



# AL English Literature Resource

## TIPS FOR STUDYING DRAMA TEXTS AT A-LEVEL

Please note that this document is relevant to Modules One and Two (for *Richard II*) and Modules Five and Six (for *The Glass Menagerie*). After reading each play, you should complete the relevant exercises, as directed by Programme of Study.

When studying any dramatic text, the key thing to remember is that the text was written to be performed by actors in a theatre, and watched by an audience, rather than read. Therefore whilst there are some similarities between drama and prose or poetry, we study drama in a slightly different way.

It is an excellent idea to try and watch a live performance of your set texts in a theatre if at all possible, but you should also look out for film and television versions. However, like all types of literature, drama is open to the interpretations of the reader/audience, but it can also be interpreted by directors and performers in the theatre so you should always bear in mind that **a play or film version may differ slightly from the original text.**

It is the text-version on which you will be examined, and this is the one from which you should take specific quotations to illustrate your ideas in your essays, but it can be very helpful to watch different versions and consider how and why the directors have made the choices about characters and themes that they have.

### Character

Plays are almost entirely made up of **dialogue**, so apart from **stage directions**, which may include brief descriptions of a character's physical appearance or behaviour, we mainly learn about characters from:

- **What they do**
- **What they say**
- **What other characters may reveal about them**

When you are learning about characters and revising them for the examination, you should therefore focus on **important aspects of their speech and behaviour**, as well as any details revealed in **stage directions**, plus **any important information about them delivered in other characters' speech.**

When reading the play and choosing quotations to learn therefore, don't forget to take quotations from the **stage directions** too. Things to look out for in stage directions include details of physical appearance (including significant clothing) and adverbs used to describe *how* actions are performed, or words are spoken, such as "hurriedly", "angrily", "calmly" etc. These details can tell you a lot about a character's emotions or feelings at key points in the play.

**N.B.** The above is more the case for modern plays; with Shakespeare plays, you will find that the stage directions are minimal.

Tennessee Williams, however, uses very descriptive and detailed stage directions in *The Glass Menagerie*, some of which contain very poetic descriptions, particularly of settings. **Do quote from these in your essays on *The Glass Menagerie* as they reveal a great deal about characters and themes and are a powerful tool Williams uses to convey atmosphere.**

## The Visual Element

You may not be lucky enough to see your texts performed live before the examination, but hopefully you will at least be able to watch a film version. Either way, you must remember that drama is a visual and aural experience, and so you should pay attention to **what is happening on stage and what the action looks like**. Again, this may be the interpretation of the director, but take note of the stage directions indicating actions and set changes when reading the play so that you can try to visualize what the scene would look like if it were being performed in front of you.

## The Basic Components of Drama

### The plot

This is the story or series of events that runs throughout the play. We can divide this further into four elements:

1. **Opening** – this introduces the characters and sets the scene. It is when the world of the play is established before the **conflict** begins.
2. **Conflict** – this usually occupies a large proportion of the drama and involves tension developing between characters. The **conflict** will build towards the **climax** of the play.
3. **Climax** – this is a significant incident or **turning point** in the action.
4. **Resolution** – this is where the issues raised during the **conflict** and **climax** stages are resolved.

**Please note:** this does not mean that all drama has a happy ending! Both of the plays you are studying at A Level are **tragedies**. You will need to have a good working knowledge of tragedy and its conventions for the A Level examinations. Make sure you use the materials provided on Canvas to build up your understanding of this type of drama, and that you can use the relevant literary terminology accurately in your essays.

**Tragedy is very important literary context.**

### Exercise 1 (*Richard II* and *The Glass Menagerie*):

Once you have read the play, think about the plot terms of the four stages above.

- Can you identify each of the stages in the play?
- Identify where conflict happens and which major event or events might be the climax of the play.
- What is the resolution offered by the playwright at the end?

### Sub-plots

Sub-plots are smaller, additional stories within the main one, which usually link to the main action in some way. Sub-plots add depth and variety to the story being told and very often echo the play's major themes.

### Setting

Settings are the locations against which the action of a scene takes place. These may be indoors or outdoors, public or private spaces, very grand or very sparse ones. Setting influences atmosphere and helps to make the events taking place seem more real to the audience.

Pay close attention to the different settings used in your drama texts and think about why the playwright might have chosen to set each scene where he/she has.

#### Exercise 2 (*Richard II* and *The Glass Menagerie*):

- List all the various settings used in the play. (N.B. This can include settings which are mentioned, even if we do not see the characters in them).
- Write down why you think the playwright may have selected the setting they did for these moments/events in the play.

### Other Elements

These include: **lighting, props, costumes** and **music**. These are all important things to consider when watching a play and they have a powerful effect upon the atmosphere and upon our response to the story, however, for English Literature, you are less concerned with these elements than with those listed above. Do pay attention to any details of these elements given in the stage directions by the playwright though; when an author has specified these items and effects, they are likely to be important to the story and the mood created onstage.

**Please note:** Where the **playwright** details these elements in the **stage directions**, you *can* comment on these elements in an examination essay because you know they were intended by the author rather than added in by the director at a later stage.

#### Exercise 3 (*The Glass Menagerie* only):

- The **Screen Device** is the most controversial theatrical device used in *The Glass Menagerie*. Go back over the play and note each time a screen device is used.
- What do you feel these moments contribute to the action and atmosphere of the play?
- Williams included detailed notes about music in his production notes. Some of the effects he achieves through the use of music are as follows:
  - *Creating emotional emphasis at specific moments in the action;*
  - *Linking Tom's and Laura's characters together;*
  - *Suggesting Tom's state of mind;*
  - *Bridging different times in the play.*

- Make a list of the moments in the play where music is used and how this contributes to our understanding of the action in that specific moment.
- Williams' production notes also contained details about how lighting should be used in the play. He uses it to draw our attention to themes and characters in very specific ways. Williams commented that the dimly lit stage, for example, is 'in keeping with the atmosphere of memory.'
- How else is lighting used in the play? What is the relationship between lighting and atmosphere?

### Dramatic devices

These are devices used by playwrights to create particular effects in the drama and to maximize the use of the theatrical medium. Many theatrical devices go back to Ancient Greek theatre and are still used today; others go in and out of fashion according to trends in the theatre of the time.

#### *The Chorus*

This is a device which stretches all the way back to Ancient Greek theatre, where it was used to explain or judge the actions of characters or key events in the drama. Using a chorus is uncommon in twentieth and twenty-first century drama.

#### *Time*

Performances of plays take place in real time, but the events depicted within them do not necessarily match the same timeframe in which the play is performed. The action described in a play may take place over days, weeks, months, or even years; thus the writer has to manipulate time on stage in order to convey this.

Some methods used by playwrights to do this include:

- **Exposition** (where the audience is informed of events which took place in the past, or offstage, through a character's speech).
- **Anachronism** – this is literally a chronological inconsistency, when something that does not exist at the time it is being referred to, perhaps because it has not yet happened, or even has not yet been invented. Rather than being a mistake made by a dramatist writing a historical play, it can be used to create particular effects on the audience.
- Dividing the play into **acts** and **scenes** and indicating that time has passed between these.
- **Set changes** can indicate that time has moved on between key events in the play.
- **Lighting** can convey the sense of time passing between day and night.

**Exercise 4 (*The Glass Menagerie* only):**

Tom's narration is fundamental to our understanding of the play. He participates in the story as well as filtering it through his memories. He claims to be the director of the action and introduces new characters to us, thereby influencing our perception of them. The play's **episodic structure** also reflects the workings of his mind.

- Go back over the play and make notes on the following:
  - *How Tom provides the audience with information about historical context;*
  - *How his prologue establishes tone, mood and theme;*
  - *How he frames the action;*
  - *How he comments on the action but is also deeply affected by it.*
- Do you think the story of *The Glass Menagerie* belongs only to Tom?