Haresh Sharma's plays) and the audience will have surtitles (on a screen on the side of the stage) to help them interpret.

### **Soliloquy/Monologue**

When a character is alone on stage and speaks out his or her thoughts aloud. Language that invites action. A character can say something that requires others to act or react.

### **Language and length**

Look out for how much or little is said by characters. Playwrights will often change the pace (slowing down or speeding up) by how the characters speak.

### **Dramatic Irony**

This is when the audience knows something that the characters on stage don't - perhaps it might be a detail that we have seen in another scene or something that we know not to be the case.

### **Satire/Parody**

This is when a playwright will 'play' on a popular trend (e.g. estate agent speak at the start of Boom) and make fun of it by showing how ridiculous it is.

### **Microcosm**

A small representation of a whole. For example, in Boom you could argue that Mother is representative of a whole generation of older Singaporeans, Boon is representative of a whole

generation of young Singaporeans, Jeremiah represents civil servants and the whole play Boom is a microcosm of Singaporean society as a whole.

### **Irony**

When the reality is the opposite of what is being said/shown