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THE PLAY'S THE THING: A DRAMATIC APPROACH TO READING

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Too often educators and students alike content themselves with the more convenient aspects of reading drama: analysis of thought, dissection of structure and plot, information about a playwright's life and times, discussion of characterization, performance of segments of a play. Language—sometimes soaring, sometimes vulgar, poignant, distressing, philosophical, or witty—gets short shrift in this type of drama study.

A focus on the language of a play can be rewarding as a teaching technique and enriching as a reading comprehension and aesthetic experience. All of us have come across language that has intrigued us. The drama teacher, *who is a reading instructor at the same time*, can tap this built-in interest by having students analyze and categorize selected language gems from plays. The following categories may function as a starter kit.

symbolic: chosen because of the clever or significant use of an old symbol or the creation of a new one.

characterization: chosen because the passage gives fuller development to a character; thus enabling the reader to comprehend more clearly the nature of the characterization.

philosophical: chosen because of some reinforcement of a timeless thought or of a relevant or timely concept.

poetical: chosen because of the imagery, the music, the appeal to the senses, the beauty of the words.

humorous: chosen because it provides a laugh. Some analysis of the language should be made as to the *type* of humor exhibited (satirical, farcical, absurd, etc.).

The following selections from plays studied in my class have been effectively used for analysis into the suggested categories. As a result, language appreciation has been sharpened.

"It's dat ole devil sea . . ."

Anna Christie, Eugene O'Neill

"I'll dry your tears, though I can't say why . . ."

Lysistrata, Aristophanes

“No man is good enough to be another man’s master.”

Major Barbara, George Bernard Shaw

“We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of the smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered . . .”

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard

“. . . down through the ages, the mollusk, the fish, the mammal, man. And all so that you might sit in the gallery of a coal mine and operate the super-adding machine with the great toe of your right foot.”

The Adding Machine, Elmer Rice

Another technique particularly effective in developing language appreciation and reading comprehension skills is a concern with the playwright’s stage directions. For some, these stage directions serve the same function as a commercial for the television viewer. They are avoided or half looked at. And yet, like the commercial, they are often of high artistic merit, as this sample from Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* reveals:

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of the vast hivelike conglomerations of the cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower-middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automation.

The entire host of reading comprehension questions usually culled from dull and esoteric and irrelevant tomes can be trained on such a section of poetical prose. Training in reading for tone and for attitude, for main thoughts and supporting details, for prediction, for conclusions, for vocabulary in context—all these can easily be done.

Thus the reader of drama discovers that “the play’s the thing,” and that its concern with language is a means towards enjoyment of the reading experience—and a pleasurable defense against the banal print experiences that have impoverished so many reading activities.