All My Sons
That’s So, Drama
A brief introduction to analysing drama

OBJECTIVE
This lecture should help you both (i) understand the dramatic features of a play and (ii) annotate patterns of words, sentences and stage directions readily as you read All My Sons.

DRAMATIC METHODS
1. **Staging**: setting, music and sound effects, lighting and visual effects
2. **Language**: tone, diction, repetition, rhythm (pauses, sentence length), sentence functions
3. **Stage directions**: action, gestures, movement, distance between characters

WHAT MAKES A PLAY A PLAY
When does a play begin and when does it end? You might think about the dimming of the lights, the drawing of the curtain or for a modern audience, that last reminder to turn all devices to silent mode… which each signal the audience’s entrance in another world — one fraught with tension, brimming with suspense or pouring with laughter (and complimentary saliva). Some of us might be so used to the illusion that it ceases to be illusion. We see actors wearing funny hats and take in the idea that they are lions (nants ingonyama...). We believe that the music from the loudspeaker really is going on inside Blanche’s head. We do not think twice when a forlorn prince stares deeply into a skull and speaks to us with lines stolen¹ from that SCGS publicity banner (‘to be or not to be, that is the question’). On stage, the soliloquy, the music, the costumes and the setting all become, for a matter of moments, real.

Drama, the third genre we are studying in Paper 1, is fundamentally different from poetry and prose. First and foremost, it involves an audience who suspends their disbelief to believe. This is why we consider drama a ‘mimetic art’, a mode of performance that seeks to imitate real life. While characters may ‘break the fourth wall’² to speak directly to the audience, the illusion is mostly preserved and the audience is led to feel, often strongly, for and against the characters on stage. Of the three genres, drama is most clearly based on effects: the internal effects on stage (i.e. a character’s tone or the mood evoked by the music) and the external effects on the audience (e.g. shock, terror, sympathy). As students of Literature, we place ourselves on both platforms to think about both sets of effects.

Just as a poem is arranged in lines and stanzas, a novel in ‘books’, ‘parts’ and chapters, a play is organised by acts and scenes. Shakespearean tragedies and comedies have been arranged into five acts, while many modern plays are divided into two major acts. A Streetcar Named Desire is unique with its eleven-scene structure. All My Sons, like classical tragedy, is composed of three acts, exposition, conflict / climax and catastrophe. These divisions are important because they greatly determine dramatic effects.

¹ An ironic reference. The banner inaccurately quotes Shakespeare’s Hamlet; I doubt SCGS wants their girls to contemplate suicide like Hamlet himself.
² The invisible line between the stage and the audience, or stage front. The ‘three’ walls are the background, stage left and stage right.
Ask yourself: when does an intermission (the break where you buy a $5 can of Coca-Cola Light or let go of other liquids) occur? It is often placed at a point of high tension, unbearable suspense or even confusion — so that the audience leaves their seats on a dramatic ‘high’. Thankfully, our emphasis is clearer: dramatic effects form a crucial link between ‘how’ (methods) and ‘why’ (purpose).

‘VISUALISING’ A PLAY

A playwright is able to achieve these effects not through words but through mise-en-scène. The term refers to the visual elements of a production: the set, the props, the lighting, the positioning of the actors, their dressing, movement (‘blocking’) and gestures.

The reader of a play is likely to encounter the setting via stage directions on the first page. Here, the playwright defines the time and location of the play, which can range from the minimalistic (Endgame) to rich expressionism (The Glass Menagerie) to grand opulence (The Phantom of Opera). While the reader will soon flip beyond page one, keep in mind that the setting evokes the overall mood of the play and will inform the audience’s understanding of the play’s characters, their status and their world. The description of characters and their appearance in the stage directions performs a similar function.

\[\text{Bare interior. Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn.}\]

Samuel Beckett, Endgame

The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation. The fire-escape is included in the set — that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it. The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic licence. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic.

Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie

We can also infer a lot about characters and their relationships by the use of physical distance between actors, their movements away or towards each other, their facial expressions and gestures. Based on these signs, an audience can perceive one character as more dominant, a relationship as cold and distant, and an ongoing conflict on the brink of an explosion. Inaction too, in the worlds of Beckett and Pinter, can be of great significance: the stillness of Estragon and Vladimir is perhaps symbolic of their helplessness, or the meaninglessness of any attempt to leave. Perhaps it could, in a less depressing play than Godot, portray a sense of peace in their friendship — their solidarity.

\[(\text{Carol starts to leave the room. John grabs her and begins to beat her.})\]

JOHN. You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life? (He knocks her to the floor… He picks up a chair, raises it above his head, and advances on her.)

David Mamet, Oleanna

Silence.

ESTRAGON. Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR. Yes, let’s go.

They do not move.

Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot
‘HEARING’ A PLAY

Much of drama is in fact based on character relationships which in turn are driven by dialogue. We conventionally refer to all spoken lines in a play or screenplay as ‘dialogue’ (not trilogue) precisely because most words are communicated in a two-way conversation. This is true even when lines are delivered by three characters or more; identifying the various two-characters conversations at such points will help you focus on the central conflict or concern more easily. In some cases, you might see the dialogue shift between character pairings. In Act Two of All My Sons, the audience witnesses Chris and Mother tussle over Ann, Mother and Keller argue about Chris, and approaching the play’s climax, Chris confronting Keller about his role in the deaths of twenty one pilots:

Both hold their voices down.
KELLER (afraid of him, his deadly insistence). What’s the matter with you? What the hell is the matter with you?
CHRIS (quietly, incredibly). How could you do that? How?
KELLER. What’s the matter with you!
CHRIS. Dad... Dad, you killed twenty one men!

Arthur Miller, All My Sons

Monologues, by their very length, are significant too but far less common in modern drama. You might be familiar with the soliloquy or aside in Shakespeare, where a character ‘steps aside’ from the main action to speak, as Romeo (‘But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?’), Othello and Hamlet variously do. You may even have had the benefit of watching Stella Kon’s Emily of Emerald Hill, a one-woman (or man) play. Like in Emily, ‘monodrama’ can be employed to recount the past, its ups and downs; the most famous lines of Hamlet portray a deep inner conflict; in Othello, the title character descends into madness as he recognises his own tragic downfall.

Analysing dramatic language, whether in dialogue or monologue, is not completely different from analysing poetry or direct speech in a novel. The style of language can range from poetic (most of Shakespeare) to naturalistic (see All My Sons), formal to colloquial (Poop!), clinical to emotional.

GRANNY. Pain?
GRANNY. I’m sorry, it doesn’t work that way lor.
DADDY. I’m also sorry lor. I also can’t take this lying down…

Chong Tze Chien, Poop!

Language can transform the atmosphere of a theatre from relaxed to intense, casual to charged. This is where the tone of dialogue is instrumental. Characters can be like Stevie in the extract we will read, regretful, outraged, aggressive and finally distraught in tone, while Martin speaks in a way that is remorseful and pathetic. In the example below, we can surely hear the hostile, combative tone adopted as George delivers a warning (‘Be careful’) and Martha responds by being incredibly dismissive (‘aren’t’, ‘haven’t’). The real question for the Lit student is, how does one substantiate an analysis of dramatic tone?

GEORGE. Be careful, Martha… I’ll rip you to pieces.
MARTHA. You aren’t man enough… you haven’t got the guts.

Edward Albee, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
In many modern plays, the stage directions prescribe what the character’s tone should be. If without such explicit guidance on tone, we must look to the choice of words and sentences: diction, or word choice will form a large part of our analysis of All My Sons. You can select prominent, striking words used by a character (e.g. ‘rip you’, ‘guts’) that have a clear effect (e.g. violent, menacing). Patterns of words, such as the repetition of ‘you’ or constant references to masculine power (‘guts’, ‘man’), can tell us even more about what characters are prioritising, emphasising or fighting over. In Streetcar, Stanley immolates the DuBois sisters’ description of him as a ‘pig’ with his own choice of imagery:

STANLEY. (He seizes her arm.) Don’t ever talk that way to me! “Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy!”—them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister’s too much around here! [...] Remember what Huey Long said—“Every Man is a King!” And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!  

Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire

Syntax and rhythm contribute to tone in a similar way. The use of anaphora, where sentences begin with the same word(s), can present characters at their most obsessive, distressed or enraged. Sentence length enhances these dramatic effects: shorter lines tend to express urgency and all manner of emotion, from fear to anger; longer lines usually portray a calmer, more reflective state of mind. Furthermore, a playwright employs interruptions and pauses in the form of ellipses, dashes and stage directions to conjure a mix of tension, exasperation and hostility. A character who interrupts another would seem domineering, threatening. A character who pauses frequently appears anxious, unsettled.

MICK. Never seen my mother before either, I suppose? (Pause.) I think I’m coming to the conclusion that you’re an old rogue. You’re nothing but an old scoundrel.

DAVIES. Now wait—

MICK. Listen, son. Listen, sonny. You stink.

DAVIES. You ain’t got the right to—

MICK. You’re stinking the place out. You’re an old robber, there’s no getting away from it…

Harold Pinter, The Caretaker

Last but certainly not least, sentence functions are also directly indicative of a character’s intention. A declarative statement is sometimes assertive, while an exclamation usually shows excitement or indignation. An imperative sentence — a direct command such as ‘Get out of here!’ — presents a sense of authority and power. An interrogative sentence is either a question that shows some deference (because you are seeking information) or a rhetorical question that acts like a command. If the rather linguistic approach is turning you off (or on), fret not. Analysing sentences is really about patterns of questions (?), commands (!) and statements (.), and at the very simplest, punctuation!?!?!

The more intuitive approach is to ask why characters say what they do. Like Martin, a character may try to coax another, express remorse, appeal for sympathy and seek to mend relationships. As Stevie does, a character may instead vent his or her frustration, exact his or her wrath upon another and vow to seek revenge. In drama, you can expect a riot of emotion in many layers, in every possible shade; while the novel is meant to be appreciated in silence, a play simply has to be read well and truly aloud. Here we go.
READING A PLAY

Martin and Stevie are introduced as a happy, long-married couple full of witty banter. Ross, an old friend, arrives at their home to interview Martin on his winning the Pritzker Prize, the most coveted prize in architecture. He will instead learn about Martin’s secret, and discloses the devastating truth to Stevie. In this extract, we witness Stevie’s reaction.

Write a critical commentary on the passage, relating it to the portrayal of the relationship between Martin and Stevie.

Stevie: (Rage; sweeps the bookcase of whatever is on it, or overturns a piece of furniture. Silence; then starting quietly, building). Now, you listen to me. I have listened to you. I have heard you tell me how much you love me, how you’ve never even wanted another woman, how we have been a more perfect marriage than chance would even allow. We’re both too bright for most of the shit. We see the deep and awful humor of things go over the heads of most people; we see what’s hideously wrong in what most people accept as normal; we have both the joys and the sorrows of all that. We have a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that’s OK because it’s a good line... so long as we don’t screw up.

Martin: I know; I know. Stevie, I…

Stevie: (Don’t interrupt me!) Shut up! So long as we don’t screw up. (Points at him) And you’ve screwed up!

Martin: Stevie, I…

Stevie: I said, shut up. Do you know how you’ve done it? How you’ve screwed up?

Martin: (Mumbled) Because I was at the vegetable stand one day, and I looked over to my right and I saw…

Stevie: (Hard and slow) Because you’ve broken something and it can’t be fixed!

Martin: Stevie…

Stevie: Fall out of love with me? Fine! No, not fine, but that can be fixed… time… whatever! But tell me you love me and her—both of us!—equally? The same way? That you go from my bed—our bed… (aside-ish) it’s amazing, you know, how good we are, still, how we please each other and ourselves so… fully, so… fresh each time… (aside over)… you go from our bed, wash your dick, get in your car and go to her, and do with her what I cannot imagine myself imagining? Or—worse!… that you’ve come from her, to my bed!? To our bed!?… and you do with me what I can imagine… love… want you for!?

Martin: (Deep sadness) Oh, Stevie…

Stevie: (Not listening) That you can do these two things… and not understand how it… SHATTERS THE GLASS!!?? How it cannot be dealt with—how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? and how I am destroyed? How you are? How I cannot admit it though I know it!? How I cannot deny it because I cannot admit it!? Cannot admit it, because it is outside of denying!?

Martin: Stevie, I… I promise you, I’ll stop; I’ll…

Stevie: How stopping has nothing to do with having started!? How nothing has anything to do with anything!? (Tears—if there—stop) You have brought me down; you love of my life! You have brought me down to nothing! (Accusatory finger right at him) You have brought me down, and, Christ! I’ll bring you down with me!

(Brief pause; she turns on her heel, exits. We hear the front door slam.)

Martin: (After she leaves; after he hears the door; little boy) Stevie? (Pause) Stevie?

Adapted from a play by Edward Albee (2002)
ANALYSING A PLAY

1. **Divide the passage** into the various conversations presented (e.g. A-B, A-C, B-C) or split one conversation into multiple parts. **Identify the conflict or concern** in each part or conversation.

2. **Form an impression** of the character relationship(s) by observing the opening lines, closing lines, and key stage directions throughout. Ask yourself who is in control, and in what ways?

   STEVIE. *Rage; sweeps the bookcase of whatever is on it, or overturns a piece of furniture. Silence; then starting quietly, building* LINE 1

   STEVIE. I'll bring you down with me! *Brief pause; she turns on her heel, exits. We hear the front door slam.*  
   MARTIN. *After she leaves; after he hears the door; little boy* Stevie? *Pause* Stevie? LINES 39-40

3. **Consider short exchanges** of no more than two lines per character (i.e. four lines). Compare how one character responds to the other, paying attention to the stage directions and use of language.

   STEVIE. I said, shut up. Do you know how you’ve done it? How you’ve screwed up?  
   MARTIN *Mumbled* Because I was at the vegetable stand one day, and I looked over to my right and I saw…  
   STEVIE *Hard and slow*. Because you’ve broken something and it can’t be fixed!  
   MARTIN. Stevie… LINES 15-19

4. **Focus only on one character’s lines** at a time, selecting a range from start to end. **Annotate** the significant words, patterns or punctuation that tell us about Martin’s feelings towards Stevie.

   MARTIN. Stevie, I… LINE 14  
   MARTIN. Stevie… LINE 19  
   MARTIN. (Deep sadness) Oh, Stevie… LINE 28  
   MARTIN. Stevie, I… I promise you, I’ll stop; I’ll… LINE 34

5. **Focus on the other character’s lines.** Break up the dialogue into parts if necessary. **Annotate** the significant words or patterns that display Stevie’s tone.

   STEVIE. We’re both too bright for most of the shit. We see the deep and awful humor of things go over the heads of most people; we see what’s hideously wrong in what most people accept as normal; we have both the joys and the sorrows of all that. We have a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that’s OK because it’s a good line… so long as we don’t screw up.  
   STEVIE. (Don’t interrupt me!) Shut up! So long as we don’t screw up. *(Points at him)* And you’ve screwed up!  
   STEVIE. I said, shut up. Do you know how you’ve done it? How you’ve screwed up? LINES 5-15
6. **Continue to focus on other character’s lines.** Here, we will pay attention to how rhythm and syntax are used to present Stevie’s emotional collapse.

STEVIE. Fall out of love with me? Fine! No, not fine, but that can be fixed… time… whatever! But tell me you love me and her—both of us!—equally? The same way? That you go from my bed—our bed… (aside-ish) it’s amazing, you know, how good we are, still, how we please each other and ourselves so… fully, so… fresh each time… (aside over)… you go from our bed, wash your dick, get in your car and go to her, and do with her what I cannot imagine myself imagining? Or—worse!… that you’ve come from her, to my bed!? To our bed!?… and you do with me what I can imagine… love… want you for!? **LINES 20-28**

7. On a more complex level, we can consider how **sentence functions** and **stage directions** work in tandem. Stevie’s frenzied imperative sentences are accompanied by a mix of sadness and rage in her actions and her exit from the scene.

STEVIE. (Not listening) That you can do these two things… and not understand how it… SHATTERS THE GLASS!!!? How it cannot be dealt with—how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? […] How stopping has nothing to do with having started?! How nothing has anything to do with anything?! (Tears— if there—stop) You have brought me down; you love of my life! You have brought me down to nothing! (Accusatory finger right at him) You have brought me down, and, Christ! I’ll bring you down with me! (Brief pause; she turns on her heel, exits. We hear the front door slam.) **LINES 29-39**

**CONCLUSION - WORKING A PLAY**

Drama demands to be seen, heard and above all, felt. As a reader, your task is not to explain what the characters are already saying. You want to **read into** characters, how and why they say their lines, picking up the patterns and stresses in the dialogue along the way. You want to use the stage directions to visualise the movements and actions of the actors, to imagine the laughter behind a gesture, the fury within an accusing finger… because no other art form holds up a mirror to our personal limitations, adversity and suffering quite like drama. Plays provide us ‘a slice of life’. We hope you have a taste of *All My Sons* soon and grow to enjoy it the way your seniors did. If drama is the food of life, we will play on. (**Curtain.**)
APPENDIX

THEATRE DESIGN
Just for knowledge, the theatre stage is designed in one of four main configurations where the lines between performance space and viewing space are clear. In the free-form ‘black box’ setting, the ‘stage’ can be defined by the director through properties (i.e. props) or, simply, the placement of actual seats:

- **Proscenium arch**: This has been the most common theatre setting since the 18th century. Actors play to an audience seated mainly on one side of the stage, with ‘wings’ in the form of box seats (*The Age of Innocence*, anyone?) and seats on the sides of a horse-shoe. The ‘proscenium arch’ refers to the ‘picture frame’ built on top of the stage, which you might find decorated with ornate, gold carvings and trimmings at a grand theatre.

- **Traverse**: Resembling a modelling runway, the audience is seated only on two sides (left and right hand sides) of a long, narrow stage. This layout is rarely used for conventional drama.

- **Thrust**: The stage ‘reaches out into the audience, who are seated (or standing) on three sides’. This design is familiar to audiences at The Globe theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and Swan Theatre — each certainly constructed with Shakespearean productions in mind.

- **In-the-round**: The stage is placed in the centre, surrounded on all sides (or four sides if the stage is rectangular but let’s not go there) by the audience.

- **Black box**: This is used to describe an ‘empty’ performance space with black walls. A recent invention in the history of theatre, a ‘black box’ can be configured in many ways and so is well-suited to experimental theatre. You can find this design at the Esplanade Theatre Studio, Drama Centre, The Necessary Stage at Marine Parade Community Club and right here in CJC.

With the advent of Ibsen and his followers… realistic dialogue, in a conversational style, took the place of rhetoric and declamation; gestures became more restrained, and the scenery presented an accurate representation of the place and period of the play. The *illusion of reality* was greatly helped by the almost universal adoption of the box-set, which took the place of the romantic backcloth and wings used in melodrama. […] This led to the darkening of the auditorium, and to the convention by which the proscenium arch became an opening in a ‘fourth wall’, through which the spectators watched what Zola, speaking of his own intense realistic plays, called *a slice of life*.

---

**DRAMATIC IRONY**
No lecture on drama would be complete without reference to ‘dramatic irony’, occurring when the audience knows more about present or future circumstances than the characters on stage. This situation usually arises when one character reveals something while other characters are offstage.
CHARACTERISATION
It goes without saying that plays have characters who each fulfil certain roles: protagonists (a main character or hero), antagonists (the villain, or the hero’s adversary), supporting characters and ‘minor’ characters (who often serve a key plot function, or comment on the action).

A SAMPLE
This is Jimmy’s first sustained attack on the upper classes, releasing his fully fury on the attitudes and privileges of the upper classes. What makes this speech more significant, however, is the fact that it is really an indirect attack on Alison and her family’s values, shocking in its cruelty and venom. He flings out insults (‘Platitude from Outer Space’, ‘so hazy’, ‘his own stupidity’) intending to provoke reactions, uses rhetorical questions to try to evoke a response, and the effect is a tirade which cannot be interrupted. It is a succession of relatively short, powerful sentences. Language here is used ironically to taunt (‘he really deserves some sort of decoration’) and inflict pain on Alison. Alison’s silence and lack of reaction to this speech, shown by her plodding ironing and downcast eyes (‘There is no sound, only the plod of Alison’s iron. Her eyes are fixed on what she is doing’), reveal her suffering and inability to respond to Jimmy’s verbal battering.

Adapted from Kenneth Pickering, How to Study Modern Drama