

Shakespeare Review Guide

courtesy of Prof. R.F.W. Kroll

This by no means represents a systematic guide to Shakespeare's plays, but comprises rather a series of devices by which to approach dramatic representation in general. If you ask yourself the questions below, you will be asking the right sort of questions; this guide does not provide you with ready-made themes.

1. Who is who in what play? Tabulate the characters in relation to each other. Some characters may represent a principle offset by others.
2. Break down events by each act and scene. Note the setting, who enters and exits, any soliloquies. Make a brief summary of what is said (key words, quotations).
3. Plot: How do characters' qualities match/comment on each other? High *vs.* low; balance *vs.* disequilibrium; moral *vs.* immoral, and so on. How many sub-plots are there? How do they reflect, qualify, or undercut one another? Pay attention to beginnings and endings. (see "scenes")
4. Setting: Country *vs.* city; nature *vs.* civilization; history *vs.* romance; Northern Europe *vs.* Southern Europe; Britain/England *vs.* Europe; interior *vs.* exterior; Christian *vs.* pagan; classical *vs.* Christian or modern; *etc.*
5. Scenes: Beginnings--how do opening scenes suggest or establish the central concerns/dynamics of the play?

Endings--what kind of ending do we have, and how does that comment on the previous action? Is there a true or only an apparent resolution? Is the ending comic or tragic?

Are there any tragic scenes in a comedy? Any comic relief in a tragedy? How does juxtaposition of scenes convey meaning?

Scenes of reportage-- how do they advance the plot (information)? how do they comment on the action in general? how do they comment on the character of the speaker, audience, others?

6. Conventions: Does the play use an earlier literary or dramatic convention? masque? sonnet/Petrarchan love convention? Romance? pastoral? revenge?
7. Conditions of performance: When and for whom was the play performed? Was the audience royal and courtly, or common? Was the theater indoor or outdoor? How would a change in perspective like this permit different staging conditions, or types of symbolic action?

8. Language:

Image--how does the presence of images in speech reflect the mood or purpose of a play or scene? And how do such images depict the quality of an individual character?

Which characters seem as interested in how they themselves talk as in what they appear to say?

Is this interest an indication of strength or weakness?

Does it call for our sympathy or exploit us or other characters?
 To what degree does it reflect a perspective which agrees with or
 differs from that of other characters?

Does the dominant type of language in the play stem from a single character, a
 group of characters, or from some putative “outside” source that molds the
 way in which everyone in the play speaks?

Does the language at any point support or undercut the events or stage action?

Prose and verse--at what point are either of these used, and why? What different
 kinds of verse are used?

Questions for Reading Shakespeare

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1. Does the setting/s tell you something about the way the characters might behave? Does it establish certain expectations in the audience. Does it use knowledge that we *bring to* the play?
2. Do the characters fulfill or subvert our expectations?
3. Do we know more about a character than he or she knows? Why? Does our knowledge come from “before the play” (a previous play, or a recounting of previous events), from the connotations of his or her name, or from the reports of other characters?
4. Does the contrast or similarity with other characters tell us more about the behavior of a given character than we might otherwise have known?
5. How does the speech of a character echo or contrast with the way in which other characters speak?
6. Does the manner in which the character speaks accurately reflect, reinforce, or symbolize his or her actions? Or does this manner of speaking conflict with the character’s actions in such a way as to invite our judgment?
7. Does our knowledge about the nature of “comedy,” “tragedy,” or “history” also establish certain expectations about the direction the play will take? What sorts of action do we expect from different types of drama?
8. Do images, allusions, and so forth in a character’s speech comment on the action of the character or on the play in some way? (For example, see the gardener’s speech in *Richard II*.)
9. Do the settings or events of each act or scene reflect and comment on each other? (country *vs.* city, *etc.*)