

The ways that meanings are shaped in drama texts

Explore the dramatic methods chosen by playwrights to convey meaning:

- dramatic structure,
- stagecraft,
- dramatic characterisation
- dramatic speech and language.

Comments on the ways in which meanings are shaped must be more than mere feature-spotting; they need to be relevantly integrated into students' arguments and discussions and grounded in understanding of the whole text. Strong essay responses often demonstrate perceptive and assured overview as well as provide analysis of detail.

Dramatic structure: consider how meaning is enhanced by

- the organisation of events in a play;
- how playwrights add to the significance of certain events by the position of those events in the play's narrative;
- what characters know and don't know at specific times.

Meanings might be constructed by:

- conventions of structure in both traditional and modern drama e.g. a classic five-act Shakespearian play includes: introduction, exposition, complication, crisis, resolution and denouement; a classic three-act 'wellmade play' can be in real time (Cat on a Hot Tin Roof)
- the division of the play into acts and scenes
- the use of features such as sub-plot, frame, the 'Green World' etc.
- linearity, chronological events, flashbacks, climax, anti-climax, cyclical effect, repetition
- how the drama is set up and resolved in the opening and ending of the play
- conflict and change
- naturalistic, non-naturalistic dramatic effect
- choice of setting
- use of an allegory
- inclusion of protagonist, antagonist and catalyst.

Stagecraft

consider the text as incomplete in written form, a blueprint for performance that needs the directors' and actors' input and interpretation, and should note how little or how much direction and specific detail playwrights give about aspects of stagecraft such as:

- stage directions · lighting
- music/sound/sound effects
- set

- costume
- disguise
- status
- contrast
- act opening/ending
- scene opening/ending
- entrance/exit with opening and closing lines
- dramatic irony
- pace
- tension/suspense/surprise
- twist
- comic relief.

Dramatic characterisation: consider the range of strategies used by playwrights to create and develop characters such as:

- how characters are established
- how characters are presented: physical appearance or suggestions about this; actions and motives for them; what they say and think; how they interact with others; what others say and think about them
- how far the characters conform to or subvert stereotypes
- the function of minor characters
- relationships between characters.

Dramatic speech and language: consider the ways in which playwrights organise speech and language such as:

- dialogue · use of monologues
- soliloquy
- Asides
- functional and literal
- metaphorical, poetic, symbolic (e.g. 'there is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth' A Streetcar Named Desire)
- the use of character to act as a mouthpiece for the playwright – authorial intrusion
- a character's personal vocabulary and syntactic patterns that project a certain way of seeing the world, which fits with/subverts stereotypes.