

## 2

# CONVENTIONS OF DRAMA

### Learning Outcomes

#### Knowledge and Understanding

- Understand drama as performance literature
- Consider the advantages and limitations of staging
- Understand the creation of momentum
- Identify dramatic structure and effect on the audience
- Explore conventions and expectations of drama

#### Appreciation

- Appreciate drama on both page and stage
- Explore importance of themes, characters and action
- Evaluate the importance of setting and props
- Evaluate the importance of dialogue and sound
- Appreciate and analyze a variety of plays
- Consider the function of stage devices

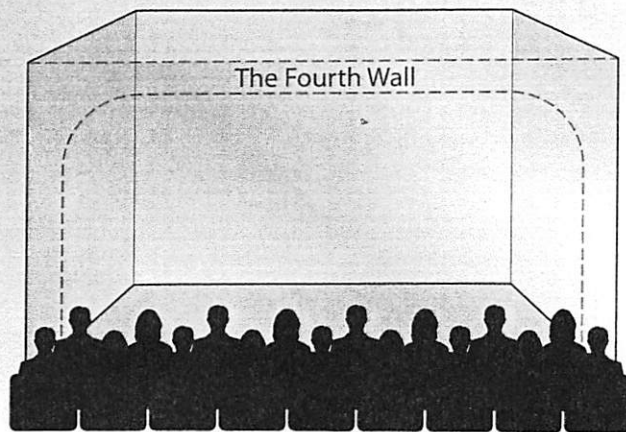
## Knowledge and Understanding

Every play has one common aspect: it is written to be performed. What this means for you as a reader is that you must call upon your imagination to see the characters and to hear the same words, sounds, actions and movements that you would experience as a member of an audience viewing a play.

While drama and prose fiction share the common elements of plot, characters and themes, the ways in which playwrights render these elements are quite distinct. The stage, and the position of the audience in relation to that stage, have limitations which the prose fiction writer does not have. For example, the physical space of the stage restricts the types of action



◀ Theatrical performances are amongst the most immediate forms of literary presentation. The words of a script are meant to be enacted, not simply read from the page.



A visual representation of the 'Fourth Wall', the imaginary wall through which the audience witnesses the action of a play.

### Dramatic strategies

A dramatic strategy is one of many tools available to the playwright to create specific effects either on stage or in the reading of a play. These tools are called dramatic conventions.

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, was particularly known for the 'alienation effect' in his plays, using techniques to generate distance between the performance and the audience.



a playwright can display. While in prose fiction readers can witness descriptions of horses stampeding, elephants parading or characters water-skiing, such action is generally unavailable on stage. Prose fiction writers also have a variety of perspectives or angles of vision to use in their works. The playwright essentially has one point of view, and that is essentially the dramatic perspective of the audience members themselves, sometimes referred to as the 'fourth wall'. If a playwright wants to reveal motivation for an action, and get inside the mind of the character, then that motivation must be revealed directly to the audience. We have to listen and watch the characters to discover their interior thoughts. Dialogue, then, becomes the primary vehicle for the playwright. Character action and

interaction, gestures, props, the configuration of the stage itself, lighting and sound – all contribute to the experience of the audience, but words, and how they are spoken by the actors, produce the greatest effects on the audience. Even if you are unable to view a play physically, learning the conventions and expectations of drama will enable you to 'see' the play in your mind's eye as you read it.

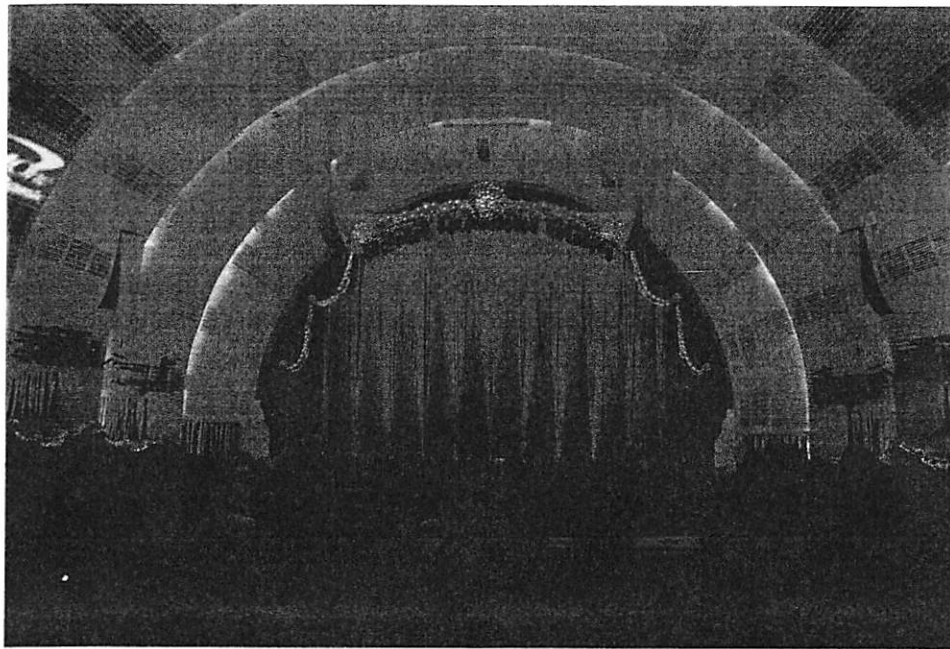
## Conventions and expectations of drama

Drama as an 'artifice' employs a number of strategies that bring to life the imaginary world of the play. Playwrights might want their audiences to embrace the theatrical world wholly or in part. Realistic drama invites audiences to view the world on stage as a familiar one. The characters, words, actions and stage sets, regardless of culture or time frame, are approachable as opposed to alienating. The character emotions are familiar and so the response of the audience is to some degree sympathetic. The psychological distance between audience and performance is minimized. In these plays, the audience experiences more emotion and participates actively from behind the fourth wall. In these plays, the audience 'suspends disbelief' and accepts that the world on stage before them is realistic and, therefore, can offer them emotional intensity and release.

Other playwrights might want their audiences to be fully aware of the artifice of their presentation, and may consciously work at dissolving the fourth wall so that audiences are reminded throughout the performance that the presentation before them is just that – a presentation that challenges the audience's subjectivity. These types of dramatic experiences keep audiences at a purposeful distance from the emotional impact of the work. A detached, somewhat objective, audience perspective is the goal similar to Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect'. The 'alienation effect' seeks to keep audience members well aware that what they are witnessing on stage is purely artificial; in this way, audiences will remain alienated, or emotionally distant, from the world they witness on stage.

The audience's emotional investment in a play can be manipulated by the playwright to great effect. Dramatic irony, for example, when the audience recognizes the truth or falsity of words or actions when characters do not, can heighten the emotional investment of the audience. The tension that such knowledge produces in the audience can drive the play forward as audience members anticipate the eventual revelation of truth.

What are the conventions of drama and what sort of expectations do we bring to plays as audience or readers? For all drama, we have a stage on which actors play out the words and actions of the playwright. Stages come in various shapes and sizes with equally varied configurations of audience seating. The stage is the setting of the play's action, and the



◀ A proscenium stage.

world of character interaction. To stage a play means to bring the play to life. Staging, then, refers to all of the decisions of a play's production, including the positioning of actors, their movements on stage, the construction of the set (including the placement and physical attributes of props), as well as the use of lighting, costume and sound devices.

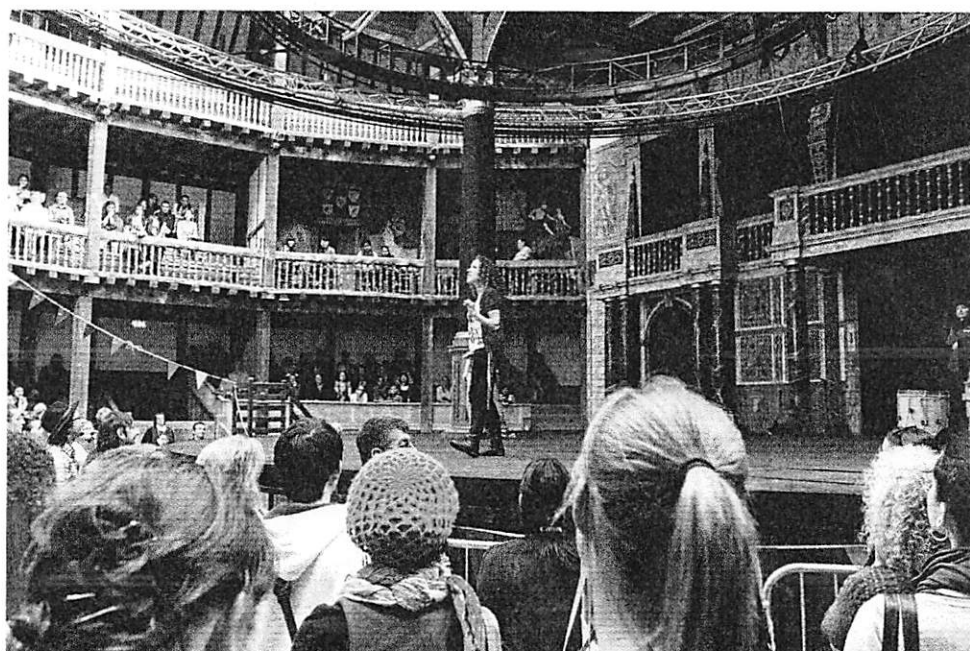
Your task, as a reader, is to pay attention to every detail of the stage. You must construct the stage in your imagination, noting positions, shapes, colours and sizes of every detail provided in the stage directions. Note where doors and windows are located, because these staging devices differentiate the interior world of the play (on-stage) from its exterior world (off-stage).

Actors assume the roles of characters. Just as in prose fiction, a play can have major and minor characters, foil characters, a protagonist, an antagonist, and, in the case of memory plays, a narrator. You will need to examine characters carefully and pay particular attention to stage directions regarding the way that a character is described initially. Note physical and costume descriptions that appear in the stage directions so that you can imagine a character



#### **Memory plays**

Memory plays use a character as a narrator who typically stands off to the side of the stage and provides background exposition, clarification or explanation to the drama unfolding on stage.



◀ A theatre in the round.

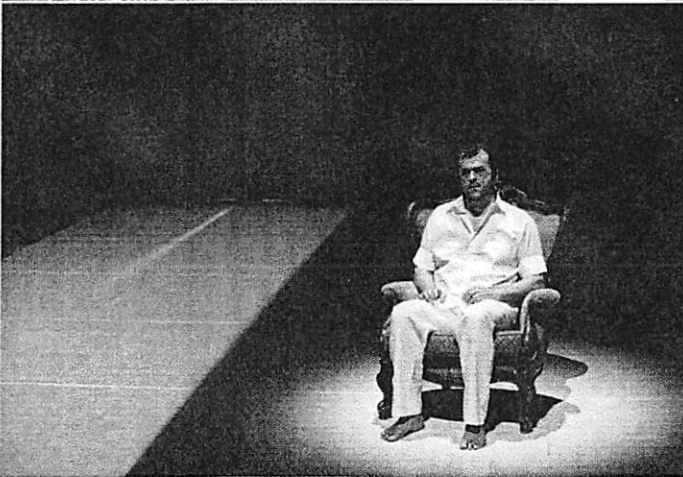
Can reading a play provide the same dramatic insight as watching a play?



Dialogue is a major cause of dramatic momentum, increasing tension between characters or pushing plot development.

visually. Also note any stage direction that describes the way a character speaks. Often, the manner in which a line is delivered can be just as important, or more so, than the words themselves. When watching a play, we have the added benefit of the actor's voice, which can suggest subtle meanings beyond the words themselves. When reading, however, voice moderation, accenting and pacing of the playwright's words can only be noted through written stage directions.

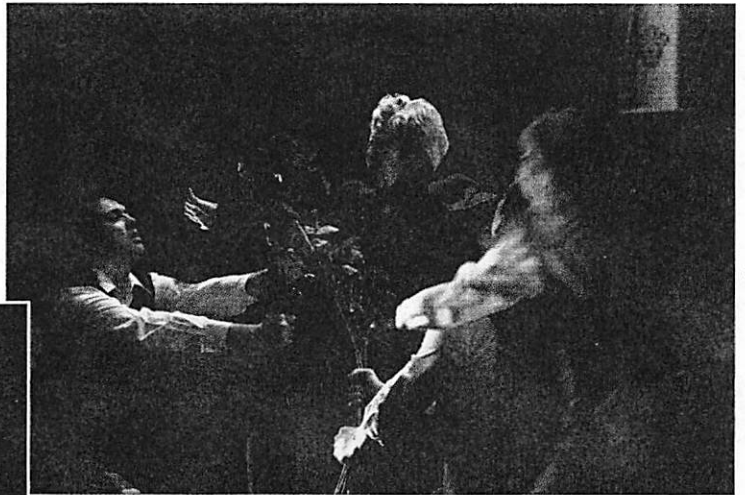
Actions on stage, whether overt or subtle, together with the words spoken by characters, serve to advance the plot of the play. Momentum, which drives the play forward, is often associated with increasing tension. As you read, you must be sensitive to those actions or situations that create reaction in one or more characters. These reactions allow you to watch character development unfold before your eyes. By reading closely you can identify what subject matter, action or interaction triggers an explosively tense moment or a moment of absolute silence. Both reactions are important to recognize because in either situation, momentum builds.



Silence on stage often prompts complete silence from the audience, as they are waiting for something important to happen or be said.



By creating the forward motion, the momentum, of a play, the playwright allows the audience to invest emotionally in the characters and their situations on stage. Tension, whether overt or subtly presented, extends to the audience. Ideally, the audience embraces the tension, driving forward their engagement with plot. Quite simply, the moment that the audience wants to know what is going to happen next, is the moment that creates momentum.



Dramatic action can be the fulfilment of rising tension, or can create new tensions in itself.

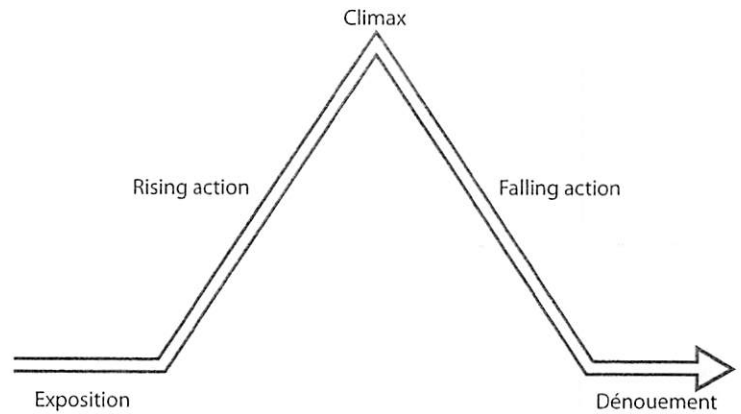
## Dramatic structure

In 1863 German dramatist and novelist Gustav Freytag created his 'Pyramid' to explain the predictable order for the unfolding of a play. The five-part structure was basically as follows:

- Exposition
- Rising action
- Climax/crisis (a turning point)
- Falling action/reversal
- Dénouement

Of course, as drama has developed through the centuries, the structuring of plays has been modified. Rather than beginning with the prescribed exposition or background, many playwrights choose to engage their audience from the outset, seemingly dropping their audiences into the action of the play. This immediate engagement

in the middle of action – *in medias res* – is often provocative. Audiences and readers alike have little time to ease into the action of the play. The effects are sometimes startling, or confusing, but the expectation is that spectators are actively engaged from the onset. Passive observation, for these playwrights, is a thing of the past.



## The 'well-made play'

One modification of Freytag's traditional five-part structure is the structure 19th-century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen used to great effect – the 'well-made play'. In this format, the plot involves a character withholding a secret. Through a series of events and actions, tension and suspense build steadily to the moment of climax when a secret is revealed and the character's fear of ultimate loss is translated into gain. Death and destruction give way to freedom and understanding – a new life, so to speak, emerges for the character.

A well-made play incorporates many of the following elements:

- A protagonist's secret
- Mistaken identity
- Misplaced documents
- Well-timed entrances and exits
- A battle of wits
- A climactic scene reveals the secret
- Logical dénouement

We will examine these elements later in this chapter in our 'Appreciation' section. In this section, however, you will have the opportunity to apply the concepts of dramatic convention and the subsequent expectations for you as a reader of drama.



▲ A scene from Henrik Ibsen's great play, *A Doll's House*.

## Other dramatic classifications

In addition to the realistic play and the well-made play, there are a number of other types of plays that you may study in one or more parts of the programme, including theatre of the absurd, classical or Elizabethan comedy and tragedy (see Chapter 3, Conventions of Poetry), and tragicomedy. Theatre of the Absurd, for example, is a term coined by Martin Esslin and refers to a nonrealistic form of drama. Characters, staging and action all run counter to our expectations of realistic drama. The world of the absurd is peopled with



▲ Patrick Stewart (left) and Sir Ian McKellen perform a scene from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Here we see Eugène Ionesco, one of the greatest exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd, standing beneath a poster advertising one of his plays.



▲ confusion, despair, illogicality and incongruity. Action is frequently repetitive or seemingly irrational. Characters are often confused, and metaphysical themes tend to reinforce that the world is incomprehensible. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are well-known plays of this classification.

#### SUMMARY

The more realistic the play, the more often the playwright intends to engage the audience emotionally. Less realistic drama, such as absurdist plays, often disregard the emotional sympathies of the audience in favour of their intellectual responses. Do not assume that playwrights always want their audiences to identify with characters and their situations.

## Considering theme in drama

Themes in drama, like those in prose fiction, are ideas that express an understanding of some aspect of human nature. Themes express lessons common to the human condition, so the time and place of the play is inconsequential to the lessons about what it means to be human. While thematic ideas can be expressed in single words or short phrases, themes are expressed in sentence form. For example, the word 'fear' is a thematic idea while the statement, 'Anger and rage are often manifestations of fear', would be a statement of theme.

#### EXERCISE 1

Below are five thematic ideas. Try to describe at least four possible themes for each thematic idea, creating ideas that would translate readily into a theatrical production.

- Jealousy
- Forgiveness
- Love
- Freedom
- Competition

## Considering time in drama

How does a playwright account for the passage of time on stage? In some instances, a playwright can use the designation of scenes themselves to indicate that time is passing. Closing the curtain or blacking out the stage between scenes or acts implicitly prompts the audience to assume that there will be changes in either the location of the set or in the time of the next scene. These mechanical devices work in the way that a chapter break works in prose fiction. Audiences anticipate change.

Playwrights can also use props on stage to signify the passage of time. Lighting a lamp, winding a clock, using background lighting or visuals (such as a sunset the audience can view from a window), all are effective means of showing time passing. Characters' words and actions and changes in costume can also signify a time shift. As a reader, you can expect that time will progress within the literal time span of the performance. But time considerations can take on more significance as well. Apart from the passage of time that an audience member observes as it occurs on stage, time can also function in relation to other conventions of drama. For example, the pacing of a scene can influence the momentum of the play itself, as well as how we respond to characters and their interactions. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for example, time functions as an antagonist. Time is Nora's enemy. Ibsen slows specific scenes and quickens the pace of other scenes to enhance the tension that drives the play forward to its resolution.

## What constitutes a 'striking theatrical experience'?

When all is said and done, when that curtain comes down, the lights fade, or you turn that last page, what thoughts and feelings do you carry with you? Peter Brook, author and critic of film and theatre, seeks an answer to these questions in his work entitled *The Empty Space*:

I know of one acid test in the theatre. [...] When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory of an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved on my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell – or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery. I haven't a hope of remembering the meanings precisely, but from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost but not quite impossible to achieve.

– Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968)

### SUMMARY

A striking theatrical experience, as defined by Brook, is often encapsulated into a single moment, a single image onstage, that holds insight into understanding the self.

As you work through the following exercises in drama, consider how your appreciation of the playwright's choices, his dramatic strategies, contribute to your theatrical experience of each text.

## Appreciation

### EXERCISE 2

#### *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen (1879)

Using the following extract from Act 1 of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, test your close-reading skills. The prompts that follow the text are designed to guide your approach to this 'well-made play'.

#### Act 1

*[Scene. – A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance-hall, another to the left leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, arm-chairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small book-case with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove.]*

*It is winter. A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open. Enter Nora, humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in outdoor dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a porter who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket, which he gives to the maid who has opened the door.]*

NORA: Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it until this evening, when it is dressed. *[To the porter, taking out her purse.]* How much?

PORTER: Sixpence.

NORA: There is a shilling. No, keep the change. *[The porter thanks her, and goes out. Nora shuts the door. She is laughing to herself, as she takes off her hat and coat. She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens.]* Yes, he is in. *[Still humming, she goes to the table on the right.]*

HELMER: *[calls out from his room.]* Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA: *[busy opening some of the parcels.]* Yes, it is!

HELMER: Is it my little squirrel bustling about?

NORA: Yes!

HELMER: When did my squirrel come home?

NORA: Just now. *[Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.]* Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

HELMER: Don't disturb me. *[A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand.]* Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?



NORA: Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

HELMER: Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly.

NORA: Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn't we? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.

HELMER: Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.

NORA: Pooh! we can borrow until then.

HELMER: Nora! [*Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear.*] The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and –

NORA: [*putting her hands over his mouth*]. Oh! don't say such horrid things.

HELMER: Still, suppose that happened, – what then?

NORA: If that were to happen, I don't suppose I should care whether I owed money or not.

HELMER: Yes, but what about the people who had lent it?

NORA: They? Who would bother about them? I should not know who they were.

HELMER: That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way for the short time longer that there need be any struggle.

NORA: [*moving towards the stove*]. As you please, Torvald.

HELMER: [*following her*]. Come, come, my little skylark must not droop her wings. What is this! Is my little squirrel out of temper? [*Taking out his purse.*] Nora, what do you think I have got here?

NORA: [*turning round quickly*]. Money!

HELMER: There you are. [*Gives her some money.*] Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas-time?

NORA: [*counting*]. Ten shillings – a pound – two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.

HELMER: Indeed it must.

NORA: Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. And all so cheap! Look, here is a new suit for Ivar, and a sword; and a horse and a trumpet for Bob; and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy, – they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dress-lengths and handkerchiefs for the maids; old Anne ought really to have something better.

HELMER: And what is in this parcel?

- NORA: [crying out]. No, no! you mustn't see that until this evening.
- HELMER: Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?
- NORA: For myself? Oh, I am sure I don't want anything.
- HELMER: Yes, but you must. Tell me something reasonable that you would particularly like to have.
- NORA: No, I really can't think of anything – unless, Torvald –
- HELMER: Well?
- NORA: [playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his]. If you really want to give me something, you might – you might –
- HELMER: Well, out with it!
- NORA: [speaking quickly]. You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.
- HELMER: But, Nora –
- NORA: Oh, do! dear Torvald; please, please do! Then I will wrap it up in beautiful gilt paper and hang it on the Christmas Tree. Wouldn't that be fun?
- HELMER: What are little people called that are always wasting money?
- NORA: Spendthrifts – I know. Let us do as you suggest, Torvald, and then I shall have time to think what I am most in want of. That is a very sensible plan, isn't it?
- HELMER: [smiling]. Indeed it is – that is to say, if you were really to save out of the money I give you, and then really buy something for yourself. But if you spend it all on the housekeeping and any number of unnecessary things, then I merely have to pay up again.
- NORA: Oh but, Torvald –
- HELMER: You can't deny it, my dear little Nora. [Puts his arm round her waist.] It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money. One would hardly believe how expensive such little persons are!
- NORA: It's a shame to say that. I do really save all I can.
- HELMER: [laughing]. That's very true, – all you can. But you can't save anything!
- NORA: [smiling quietly and happily]. You haven't any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have, Torvald.
- HELMER: You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora.
- NORA: Ah, I wish I had inherited many of papa's qualities.

HELMER: And I would not wish you to be anything but just what you are, my sweet little skylark. But, do you know, it strikes me that you are looking rather – what shall I say – rather uneasy today?

NORA: Do I?

HELMER: You do, really. Look straight at me.

NORA: *[looks at him]*. Well?

HELMER: *[wagging his finger at her]*. Hasn't Miss Sweet Tooth been breaking rules in town today?

NORA: No; what makes you think that?

HELMER: Hasn't she paid a visit to the confectioner's?

NORA: No, I assure you, Torvald –

HELMER: Not been nibbling sweets?

NORA: No, certainly not.

HELMER: Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?

NORA: No, Torvald, I assure you really –


HELMER: There, there, of course I was only joking.

NORA: *[going to the table on the right]*. I should not think of going against your wishes.

HELMER: No, I am sure of that; besides, you gave me your word – *[Going up to her.]* Keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself, my darling. They will all be revealed tonight when the Christmas Tree is lit, no doubt.

#### **A Doll's House prompts**

- 1 Sketch the stage according to the opening stage directions. Use colour in your drawing. Pay particular attention to the placement of props and doors.
- 2 Examine character reactions in this extract from Act 1. Often these reactions (either overt or subtle) hint at potential conflicts, issues, secrets and/or mysteries that are later exposed or resolved. This gradual unfolding of mystery is what provides momentum to the play. Note where these reactions occur, and briefly address what seems to lie behind each reaction.
- 3 Compare and contrast the values/ideals/truths of Nora and Torvald Helmer. Briefly describe what each believes is most important in terms of moral belief. Consider how Nora and Torvald are depicted as 'complementary' to each other in terms of these beliefs. 'Complementary' characters need not be opposites (though they could be); 'complementary' implies connection, balance and working together in some way to make a point that the playwright believes is important.
- 4 List the props from Act 1. From the extract, choose a prop that you believe has a critical function. Is that function emphatic? Ironic? Satiric? Does Ibsen go so far as to use the prop as a symbol? Explain.

 To access worksheet 2.1 on *A Doll's House* (identifying contextual elements), please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

### **EXERCISE 3**

#### **'Master Harold' ... and the Boys by Athol Fugard (1982)**

Using the following extract from this one-act play by Athol Fugard, test your close-reading skills. The prompts that follow the text are designed to guide your approach to this realistic drama. The play opens in a restaurant in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in the year 1950. Willie and Sam work there as waiters and cleaning staff. They are both black men in their early forties. They are joined by Hally, the owner's son, a 17-year-old white boy.

*Hally deposits his school case and takes off his raincoat. His clothes are a little neglected and untidy: black blazer with school badge, gray flannel trousers in need of an ironing, khaki shirt and tie, black shoes. Sam has fetched a towel for Hally to dry his hair.*

HALLY: God, what a lousy bloody day. It's coming down cats and dogs out there. Bad for business, chaps . . . [*Conspiratorial whisper.*] . . . but it also means we're in for a nice quiet afternoon.

SAM: You can speak loud. Your Mom's not here.

HALLY: Out shopping?

SAM: No, the hospital.

HALLY: But it's Thursday. There's no visiting on Thursday afternoons. Is my Dad okay?

SAM: Sounds like it. In fact, I think he's going home.

HALLY: [*Stopped short by Sam's remark.*] What do you mean?

SAM: The hospital phoned.

HALLY: To say what?

SAM: I don't know. I just heard your Mom talking.

HALLY: So what makes you say he's going home?

SAM: It sounded as if they were telling her to come and fetch him.

*Hally thinks about what Sam has said for a few seconds.*

HALLY: When did she leave?

SAM: About an hour ago. She said she would phone you. Want to eat?

*Hally doesn't respond.*

Hally, want your lunch?

HALLY: I suppose so. [*His mood has changed.*] What's on the menu? . . . as if I don't know.

SAM: Soup, followed by meat pie and gravy.

HALLY: Today's?

SAM: No.

HALLY: And the soup?

SAM: Nourishing pea soup.

HALLY: Just the soup. [*The pile of comic books on the table.*] And these?

SAM: For your Dad. Mr. Kempston brought them.

HALLY: You haven't been reading them, have you?

SAM: Just looking.

HALLY: [*Examining the comics.*] *Jungle Jim . . . Batman and Robin . . . Tarzan . . .* God, what rubbish! Mental pollution. Take them away.

*Sam exits waltzing into the kitchen. Hally turns to Willie.*

HALLY: Did you hear my Mom talking on the telephone, Willie?

WILLIE: No, Master Hally. I was at the back.

HALLY: And she didn't say anything to you before she left?

WILLIE: She said I must clean the floors.

HALLY: I mean about my Dad.

WILLIE: She didn't say nothing to me about him, Master Hally.

HALLY: [*With conviction.*] No! It can't be. They said he needed at least another three weeks of treatment. Sam's definitely made a mistake. [*Rummages through his school case, finds a book and settles down at the table to read.*] So, Willie!

WILLIE: Yes, Master Hally! Schooling okay today?

HALLY: Yes, okay . . . [*He thinks about it.*] . . . No, not really. Ag, what's the difference? I don't care. And Sam says you've got problems.

WILLIE: Big problems.

HALLY: Which leg is sore?

*Willie groans.*

Both legs.

WILLIE: There is nothing wrong with my legs. Sam is just making jokes.

HALLY: So then you *will* be in the competition.

WILLIE: Only if I can find me a partner.

HALLY: But what about Hilda?

SAM: [*Returning with a bowl of soup.*] She's the one who's got trouble with her legs.

HALLY: What sort of trouble, Willie?

SAM: From the way he describes it, I think the lady has gone a bit lame.

HALLY: Good God! Have you taken her to see a doctor?

SAM: I think a vet would be better.

HALLY: What do you mean?

SAM: What do you call it again when a racehorse goes very fast?

HALLY: Gallop?

SAM: That's it!

WILLIE: *Boet* Sam!

HALLY: 'A gallop down the homestretch to the winning post.' But what's that got to do with Hilda?

SAM: Count Basie always gets there first.

*Willie lets fly with his slop rag. It misses Sam and hits Hally.*

HALLY: [*Furious.*] For Christ's sake, Willie! What the hell do you think you're doing?

WILLIE: Sorry, Master Hally, but it's him . . .

HALLY: Act your bloody age! [*Hurls the rag back at Willie.*] Cut out the nonsense now and get on with your work. And you too, Sam. Stop fooling around.

*Sam moves away.*

No. Hang on. I haven't finished! Tell me exactly what my Mom said.

SAM: I have. 'When Hally comes, tell him I've gone to the hospital and I'll phone him.'

HALLY: She didn't say anything about taking my Dad home?

SAM: No. It's just that when she was talking on the phone . . .

HALLY: [*Interrupting him.*] No, Sam. They can't be discharging him. She would have said so if they were. In any case, we saw him last night and he wasn't in good shape at all. Staff nurse even said there was talk about taking more X-rays. And now suddenly today he's better? If anything, it sounds more like a bad turn to me . . . which I sincerely hope it isn't. Hang on . . . how long ago did you say she left?

SAM: Just before two . . . [*His wrist watch.*] . . . hour and a half.

HALLY: I know how to settle it. [*Behind the counter to the telephone. Talking as he dials.*] Let's give her ten minutes to get to the hospital, ten minutes to load him up, another ten, at the most, to get home and another ten to get him inside. Forty minutes. They should have been home for at least half an hour already. [*Pause – he waits with the receiver to his ear.*] No reply, chaps. And you know why? Because she's at his bedside in hospital helping him pull through a bad turn. You definitely heard wrong.

SAM: Okay.

*As far as Hally is concerned, the matter is settled. He returns to his table, sits down and divides his attention between the book and his soup.*

[Hally and Sam discuss Hally's teachers and what he is learning. They debate their 'men of magnitude!']

HALLY: Anyway, that's my man of magnitude. Charles Darwin! Who's yours?

SAM: [*Without hesitation.*] Abraham Lincoln.

HALLY: I might have guessed as much. Don't get sentimental, Sam. You've never been a slave, you know. And anyway we freed your ancestors here in South Africa long before the Americans. But if you want to thank somebody on their behalf, do it to Mr. William Wilberforce. Come on. Try again. I want a real genius. [*Now enjoying himself, and so is Sam. Hally goes behind the counter and finds himself a chocolate.*]

SAM: William Shakespeare.

HALLY: [*No enthusiasm.*] Oh. So you're also one of them, are you? You're basing that opinion on only one play, you know. You've only read my *Julius Caesar* and even I don't understand half of what they're talking about. They should do what they did with the old Bible: bring the language up to date.

SAM: That's all you've got. It's also the only one *you've* read.

HALLY: I know. I admit it. That's why I suggest we reserve our judgment until we've checked up on a few others. I've got a feeling, though, that by the end of this year one is going to be enough for me, and I can give you the names of twenty-nine other chaps in the Standard Nine class of the Port Elizabeth Technical College who feel the same. But if you want him, you can have him. My turn now. [*Pacing.*] This is a damn good exercise, you know! It started off looking like a simple question and here it's got us really probing into the intellectual heritage of our civilization.

SAM: So who is it going to be?

HALLY: My next man . . . and he gets the title on two scores: social reform and literary genius . . . is Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy.

SAM: That Russian.

HALLY: Correct. Remember the picture of him I showed you?

SAM: With the long beard.

HALLY: [*Trying to look like Tolstoy.*] And those burning, visionary eyes. My God, the face of a social prophet if ever I saw one! And remember my words when I showed it to you? Here's a *man*, Sam!

SAM: Those were words, Hally.

HALLY: Not many intellectuals are prepared to shovel manure with the peasants and then go home and write a 'little book' called *War and Peace*. Incidentally, Sam, he was somebody else who, to quote, ' . . . did not distinguish himself scholastically.'

SAM: Meaning?

HALLY: Meaning he was not good at school.

SAM: Like you and Winston Churchill.

HALLY: [*Mirthlessly.*] Ha, ha, ha.

SAM: [*Simultaneously.*] Ha, ha, ha.

HALLY: Don't get clever, Sam. That man freed his serfs of his own free will.

SAM: No argument. He was a somebody, all right. I accept him.

HALLY: I'm sure Count Tolstoy will be very pleased to hear that. Your turn. Shoot. [*Another chocolate from behind the counter.*] I'm waiting, Sam.

SAM: I've got him.

HALLY: Good. Submit your candidate for examination.

SAM: Jesus.

HALLY: [*Stopped dead in his tracks.*] Who?

SAM: Jesus Christ.

HALLY: Oh, come on, Sam!

SAM: The Messiah.

HALLY: *Ja*, but still . . . No Sam. Don't let's get started on religion. We'll just spend the whole afternoon arguing again. Suppose I turn around and say Mohammed?

SAM: All right.

HALLY: You can't have them both on the same list!

SAM: Why not? You like Mohammed, I like Jesus.

HALLY: I *don't* like Mohammed. I never have. I was merely being hypothetical. As far as I'm concerned, the Koran is as bad as the Bible. No. Religion is out! I'm not going to waste my time again arguing with you about the existence of God. You know perfectly well I'm an atheist . . . and I've got homework to do.

SAM: Okay, I take him back.

HALLY: You've got time for one more name.

- SAM: [After thought.] I've got one I know we'll agree on. A simple straightforward great Man of Magnitude . . . and no arguments. And he really *did* benefit all mankind.
- HALLY: I wonder. After your last contribution I'm beginning to doubt whether anything in the way of an intellectual agreement is possible between the two of us. Who is he?
- SAM: Guess.
- HALLY: Socrates? Alexandre Dumas? Karl Marx? Dostoevsky? Nietzsche?  
*Sam shakes his head after each name.*
- HALLY: Give me a clue.
- SAM: The letter P is important . . .
- HALLY: Plato!
- SAM: . . . and his name begins with an E.
- HALLY: I've got it. Freud and Psychology.
- SAM: No. I didn't understand him.
- HALLY: That makes two of us.
- SAM: Think of mouldy apricot jam.
- HALLY: [After a delighted laugh.] Penicillin and Sir Alexander Fleming! And the title of the book: *The Microbe Hunters*. [Delighted.] Splendid, Sam! Splendid. For once we are in total agreement. The major breakthrough in medical science in the Twentieth Century. If it wasn't for him, we might have lost the Second World War. It's deeply gratifying, Sam, to know that I haven't been wasting my time in talking to you. [Strutting around proudly.] Tolstoy may have educated his peasants, but I've educated you.
- SAM: Standard Four to Standard Nine.
- HALLY: Have we been at it as long as that?

[Hally, Sam and Willie talk about when they first met seven years ago. Hally would tell Sam about what he had learnt and they would play games together, which Willie would always lose unless they let him win. Hally recounts his favourite memory, which was when Sam built him a kite that he loved to see fly.]

*The telephone rings. Sam answers it.*

- SAM: St. George's Park Tea Room . . . Hello, Madam . . . Yes, Madam, he's here . . . Hally, it's your mother.
- HALLY: Where is she phoning from?
- SAM: Sounds like the hospital. It's a public telephone.
- HALLY: [Relieved.] You see! I told you. [The telephone.] Hello, Mom . . . Yes . . . Yes no fine. Everything's under control here. How's things with poor old Dad? . . . Has he had a bad turn? . . . What? . . . Oh, God! . . . Yes, Sam told me, but I was sure he'd made a mistake. But what's all this about, Mom? He didn't look at all good last night. How can he get better so quickly? . . . Then very obviously you must say no. Be firm with him. You're the boss. . . . You know what it's going to be like if he comes home. . . . Well, then, don't blame me when I fail my exams at



the end of the year. . . . Yes! How am I expected to be fresh for school when I spend half the night massaging his gammy leg? . . . So am I! . . . So tell him a white lie. Say Dr. Colley wants more X-rays of his stump. Or bribe him. We'll sneak in double tots of brandy in future. . . . What? . . . Order him to get back into bed at once! If he's going to behave like a child, treat him like one. . . . All right, Mom! I was just trying to . . . I'm sorry. . . . I said I'm sorry. . . . Quick, give me your number. I'll phone you back. [*He hangs up and waits a few seconds.*] Here we go again! [*He dials.*] I'm sorry, Mom. . . . Okay . . . But now listen to me carefully. All it needs is for you to put your foot down. Don't take no for an answer. . . . Did you hear me? And whatever you do, don't discuss it with him. . . . Because I'm frightened you'll give in to him. . . . Yes, Sam gave me lunch. . . . I ate all of it! . . . No, Mom not a soul. It's still raining here. . . . Right, I'll tell them. I'll just do some homework and then lock up. . . . But remember now, Mom. Don't listen to anything he says. And phone me back and let me know what happens. . . . Okay. Bye, Mom. [*He hangs up. The men are staring at him.*] My Mom says that when you're finished with the floors you must do the windows. [*Pause.*] Don't misunderstand me, chaps. All I want is for him to get better. And if he was, I'd be the first person to say: 'Bring him home.' But he's not, and we can't give him the medical care and attention he needs at home. That's what hospitals are there for. [*Brusquely.*] So don't just stand there! Get on with it!

*Sam clears Hally's table.*

You heard right. My Dad wants to go home.

#### **'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys prompts**

- 1 Construct Hally's 'emotional map' from these selected portions of the play. An emotional map records the progression of a character's emotions from his emotional status when he first enters the play to his final emotional condition. You should indicate in chart form: (1) initial state of mind; (2) events or words that change the character's state of mind; and (3) the character's resulting emotional state.
- 2 Choose a moment in the selected section when Willie's character functions as a foil either to Sam or Hally, or both. What does Willie's character allow us to understand more fully about the character he is foiling?
- 3 Speculate on the effect of the 'man of magnitude' discussion. What subtleties of characterization emerge for Sam and Hally? What does their discussion indicate about their ability to communicate openly? Does a theme emerge about the nature of communication?
- 4 Identify two examples of verbal (surprising, incongruous statements), dramatic (the audience has knowledge that the characters on stage do not have) or situational (those situations that are surprising, shocking, or incongruous) irony. What effects do these ironies produce in terms of characterization directly or indirectly?

To access worksheet 2.2 on 'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys (constructing a metaphorical character map), please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

### **EXERCISE 4**

#### ***The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1956)**

Using this extract from the first act of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play, test your close reading skills. The prompts that follow the reading are designed to guide your approach to this tragicomedy.

Act 1 opens at the train station in Guellen in Germany, where a group of people await the arrival of the multi-millionairess, Claire Zachanassian. Claire was born in Guellen and the townspeople are hoping that she will give some money to improve the town, and Ill, an old friend and lover of Claire, is there to ask for her help. They reminisce about their past relationship and how good it was. The mayor addresses the town in a welcome ceremony for Claire.

**MAYOR:** My dear lady, fellow citizens. Forty-five years have flowed by since you left our little town, our town founded by Crown Prince Hasso the Noble, our town so pleasantly nestling between Konrad's Village Wood and Pückerried Valley. Forty-five years, more than four decades, it's a long time. Many things have happened since then, many bitter things. It has gone sadly with the world, sadly with us. And yet we have never, my dear lady – our Claire (*applause*) – never forgotten you. Neither you, nor your family. Your mother, that magnificent and robustly healthy woman (*Ill whispers something to him*) tragically and prematurely torn from our midst by tuberculosis, and your father, that popular figure, who built the building by the station which experts and laymen still visit so often (*Ill whispers something to him*) – still admire so much, they both live on in our thoughts, for they were of our best, our worthiest. And you too, my dear lady: who, as you gambolled through our streets – our streets, alas, so sadly decrepit nowadays – you a curly-headed, blonde (*Ill whispers something to him*) – redheaded madcap, who did not know you? Even then, everyone could sense the magic in your personality, foresee your approaching rise to humanity's dizzy heights. (*Takes out his notebook.*) You were never forgotten. Literally never. Even now, the staff at school hold up your achievements as an example to others, and in nature studies – the most essential ones – they were astonishing, a revelation of your sympathy for every living creature, indeed of all things in need of protection. And even then, people far and wide were moved to wonder at your love of justice, at your sense of generosity. (*Huge applause.*) For did not our Claire obtain food for an old widow, buying potatoes with that pocket-money so hardly earned from neighbours, and thereby save the old lady from dying of hunger, to mention but one of her deeds of charity. (*Huge applause.*) My dear lady, my dear Guelleners, that happy temperament has now developed from those tender seeds to an impressive flowering, and our redheaded madcap has become a lady whose generosity stirs the world: we need only to think of her social work, of her maternity homes and her soup kitchens, of her art foundations and her children's nurseries, and now, therefore, I ask you to give three cheers for the prodigal returned: Hip, Hip, Hip, Hurrah! (*Applause.*)

(*Claire Zachanassian gets to her feet.*)

**CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN:** Mister Mayor, Guelleners. I am moved by your unselfish joy at my visit. As a matter of fact I was somewhat different from the child I seemed to be in the mayor's speech. When I went to school, I was thrashed. And I stole potatoes for Widow Boll, aided by Ill; not to save the old bawd from dying of hunger, but just for once to sleep with Ill in a more comfortable bed than Konrad's Village Wood or Petersens' Barn. None the less, as my contribution to this joy of yours, I want to tell you that I'm ready to give Guellen one million.

Five hundred thousand for the town and five hundred thousand to be shared among each family.

*(Deathly silence.)*

MAYOR: *(stammers)*. One million.

*(Everyone still dumbstruck.)*

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: On one condition.

*(Everyone bursts into indescribable jubilation, dancing round, standing on chairs, Gymnast performing acrobatics, etc. Ill pounds his chest enthusiastically.)*

ILL: There's Clara for you! What a jewel! She takes your breath away! Just like her, O my little sorceress!

*(Kisses her.)*

MAYOR: Madam: you said, on one condition. May I ask, on what condition?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I'll tell you on what condition. I'm giving you a million, and I'm buying myself justice.

*(Deathly silence.)*

MAYOR: My dear lady, what do you mean by that?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: What I said.

MAYOR: Justice can't be bought.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Everything can be bought.

MAYOR: I still don't understand.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Bobby. Step forward.

*(Butler steps forward, from right to centre, between the three tables. Takes off his dark glasses.)*

BUTLER: I don't know if any of you here still recognise me.

SCHOOLMASTER: Chief Justice Courtly.

BUTLER: Chief Justice Courtly. Forty-five years ago, I was Lord Chief Justice in Guellen. I was later called to the Kaffigen Court of Appeal until, twenty-five years ago it is now, Madame Zachanassian offered me the post of Butler in her service. A somewhat unusual career, indeed, I grant you, for an academic man, however, the salary involved was really quite fantastic . . .

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Get to the point, Bobby.

BUTLER: As you may have gathered, Madame Claire Zachanassian is offering you the sum of one million pounds, in return for which she insists that justice be done. In other words, Madame Zachanassian will give you all a million if you right the wrong she was done in Guellen. Mr Ill, if you please.

*(Ill stands. He is pale, startled, wondering.)*

ILL: What do you want of me?

BUTLER: Step forward, Mr Ill.

ILL: Sure.

*(Steps forward, to front of table, right. Laughs uneasily. Shrugs.)*

BUTLER: The year was nineteen ten. I was Lord Chief Justice in Guellen. I had a paternity claim to arbitrate. Claire Zachanassian, at the time Claire Wascher, claimed that you, Mr Ill, were her child's father.

*(Ill keeps quiet.)*

At that time, Mr Ill, you denied paternity. You called two witnesses.

ILL: Oh, it's an old story. I was young, thoughtless.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Toby and Roby, bring in Koby and Loby.

*(The two gum-chewing giants lead a pair of blind eunuchs on to centre of stage, blind pair gaily holding hands.)*

BLIND PAIR: We're on the spot, we're on the spot!

BUTLER: Do you recognise these two, Mr Ill?

*(Ill keeps quiet.)*

BLIND PAIR: We're Koby and Loby, we're Koby and Loby.

ILL: I don't know them.

BLIND PAIR: We've changed a lot, we've changed a lot!

BUTLER: Say your names.

FIRST BLIND MAN:

Jacob Chicken, Jacob Chicken.

SECOND BLIND MAN: Louis Perch, Louis Perch.

BUTLER: Now, Mr Ill.

ILL: I know nothing about them.

BUTLER: Jacob Chicken and Louis Perch, do you know Mr Ill?

BLIND PAIR: We're blind, we're blind.

BUTLER: Do you know him by his voice?

BLIND PAIR: By his voice, by his voice.

BUTLER: In nineteen ten, I was Judge and you the witnesses. Louis Perch and Jacob Chicken, what did you swear on oath to the court of Guellen?

BLIND PAIR: We'd slept with Clara, we'd slept with Clara.

BUTLER: You swore it on oath, before me. Before the court. Before God. Was it the truth?

BLIND PAIR: We swore a false oath, we swore a false oath.

BUTLER: Why, Jacob Chicken and Louis Perch?

BLIND PAIR: Ill bribed us, Ill bribed us.

BUTLER: With what did he bribe you?

BLIND PAIR: With a pint of brandy, with a pint of brandy.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: And now tell them what I did with you, Koby and Loby.

BUTLER: Tell them.

BLIND PAIR: The lady tracked us down, the lady tracked us down.

BUTLER: Correct. Claire Zachanassian tracked you down. To the ends of the earth. Jacob Chicken had emigrated to Canada and Louis Perch to Australia. But she tracked you down. And then what did she do with you?

BLIND PAIR: She gave us to Toby and Roby, she gave us to Toby and Roby.

BUTLER: And what did Toby and Roby do with you?

BLIND PAIR: Castrated and blinded us, castrated and blinded us.

BUTLER: And there you have the full story. One Judge, one accused, two false witnesses: a miscarriage of justice in the year nineteen ten. Isn't that so, plaintiff?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: (*Stands.*) That is so.

ILL: (*Stamping on floor.*) It's over and done with, dead and buried! It's an old, crazy story.

BUTLER: What happened to the child, plaintiff?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: (*Gently.*) It lived one year.

BUTLER: What happened to you?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I became a prostitute.

BUTLER: What made you one?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: The judgment of that court made me one.

MRS ILL: Freddy!

ILL: My little sorceress! You can't ask that! It was long ago. Life went on.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Life went on, and I've forgotten nothing, Ill. Neither Konrad's Village Wood, nor Petersens' Barn; neither Widow Boll's bedroom, nor your treachery. And now we're old, the pair of us. You decrepit, and me cut to bits by the surgeon's knives. And now I want accounts between us settled. You chose your life, but you forced me into mine. A moment ago you wanted time turned back, in that wood so full of the past, where we spent our young years. Well I'm turning it back now, and I want justice. Justice for a million.

BUTLER: And now you desire justice, Claire Zachanassian?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I can afford it. A million for Guellen if someone kills Alfred Ill.

(*Deathly silence. Mrs Ill rushes to Ill, flings her arms round him.*)

(*Mayor stands, pale, dignified.*)

MAYOR: Madame Zachanassian: you forget, this is Europe. You forget, we are not savages. In the name of all citizens of Guellen, I reject your offer; and I reject it in the name of humanity. We would rather have poverty than blood on our hands.

(*Huge applause.*)

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I'll wait.

### **The Visit prompts**

- 1 Define tragicomedy. To what degree does this extract from the first act of the play demonstrate the characteristics of tragicomedy? Use two or three specific references to the text to support your argument.
- 2 Sound and silence are both used to powerful dramatic effect in this play. Identify a particular sound effect and trace its progressive effect on the audience/reader. Consider how silence functions in this extract from Act 1. Identify a specific instance and discuss the function of silence within dialogue. Does silence 'speak'? If so, what is its message?

To access worksheet 2.3 on *The Visit* (identifying contextual elements), please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

- 3 Discuss the function of the physical stage/set as a means of establishing an actor's physical space. What do we learn and/or experience emotionally and intellectually as we witness the visual spectacle that Dürrenmatt creates in this extract?
- 4 The theme of morality is presented in Act 1 of *The Visit*, when Claire Zachanassian demands that 'justice' be carried out for the wrong done to her by Ill, which caused her to lose the man she loved and become a prostitute. Justice, for her, means Ill's death. Which character do you think is morally right, and why?

### INSIGHTS INTO DRAMA

So what are the conventions of drama and what expectations should you have as you read a play? All plays possess three elements: actors who perform dramatic action; a stage on which the performance takes place; and the words of the playwright. Beyond these basic elements, playwrights can include many more theatrical strategies to create their dramatic vision, and to provide their audience with a full and satisfactory understanding of that vision.

The list below explores the dramatic strategies that playwrights can use. Understanding these strategies and recognizing them as you read will enable you to evaluate their varying functions and the effects they produce within the play. Whether you are writing about plays or speaking about them in your course of study, the principle common to analysis is **close reading** – observing the stylistic strategies of the writer and determining their effects.

- 1 In stage directions, playwrights can establish full or partial descriptions of characters, and state the way that actors should deliver specific lines. In addition, descriptions of costumes, facial expressions and gestures enable a reader to have a clearer visual picture of the characters on stage. As a reader, you will have to imagine the tone of voice of a character with the help of specific stage directions.
- 2 While playwrights make use of monologues, soliloquies and asides, the primary vehicle of expression on stage is dialogue. Pay attention to those moments when one character dominates the stage. Is that domination a result of the frequency of his or her speech or something else? Does the use of questioning have a significant function? Does the use of questioning establish tension? Is there a power struggle between two or more characters?
- 3 Dramatic action includes physical movement of the characters, such as when and where they enter or exit a scene. Pay attention to characters that are referred to even though they are off-stage. Sound effects can accompany these off-stage scenes and the audience will be particularly curious about what they hear but cannot see, or what they see but cannot hear.
- 4 Themes can emerge directly or indirectly. Characters can serve as the mouthpiece of the playwright. Without biographical insights, however, denoting a character as a mouthpiece is purely speculative. Remember, too, that themes develop and build as the play unfolds.
- 5 Irony, particularly dramatic irony, has a powerful function in drama. As a reader you must also be sensitive to those characters that use sarcasm or speak in asides.
- 6 Stage props can have symbolic value. While some symbols are traditional – darkness as a symbol of hopelessness, a cross as a symbol of Christianity, water as a symbol of rebirth, light as a symbol of insight or understanding – other symbols are particular to a text. Symbolic value is only established by the frequency and significance of use within the dramatic action of the play.
- 7 The events of the play and the ordering of those events determine the plot. Be aware that subplots often function in comparison or contrast to the main plot for purposes of character or thematic development.
- 8 The design of the stage set and the use of lighting and sound effects are all functional elements of the drama. Changes to the set in scene changes, the use of lighting or sound effects (including music), must be noted. The decision of the playwright to include these elements at a particular moment in the dramatic action is important. What effects are produced in the audience? How do these effects impact on meaning or understanding?