

Ways of Reading a Play

Writing Resources



Among the three great textual genres (the novel, the poem, the play), the play tends to suffer the most from unhelpful clichés and unhelpful assumptions about reading. It is not necessary to know a lot about performance or about acting to read a play, discuss it in a seminar, or write about it well.

And it is not necessary to have seen a performance of a play to understand its nuances and details: that's because a play text always has a tense and tentative relation to the idea of its realisation as a performance.

Any given performance will add some elements to a play text and take other elements out of it, and as such a performance is also a text in its own right, open to interpretation, which complements the play text but is not the play text itself.

A play asks to be imagined and gives this right to everyone. A play has many lives beyond the page – not simply on stage, but in the minds of its readers. You are one of them.

Use your imagination

Reading a play requires, first and foremost, having faith in the powers of your own imagination: a play is an invitation to imagine bodies and voices in a space.

The text consists not simply of lines in verse or prose, but of visual images and poetic combinations of words and movements that engage the imagination and the emotions.

Character and plot are important – you must ensure that you have a strong grasp of the plot – but plays aren't simply about character or about plot. Some plays have no defined characters and many have no plot; many plays, also, feature characters that don't have a fully-fledged psychology and don't purport to seem real at all.

Plays aren't necessarily about a recognisable reality either. Any given play creates its own world; be it little or big, that world is always specific to itself.

Reading a play is never a passive endeavour. You should think about what the words imply, and you should go further: you should look deep within the space

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crafted by the text, and consider how forms of presence and absence are made to interact, how bodies and voices are made to interact, and how different tones and registers of being are made to interact.

A play is as delicate a construction as a carefully-crafted poem or an evocative piece of prose, and the same line can be open to many interpretations.

There are different layers of meaning at work at any given time and on any given page: indeed, the forms of action depicted in a play are both literal (they call for actual utterances and movements) and symbolic (speech and gesture always mean more than what they simply are).

Even plays that are realistic and seem 'real' are very carefully constructed, and rely on visual images, movements and utterances that have a symbolic dimension.

Read it aloud, and linger

When you read a play, try to **really** read it: read it aloud, at least in parts, adding intonation and gesture – no matter how tentatively – and think about the space or spaces that the text delineates and creates.

Take time to linger on what you are reading: the details matter.

You should look at all the indications given in the text with equal care, including the indications given in the margins about the play's structure, in the list of characters and in any foreword or preface that might be included. If the edition you have gives you information about the play's performance history, read that too.

The stage directions are part of the text to be read and interpreted: very often, particularly in modern and contemporary plays, the stage directions hold all the keys to the action.

They can indicate where the characters are positioned, their emotional states, how their words should be uttered and how they should move, and give many other valuable insights.

- Think about the stage set, and look at any information given about space: what is stated? What remains unstated? How much is left to the imagination?
- Think, also, about how the space of the stage is used, structured and partitioned. How are emotional states and power relations represented within space, and in speech and gesture?
- How is the passing of time represented? Does the play abide by linear time, as measured by the clock, or does it represent another kind of time, jagged, discontinuous – time as experienced by the subject?

Since plays tend to be shorter than novels, it is a good idea to read a play twice in preparation for a seminar or a workshop, rather than once: you will have a better understanding of it.