ANALYZING A PLAY

The following questions are intended to direct a reader/writer to what he/she should look for in a play. They are general questions, and not all of them will apply to a specific play. They are not an outline for writing about a play, but answering (or even attempting to answer) the questions should help you to formulate your own thesis statement and outline. (If there are terms here that you don't understand, see A Handbook to Literature in the Writing Lab.)

CHARACTER
1. Who is the protagonist or main character? What are his/her character traits? His/her chief weaknesses? Virtues?

2. What are the functions of the other characters? Do any serve to bring out certain aspects of the main character? How? Is there a character who seems to be the special vehicle for the playwright's own comment on the play?

3. Who is the antagonist, if there is one? Is he/she a complex character, a mixture of good and bad?

4. If the play is a classical tragedy, does the main character have a "tragic flaw" (weakness, moral defect, or an error in judgment)? What part does chance play in his downfall? Is he/she of sufficient nobility of character to win our admiration and sympathy in spite of his/her shortcomings?

5. What means does the playwright use to characterize? Stage directions? Self-revelation by monologue or conversation? Actions? Comments by other characters?

6. Does the playwright try to give characters well-rounded personalities? Are there any type or stock characters in the play?

PLOT
1. What are the main elements? Into how many "chapters of action" is the play divided, regardless of the act divisions? Can you summarize each chapter of action after you have read it? Is the progress of the action clear or confused?

2. Is the plot of sufficient scope and importance to engage our interest?

3. What brings on the dramatic conflict? Where does the play really begin?

4. Are the incidents well and plausibly connected? Is there sufficient causation? How are gaps in time treated?
5. Is the resolution sufficiently inevitable, or is the denouement brought about by arbitrary coincidence?

6. Is there dramatic irony present? To what degree? What does it achieve?

**SETTING**
1. What is the setting? Does it change? If so, does the change weaken the play? Is the change necessary and natural?

2. How does the setting contribute to the theme and characterization? Is the particular setting important to the play?

**THEME**
1. What is the moral or human significance of the play? Does it have universal significance through its theme, plot and characters? Does it stimulate thought about any important problems of life? Does it supply answers by implication or by direct statement?

2. Does the play clearly reveal any over-all view of the universe on the part of the dramatist? Is his view sentimental, cynical, Christian, humanist, romantic, etc.? Does the dramatist leave conclusions up to the reader? Or does he use devices to help form the reader's conclusions?

**LANGUAGE** *(NOTE: Before discussing language, be sure to note if the play is a translation.)*
1. If verse, what kind? Does the dramatist seem hampered by his verse form?

2. Is the language elevated or close to that of real life?

3. Does it contribute significantly to the enjoyment of the play?

4. Is the language used by each character especially adapted to him? Is it used to help characterize him?

**GENERAL**
1. What is the genre of the play (tragedy, melodrama, etc.)? How well does this play fit the definition of the genre?

2. Would you like to read the play a second or third time? Why? Why not?

*Adapted from Literature in Critical Perspectives, pp. 777-778*