Analysing Dramatic Texts

When one deals with dramatic texts one has to bear in mind that drama differs considerably from poetry or narrative in that it is usually written for the purpose of being performed on stage. Although plays exist which were mainly written for a reading audience, dramatic texts are generally meant to be transformed into another mode of presentation or medium: the theatre. For this reason, dramatic texts even look different compared to poetic or narrative texts. One distinguishes between the primary text, i.e., the main body of the play spoken by the characters, and secondary texts, i.e., all the texts ‘surrounding’ or accompanying the main text: title, dramatis personae, scene descriptions, stage directions for acting and speaking, etc. Depending on whether one reads a play or watches it on stage, one has different kinds of access to dramatic texts. As a reader, one receives first-hand written information (if it is mentioned in the secondary text) on what the characters look like, how they act and react in certain situations, how they speak, what sort of setting forms the background to a scene, etc. However, one also has to make a cognitive effort to imagine all these features and interpret them for oneself. Stage performances, on the other hand, are more or less ready-made instantiations of all these details. In other words: at the theatre one is presented with a version of the play which has already been interpreted by the director, actors, costume designers, make-up artists and all the other members of theatre staff, who bring the play to life. The difference, then, lies in divergent forms of perception. While we can actually see and hear actors play certain characters on stage, we first decipher a text about them when reading a play script and then at best ‘see’ them in our mind’s eye and ‘hear’ their imaginary voices. Put another way, stage performances offer a multi-sensory access to plays and they can make use of multimedia elements such as music, sound effects, lighting, stage props, etc., while reading is limited to the visual perception and thus draws upon one primary medium: the play as text. This needs to be kept in mind in discussions of dramatic texts, and the following introduction to the analysis of drama is largely based on the idea that plays are first and foremost written for the stage. The main features one can look at when analysing drama are the following:

- space
- time
- characters
- types of utterance in drama

Space

Space is an important element in drama since the stage itself also represents a space where action is presented. One must of course not forget that types of stage have changed in the history of the theatre and that this has also influenced the way plays were performed. The analysis of places and settings in plays can help one get a better feel for characters and their behaviour but also for the overall atmosphere. Plays can differ significantly with regard to how space is presented and how much information about space is offered. The stage set quite literally ‘sets the scene’ for a play in that it already conveys a certain tone, e.g., one of desolation and poverty or mystery and secrecy. The fact that the description of the stage sets in the secondary text is sometimes very detailed and
sometimes hardly worth mentioning is another crucial starting point for further analysis since that can tell us something about more general functions of settings.

A more detailed stage set also aims at creating an illusion of realism, i.e., the scene presented on stage is meant to be as true to-life as possible and the audience is expected to succumb to that illusion. At the same time, a detailed set draws attention to problems of an individual's milieu, for example, or background in general. This was particularly important in naturalist writing, which was premised on the idea that a person's character and behaviour are largely determined by his or her social context.

**Setting and Characterisation**

The setting can be used as a means of indirect characterisation.

**Symbolic Space**

Another important factor to consider in this context is the interrelatedness of setting and plot. Obviously, the plot of a play is never presented in a vacuum but always against the background of specific scenery and often the setting corresponds with what is going on in the story world. One can say that rather than only functioning as a background or creating a certain atmosphere, these spaces become symbolic spaces as they point towards other levels of meaning in the text. The setting can thus support the expression of the world view current at a certain time or general philosophical, ethical or moral questions.

**Time**

Time in drama can be considered from a variety of angles. One can, for example, look at time as part of the play: How are references to time made in the characters' speech, the setting, stage directions, etc.? What is the overall time span of the story? On the other hand, time is also a crucial factor in the performance of a play: How long does the performance actually take? Needless to say that the audiences' perception of time can also vary. Another question one can ask in this context is: Which general concepts of time are expressed in and by a play?

**Story Time and Discourse Time**

**Duration**

Another important distinction one needs to be made when analysing time in drama, namely between fictive story time or played time and real playing time (see also story time and discourse time for narrative ch. 2.8.2.). While the played time or the time of the story in Osborne's Look Back in Anger encompasses several months, the play's actual playing time (time it takes to stage the play) is approximately two hours. The playing time of a piece of drama of course always depends on the speed at which actors perform individual scenes and can thus vary significantly from one performance to another. The fact that story time elapses from one scene to the next and from act to act is indicated by the fall of the curtain in Osborne's play. Thus, quick curtains are used between scenes, while longer curtain pauses occur between acts. Significantly, the length of curtain time is correlated with the length of time that has been left out in the story: A quick curtain suggests a short
time span while normal breaks cover longer time spans of the played time. A gap in the played time
of a piece of drama is called ellipsis, i.e., one leaves out bits of the story and thus speeds up the plot.
Considering that scenes usually present actions directly, one can assume that played time and
playing time usually coincide in drama. In other words: If characters are presented talking to one
another for, say, twenty minutes, then it will normally take about twenty minutes for actors to
perform this ‘conversation’. Discrepancies between the duration of played time and playing time
mostly concur with scenic breaks because it is difficult to present them convincingly in the middle of
an interaction.

Techniques of Characterisation

Characters in drama are characterised using various techniques of characterisation. Generally
speaking, one can distinguish between characterisations made by the author in the play’s secondary
text (authorial) or by characters in the play (figural), and whether these characterisations are made
directly (explicitly) or indirectly (implicitly). Another distinction can be made between self-
characterisation and characterisation through others (see also characterisation techniques in
narrative prose ch. 2.4.1.). The way these different forms of characterisation can be accomplished in
plays can be schematised as follows: authorial: figural explicit descriptions of characters in author
commentary or stage directions; telling names characters’ descriptions of and comments on other
characters; also self-characterisation implicit correspondences and contrasts; indirectly
characterising names physical appearance, gesture and facial expressions (body language), masks
and costumes; stage props, setting; behaviour: voice; language (style, register, dialect, etc.); topics
one discusses Of course, the characterisation of figures usually works on several levels and combines
a number of these techniques.

Dramatic language is another important means of indirect characterisation in plays. Characters are
presented to the audience through what they say and how they say it, their verbal interactions with
others and the discrepancies between their talk and their actions. In an actual performance, an
actor’s voice and tone thus also play a major role for how the audience perceives the played
character. This can also be seen in plays where dialect or specific sociolects are used. Dialect
indicates what region or geographical area one comes from, while sociolect refers to linguistic
features which give away one’s social status and membership in a social group.

Characters represent one of the most important analytical categories in drama since they carry the
plot. In other words: there cannot be a play without characters. Characters’ interactions trigger and
move the plot, and their various relationships to one another form the basis for conflicts and
dynamic processes. A lot of the terms used for techniques of characterisation in narrative are also
applicable in drama but one needs to be aware of fundamental differences related to the different
medium. When we read a novel, for example, the narrator often describes characters which we then
have to imagine and bring to life in our mind’s eye. While this exists in drama to the extent that we
often find stage directions or introductory comments in the secondary text, characters in actual
performances are always already interpretations of stage directors and actors who bring characters
to life for us. Our view of characters in staged plays is thus inevitably influenced by the way an actor
looks, how he speaks, how he acts out his role, etc. Other influential factors can be costumes and
makeup, the overall setting in which a character is presented, etc.
Types of Comedy

Sometimes, scholars distinguish between high comedy, which appeals to the intellect (comedy of ideas) and has a serious purpose.

Types of Utterance in Drama

Dramatic language is modelled on real-life conversations among people, and yet, when one watches a play, one also has to consider the differences between real talk and drama talk. Dramatic language is ultimately always constructed or ‘made up’ and it often serves several purposes. On the level of the story-world of a play, language can of course assume all the pragmatic functions that can be found in real-life conversations, too: e.g., to ensure mutual understanding and to convey information, to persuade or influence someone, to relate one’s experiences or signal emotions, etc. However, dramatic language is often rhetorical and poetic, i.e., it uses language in ways which differ from standard usage in order to draw attention to its artistic nature. When analysing dramatic texts, one ought to have a closer look at the various forms of utterance available for drama.

In drama, in contrast to narrative, characters typically talk to one another and the entire plot is carried by and conveyed through their verbal interactions. Language in drama can generally be presented either as monologue or dialogue.

Turn Allocation, Stichomythia, Repartee

In comparison to monologues and asides, dialogue is by far the most frequently used type of speech in drama. In analysing dialogue, one can look at turn-taking and the allocation of turns to different speakers, e.g., how many lines is each character’s turn? Do some characters have longer turns than others and, if so, why? One can also analyse how often a character gets the chance to speak through the entire play and whether he or she is interrupted by others or not. A special type of turn allocation occurs when speaker’s alternating turns are of one line each. This is called stichomythia and is often, albeit not exclusively, used in contexts where characters compete or disagree with one another. In the following excerpt from Richard III, Richard tries to persuade Elizabeth to woo her daughter on his behalf: KING RICHARD Infer fair England’s peace by this alliance. ELIZABETH Which she shall purchase with still-lasting war. KING RICHARD Tell her the King, that may command, entreats. ELIZABETH That, at her hands, which the King’s King forbids. KING RICHARD Say she shall be a high and mighty queen. ELIZABETH To vail the title, as her mother doth. KING RICHARD Say I will love her everlasting. ELIZABETH But how long shall that title ‘ever’ last? KING RICHARD Sweetly in force, until her fair life’s end. ELIZABETH But how long fairly shall her sweet life last? KING RICHARD As long as heaven and nature lengthens it. ELIZABETH As long as hell and Richard likes of it. KING RICHARD Say I, her sovereign, am her subject low. ELIZABETH But she, your subject, loathes such sovereignty. KING RICHARD Be eloquent in my behalf to her. Basics of English Studies, Version 03/04, Drama 125 ELIZABETH An honest tale speeds best being plainly told. KING RICHARD Then plainly to her tell my loving tale. ELIZABETH Plain and not honest is too harsh a style. KING RICHARD Your reasons are too shallow and too quick. […] (Richard III, IV, 4: 343-361) This dialogue is marked by repartees, i.e., quick responses given in order to top remarks of another speaker or to use them to one’s own advantage. The repartees in this example express Elizabeth’s doubts and counterarguments. The fact that stichomythia is used here underlines the argumentative character of this conversation. In a sense, Richard and Elizabeth compete rhetorically: Richard in order to
persuade Elizabeth and Elizabeth in order to resist Richard’s persuasive devices. Through the quick
turn-taking mechanism, the dialogue also appears livelier and in itself represents fast action. This is
reinforced by a number of word plays and rhetorical figures which use the repetition of words and
sounds and thus demonstrate how tightly connected the individual turns are and that each turn
immediately responds to the previous one: “everlastingly” – “ever last” (349f); figura etymologica:
“sweetly” – “sweet” (351f), “fair” – “fairly” (351f), “sovereign” – “sovereignty” (356f); parallelism:
“As long as.../ As long as...” (353f); assonance: “low”, “loathes” (356f); chiasmus: “An honest tale
speeds best being plainly told. / Then plainly to her tell my loving tale”.

The Significance of Wordplay in Drama

The play with language entertains spectators and at the same time attracts and sustains their
attention. A special type of wordplay is the so-called pun, where words are used which are the same
or at least similar in sound and spelling (homonyms) but differ in meaning. Another concept to be
mentioned in the context of play with language is wit. The idea of wit, which combines humour and
intellect, plays a significant role in the so-called comedy of manners.