

6.2: Reading and Responding to Drama

How to "Read" Drama

For reasons discussed in this chapter so far, drama comes with a unique set of benefits and challenges for readers. Beginning readers of drama often make the mistake of reading plays the same way they would a novel, becoming frustrated or lost as a result. Because it is meant to be performed and/or viewed as an audience member, audiences must infer a lot about the setting and characters' internal feelings through the dialogue. This takes a bit more work than a novel, which often offers this kind of description for the reader. While ideally readers could either act out the play or see a play live, this is not always an option. So what is the best way to "read" a play?

ACT IT OUT LOUD.

That's right: as silly as it may feel, reading the play out loud in character will help readers better grasp the meanings of the play which may be missed when read silently. To reiterate, plays are meant to be performed. To be heard. To be seen. When possible, students should pair up with fellow classmates to take turns reading and acting out the parts. This is what makes plays fun: they are the most collaborative genre of literature!

Other tips for reading plays:

- Watch film versions of the play
- Listen to audiobook versions
- Summarize each act in your own words as you read
- Takes notes on each character: Who are they? What is their role (protagonist, antagonist, or supporting role)? What are the characters' relationships with each other?

Special Considerations For Reading Shakespeare & Other "Old" Works of Literature

Diction

As if reading plays was not challenging enough, many students find Shakespeare's **diction** -- or vocabulary choices -- flummoxing. I use the term flummoxing here because it is a term that is not widely in circulation anymore. That is, it is archaic or antiquated. Or, to put it more simply, it's old. Shakespeare can be difficult to read for this reason: over time, like any language, English has evolved. Certain figures of speech, manners of speaking, and words commonly used in Elizabethan London (Shakespeare's time) are no longer used today. So if it feels like you are reading a foreign language when reading Shakespeare or his contemporaries, you kind of are: Early Modern English.

- Old English – 450 to 1066 A.D
- Middle English – 1150 to 1500
- Early Modern English – 1500 to 1690
- Modern English – 1700 to present

Early Modern English is actually much closer to our modern English than one would think. It is much easier to understand than Old English for this reason. Basically, to use a Pokemon simile, if Old English is Charmander, and contemporary English is Charizard, Early Modern English is like Chameleon. And it goes both ways: if I lost you with these Pokemon words you probably feel a lot like a speaker of Early Modern English would feel having to learn contemporary English!

The good news is, like learning a new language, there are helpful tools students can use to understand Shakespeare. Use the Oxford English Dictionary combined with context clues to learn what words meant in the time period. Some words mean the same thing. But other words have entirely different meanings. Try looking up how the words were used in the 1500s or 1600s to get a better understanding of how Shakespeare intended the word to be understood by his audiences.

Practicing Looking Up Diction

Let's try looking up a word which is difficult to understand in *Hamlet*.

BARNARDO: Well, good night.
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The **rivals** of my watch, bid them make haste.

(1.1.13 - **emphases mine**)

In our modern understanding, "rival" means competitor. Like when playing Pokemon, you are introduced to a neighbor who also is given a Pokemon at the same time as you. As you raise your Pokemon, so does your rival, and you must continuously battle against your rival throughout the game. However, it seems like our modern understanding of this word does not quite work in the context of *Hamlet*. Why would Barnardo bid Horatio and Marcellus -- who seem not to be his competitors -- to make haste (AKA hurry up)? It seems like we are missing the definition of the word in Early Modern English.

So, let's use the Oxford English Dictionary to [look up the word "rival"](#) (1.1.13)

While there are a lot of definitions, many of them the same as the contemporary meaning, none quite fit as well as this one:

A person having the same objective as another, an associate. *Obsolete. rare.*

1604 W. Shakespeare *Hamlet* i. i. 10 The riuals of my watch, bid them make hast.

("rival, 3" Oxford English Dictionary)

As you can see, this definition is literally from *Hamlet*. And, knowing this meaning, it makes much more sense: Horatio and Marcellus are not Barnardo's competitors: they are his associates, fellow castle guards, who share his objective of patrolling and protecting Elsinore. Knowing this, we can better understand the relationship dynamics between characters.

- **Pro-Tip #1: Use a Dictionary.** Keep the Oxford English Dictionary open while reading and be willing to look up words you do not understand.

Syntax and Iambic Pentameter

Another confusing aspect of Shakespearean language is due to a poetic structure called **iambic pentameter**. This is the meter of epic and tragic poetry, dating all the way back to Greek antiquity. Iambic pentameter is a poetic meter in which each line of poetry contains five sets of iambs, or about ten syllables. An iamb is essentially a two-syllable pairing of an unstressed and stressed syllable: think of it like da-dum, or "I am!" both of which would be examples of iambs. Since the word "pentameter" has the root of "penta" or five, we know then that the term means five sets of iambs. Take a look at the following first line of a popular Shakespeare poem (Sonnet 118) to see iambic pentameter in action, where each bolded portion represents a stressed syllable, and a non-bolded represents an unstressed syllable:

Shall **I** compare thee **to** a summer's **day**?

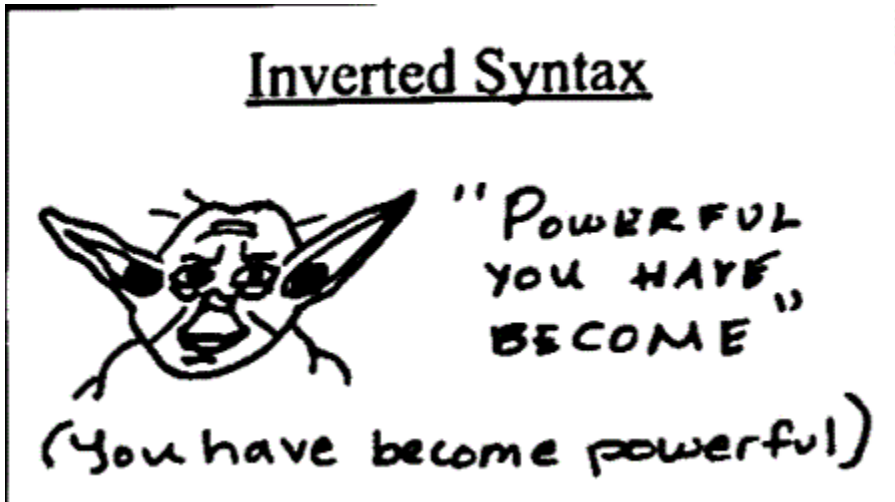
Poets and playwrights often wrote in iambic pentameter as a means to signal to audiences the literary significance of their work, to indicate the class of the character speaking (iambic pentameter for the upper class, prose for a commoner), or just to make the play or poem sound euphonic. Whatever the purpose, writing a poem in iambic pentameter is difficult. Writing an entire play in iambic pentameter? And rhyming? Even more difficult, since ideas have to perform intense linguistic gymnastics just to conform to the structure.

In order to fit the iambic pentameter, writers sometimes mess with **syntax**, or the grammatical order of words. More specifically, this is called **inverted syntax**. This makes for some pretty sounding lines, but can be confusing at first. While contemporary English often goes subject-verb-object, Shakespeare's verse often switches this order around. This means it is easier to understand if you re-order the words to be in an order we are more comfortable with. So what can you do if you encounter words

which seem out of order, to the point where you cannot understand what is being said?

Whenever you read a poem or play where the words seem out of normal order, think of Yoda. If it sounds like Yoda is saying it, it is probably a case of inverted syntax. Simply re-order the words to make them clearer.

Try the Yoda trick.



The Yoda Trick is essentially pretending it is Yoda who says the words in the play, and re-ordering the words to make more sense.

Re-Ordering Syntax Practice

Try the Yoda trick on the following line from *Hamlet*:

"To thine own self be true" (*Hamlet* 1.3.78)

How would you re-order this to be more comprehensible?

"Be true to yourself."

- **Pro-Tip #2: The Yoda Trick.** Anytime you encounter words that seem out of order, try reordering words to help you make sense of them.

Zeitgeist

Zeitgeist is a German word meaning "spirit of the times." Aristotle might use a similar term called **Kairos**, or the temporal and cultural context of a piece of rhetoric. Whatever term you prefer, it basically means that any work of writing is, in some way, a product of the time in which it was written. This means that, like language has evolved since Shakespeare's time, so has culture. For example, while Shakespeare's audience would have understood the many references to the Bible, Greek Mythology, and contemporary political events, modern readers might not be as familiar with these references. This can be super confusing. But, believe it or not, you practice learning cultural context all the time. For example, take a look at an excerpt from Tupac Shakur's song "Changes" (1992):

And still I see no changes can't a brother get a little peace
It's war on the streets and the war in the Middle East
Instead of war on poverty they got a war on drugs
So the police can bother me
And I ain't never did a crime I ain't have to do
But now I'm back with the blacks givin' it back to you

Don't let 'em jack you up, back you up,
Crack you up and pimp smack you up
You gotta learn to hold ya own
They get jealous when they see ya with ya mobile phone
But tell the cops they can't touch this
I don't trust this when they try to rush I bust this
That's the sound of my tool you say it ain't cool
My mama didn't raise no fool
And as long as I stay black I gotta stay strapped
And I never get to lay back
'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs
Some buck that I roughed up way back
Comin' back after all these years
Rat-a-tat-tat-tat that's the way it is uhh

In this excerpt, there are several cultural reference points which are easily understood to most current readers, but would be completely lost to someone outside of the cultural context. The "war in the Middle East" is likely a reference to the Gulf War (1990-1991) which was taking place just before Tupac penned this song, so readers would understand the comparison to "war on the streets" (poor people of color confrontations with police) as a violent and unjust act of war on people because of their skin color. Similarly, the reference to the "war on drugs" is likely a reference to President Ronald Reagan's war on drugs which (starting in 1982) is widely understood to have disproportionately affected people of color (Human Rights Watch). And while Shakespeare would have no idea what a "mobile phone" might be, and the term might itself seem antiquated at the time of this textbook's publication (2019) when the term cell phone is more commonly used, the term is contemporary enough that we understand what Tupac means, and we understand the value of the object as a signifier of wealth, especially in 1992 when mobile phones were even more expensive to most people than they are now. Other terms, like "strapped" and "Rat-a-tat-tat-tat" are references to guns as a means to defend oneself from the abusive police profiling and unjust aggression in addition to gang violence directed towards African Americans. Through understanding these cultural references (direct) and allusions (indirect), readers are able to understand the theme of the verse: expressing frustration with the oppressive force of racism which never seems to change, and the need for a person of color to always be prepared to defend themselves from violence.

So just like listening to a popular rap song using context-specific words and references might confuse an older audience, or my previous reference to Pokemon might confuse people who have never played Pokemon, or my reference to Yoda might confuse those who have never seen Star Wars, so too might Shakespeare's lingo be confusing to us because we miss the cultural reference points. The good news is that cultural context can be learned so that we can fully enjoy Shakespeare's words.

Practicing Learning Cultural Context

Take, for example, the following lines from *Hamlet*, wherein Hamlet compares his uncle Claudius with his deceased father Old Hamlet:

So excellent a king; that was, to this,

Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother

(1.2.139-140)

1. Who or what was Hyperion?
2. Who or what is a satyr?
3. After looking up these references, what do you think Hamlet is insinuating about his uncle Claudius compared to his father, Old Hamlet?

Elizabethan Cultural Reference Point: Greek Mythology

In this case, a simple Google search of the terms will help elucidate cultural reference points we might not understand. A cursory search reveals these are important figures in Greek mythology: a satyr is a gross, sexually perverted crossbreed between a man and a goat. Hyperion was the glorious and dazzling God/Titan of the sun. So we can infer from this comparison that Hamlet is saying his dad was awesome and represented all things good and powerful, and his uncle is a nasty perverted animal. This tells us a lot about the plot and character dynamic between Claudius and Hamlet, and foreshadows, perhaps, that a confrontation will

take place between the two of them.

Pro-Tip #3: Research Cultural Contexts. Use Google or your library's databases to do a little bit of research on cultural context to give you a deeper understanding of the play.

Other recommended resources for understanding drama (Shakespeare in particular):

- YouTube videos, like Crash Course Literature
- No Fear Shakespeare provides a translation of Shakespeare into modern English. Be wary of using this resource, though, as you may lose important literary aspects. Just like listening to a rap song in its original form and taking time to understand the cultural background, so too is it important to read a play in its original form.
- Folger's Shakespeare, which includes helpful annotations and footnotes to explain diction and cultural context
- Kenneth Branagh's film version of *Hamlet* (1996) contains every line from the play, and is probably the most accurate representation of the play. It can be rented for free from most libraries.

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