

Paper 2 – Example Drama Essay Higher Level May 2003

Question 1a):

'Visual action can be as important on the stage as speech.' How far do you agree with this claim? In your answer you should refer to two or three plays you have studied.

Answer:

In the plays *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams, the playwrights use visual action in conjunction with speech to effectively convey their ideas and themes. This can be seen through the use of **setting, costume, lighting, on stage and off stage action, and symbols**. These dramatic devices show that 'visual action can be as important on the stage as speech' in these two plays.

Both plays begin with a **description of the setting** in which the action of the play takes place. The Helmers' apartment in *A Doll's House* is described as "not extravagant, but comfortable and stylish." There are also bookshelves that house "expensively bound books." Thus, before any words have even been spoken, Ibsen has revealed to the audience that the Helmers are financially well-off, though not rich. There is also an insinuation that they have superficial desires to appear educated by possessing the "expensively bound books" as there is no reference to their content, only their appearance. There is also a "door" and "beyond it, a window". These are significant because they represent opportunity and escape for Nora Helmer. She is essentially confined to the stage and apartment throughout most of the play, since she must act as a "dolly-wife", so the presence of a door shows the audience that there is a way out. This is especially true when Kristine Linde is seen coming in and out of it. Kristine represents the woman that Nora is able to become, as she has become independent. Her entrances and exits (of her own free will) as well as her ability to say things like "I need to find a place to stay." (something she does on her own) illustrate that it is possible for a woman to be independent.

The setting in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is also significant. The houses are described as being "mostly the same", which shows that the people in this neighbourhood are part of the working class. There are "two women, one white, one coloured" sitting and talking to each other in the opening scene. Their difference in race represents the multi-culturalism of that society, and their presence indicates a high degree of familiarity and comfort with each other. Blanche's confusion with this area, apparent enough that Eunice asks her if she's "lost", illustrates that she comes from a different kind of society and culture and thus indicate that there will be a conflict between these two worlds throughout the play, even though this is not something that any character ever verbalises. Blanche's disapproval of the apartment where her sister lives, evident both in her look of disgust and her question, "Is this it?" serve the same purpose—to illustrate the conflict.

The difference in **costume** between characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* also serves to demonstrate the presence of a conflict. When he is first seen, Stanley is "roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes", whereas Blanche is "daintily dressed" and "there is something about her that suggests a moth." Stanley's "work clothes" show that he has had to work for his living, whereas Blanche has had things given to her, which gives her the freedom to dress "daintily". The metaphor that compares her to a moth is significant because it shows that she longs to get closer to the truth, represented by light, but getting too close will (and ultimately does) kill her. In wearing white, Blanche gives the audience the first impression that she is innocent and virginal. Her confusion and the fact that she is "incongruous to the setting" incite sympathy for her.

Comment [K1]: Focus on authors and texts right from the start

Comment [K2]: Repetition of words in the question title to ensure that there is focus on the question

Comment [K3]: Good variety of literary features considered, although I don't really like the list format it does enable the candidate to structure their essay as they work through these in order

Comment [K4]: This simple phrase enables the candidate to compare the two texts right from the start of the essay

Comment [K5]: Good clear topic sentence indicating the subject of this paragraph

Comment [K6]: Excellent analysis – notice that the explanation is much longer than the evidence!

Comment [K7]: Again, excellently detailed explanation

Comment [K8]: This candidate uses a variety of forms of evidence and does not rely solely on quotation

Comment [K9]: Clear linking phrase which indicates a switch from one text to another

Comment [K10]: Good smooth use of quotations

Comment [K11]: Nice detailed well developed points. There is analysis after every quotation that does not simply repeat points but helps to expand them in new directions

Comment [K12]: Nice subtle relation back to the question – pointing out that the conflict is something that we learn about in non-verbal ways

Comment [K13]: Clear new topic

Comment [K14]: Nice detailed evidence and recall of quotations in exam conditions

However, when Blanche changes into a “red satin robe” later, she shows that she is not as innocent as originally believed to be. She changes into this robe just before her first confrontation with Stanley, when he searches through her suitcase. He wears “bright clothes” which illustrate his power, but Blanche wearing red highlights the competition between the two. Stanley also “rips off” his shirt, showing a more primitive side. Animal imagery is used throughout the play with Stanley. In speech, Blanche calls him “sub-human” and Stella tells him he’s a “pig”, which are effective, but visually the audience can also see that in wearing “raw colours, like a childhood’s spectrum”, he is like a “peacock”, showing off his masculinity. He is also shown as the king of a “jungle”. The use of Stanley’s costume and the way in which he changes it show that despite Blanche’s desire for a battle, he is still in charge because it is his house and therefore his territory.

Comment [K15]: Nice connectives enable the candidate to develop their ideas in more detail

Comment [K16]: Notice the short, smooth alternation between evidence and analysis. The points are clear and confidently made showing that the candidate can make short precise analytical points as well as more general ones

Comment [K17]: A very nice linking phrase – picking up on the animalism of the shirt ripping, the candidate has decided to develop this idea in more detail

Comment [K18]: A very nice point. Here the candidate has admitted that some of the conflict is conveyed verbally but, they point out that this is added to by the visual features

Stella’s costume also reveals her characteristics. She wears “floral” throughout much of the play, which shows how she is in between the two conflicting worlds. It also illustrates how she is playing the role of a wife, who dresses femininely and prettily.

Comment [K19]: It is clear that we are continuing with the topic of costume

Nora’s dress at the beginning of A Doll’s House also shows this. When the audience first sees her, she is wearing “outdoor clothes”, which reveals that her trip was an excursion and part of her role as a wife. To go to the party, she dresses as a “Capri fisher-girl” so that she can dance the “tarantella” and please her husband, Torvald. In contrast, Nora’s friend Kristine Linde enters wearing “traveling clothes”. This attire is representative of a woman who has undertaken a journey, matured, and learnt to be independent. Although it is never said verbally, her clothing indicates that Kristine is a role model and example for Nora to follow.

Comment [K20]: The mention of a costume element acts as a linking phrase which makes it clear that this paragraph is continuing the point about costume although we have switched text

Comment [K21]: Clear relation back to the question ensures that this candidate is keeping on track

Dr. Rank wears black throughout the play. This is because he represents death, both his own and that of the Helmer marriage. His relationship with Nora serves as a contrast to her marriage, as he treats her like an adult and knows her well. (When Kristine comes, he says, ‘we have heard your name often in this house’, whereas Torvald does not know who she is.) His clothing is a physical manifestation of this. With him gone, Nora can no longer handle being in a bad relationship with Torvald, as there is nothing to counteract it.

Comment [K22]: Good evidence, although you should almost always avoid putting things in brackets

The lighting also serves to show that the relationship between Nora and Dr. Rank borders on being inappropriate. In the scene where she asks him to feel her silk stockings in a very sexual way, the room “glows darker”, it is implicated that Nora is doing this to try to get Dr. Rank’s help, as when he professes love for her, she switches on the light, and then says, “Don’t you feel silly now with the lights on?” The use of the darkness shows that sex is the only way in which Nora knows how to deal with men, but the return of the light indicates that she feels she has a role to play as Torvald’s wife. These are aspects that are shown only through non-verbal action, as Nora is too uncomfortable to actually discuss them. She is too immature to handle such a conversation.

Comment [K23]: New topic, this time lighting, following the order of points laid out in the introduction

Comment [K24]: The animalistic, basic, primitive connotations of glows darker could be examined here

Comment [K25]: Clear relation back to the question, although this does not have to be done all the time and can get a bit heavy handed

Kristine again serves as a contrast to Nora. When she and Krogstad are having a conversation about their relationship, they are open and honest with each other and admit that they are “drowning” and want to “help each other.” In addition, the light is on. Thus, in this scene, both verbal and visual action on stage work together to illustrate a point. The same happens in the final conversation between Nora and Torvald. Nora wears “traveling clothes” and keeps the light on, both things previously associated with Kristine. However, because she is more lucid and mature now than in any other party of the play, she is also able to express herself verbally, by saying “no more fancy dress”, “I’m your dolly-wife, just as I was daddy’s

Comment [K26]: It is nice that this candidate has chosen to point out that both the verbal and visual are important in creating a dramatic effect instead of identifying one as more important

dolly-baby”, and “I’ve someone else to raise first - myself” While in previous scenes, visual action served to illustrate things that Nora could not verbalise, now they serve as reinforcement for her ideas. The use of both visual action and speech demonstrate Nora’s new maturity and her revelation.

Comment [K27]: This is a really nice point and the candidate has pointed out how a move from the visual to the verbal is used to reflect character development

Lighting in A Streetcar Named Desire is important because Blanche enters their lives and changes the environment around her. She puts “lanterns” over the naked light bulbs, indicating that she is not “adaptable” as she believes herself to be (and as Stella actually is), but rather she must alter what is around her in order to her needs. She tells Mitch that “the darkness is comforting to me”, which is why she likes it, when he confronts her about having never seen her in the light before. However, when Mitch and later Stanley rip off the lanterns she has put on, Blanche cringes, as if in pain, and begs for them to be put back on. Thus, the visual action is more important than the speech, as Blanche is not honest. While she claims to simply find the dark more comforting, the real reason for her cover ups is because she fears the light. This is so because it represents the truth about her past, which she wants to be kept secret.

Comment [K28]: A bit blunt, but still nonetheless it makes it clear that we are maintaining the same topic but switching texts

Specific actions performed by characters are also significant in these plays. Both women indicate their devotion to their husbands in some way. At the end of the first act, Nora runs offstage crying, “She’s here, she’s here,” when Torvald calls for her. Her dashing to him is symbolic of the role she plays in their marriage, which is to serve him. Similarly, after Stanley beats Stella, she returns to him and pulls him up from his knees, where he is begging for her forgiveness. There are “low animal moans” during this scene, as well. By doing this, Stella shows Stanley and the audience that she does not look down on him for what he has done and is satisfied with the relationship - in particular the sexual side of it. Also, after Blanche has told Stella that she doesn’t think Stanley is good enough for her because he is “out of the Stone Age”, Stella still runs to Stanley and “embraces him with open arms, fiercely, and in the full view of Blanche.” Stanley then “grins” at Blanche. Thus, in these two instances, despite the fact that no words are exchanged, Stella has shown that she has chosen to remain with her husband, regardless of his faults, and is not ashamed to admit it to her sister who disapproves.

Comment [K29]: Again, a nice point clearly related back to the question that uses the difference between the reliability of visual and verbal cues to reinforce a point about character

Comment [K30]: New topic

The power of men and the patriarchal societies prevalent during the times of the plays is also shown through visual action. In A Doll’s House, this is illustrated through the letterbox, which contains a letter from Krogstad. It is symbolic of Nora’s entrapment by the men in her life. Krogstad has written a letter that has the ability to seriously affect her future, and only Torvald has the key to it. Because the letterbox is visible throughout the play, and Nora is on the stage with it, it is evident that only Torvald holds the key to her future. It is his actions that will eventually determine hers.

Comment [K31]: Again clear balance of evidence and explanation

Comment [K32]: This new topic and was not introduced at the start of the essay and the structure seems to break down a little here. It suggests that the candidate has still got time left and is trying to fill it. Sometimes, if it is going to disrupt the structure of your essay, it may be better to stop a little early and go back and check your work rather than write right up to the buzzer

Comment [K33]: Nice detailed explanation of this point

In A Streetcar Named Desire, the patriarchal society is apparent at the beginning of the play, Stanley throws a package of meat at Stella. While it is never verbalized, it is clear that he earns the money, while she performs the stereotypically female roles, such as cooking. At the poker night Stanley’s smashing of the radio shows his desire to be in control it is not because the women playing the music that he breaks it, but rather because they disobeyed him by refusing to turn it off. If he allows them to play it, he feels as if he has given some control to Blanche, who has incited Stella to disobey him. Again, these ideas are presented only in non verbal form.

Comment [K34]: Clear topic sentence – the point is continued

Comment [K35]: This is a nice subtle way of making a link back to the question without being too heavy handed about it

Deception is also shown through visual action. In A Doll’s House Nora’s snacking on macaroons only to lie and say that she doesn’t have any, shows her dishonesty. Blanche does the same with her drinking habits. She drinks, but does not admit it. To both women, these tasks are their weaknesses, so they hide them. The visual actions are important because they reveal to the audience their true characteristics.

Comment [K36]: The reference back to the question is a little heavy handed and unnecessary given that it has already been done once in this paragraph

Comment [K37]: Clear topic – although this point is rushed and doesn’t really do justice to the candidates work in the rest of the essay

A **desire to rebuild and cleanse** can be seen as well. In *A Doll's House*, Kristine helps mend Nora's dress for the party. This is representative of her desire to help repair the Helmer marriage, and prove that she is honest when she says she wants to help her friend. Her actions that are seen support her verbal speech. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche is constantly bathing. While she never admits that she wants to rid herself of her past, her continual cleansing show she actually feels differently.

Comment [K38]: Again a brief point that seems rushed

Comment [K39]: Clear, relatively subtle reference back to the question – simply the words 'visual' or 'verbal' will be enough to ensure that the link to the question is clear

Visual action can be just as important as speech because **it can provide insight that characters will not verbally admit, as well as reinforce spoken ideas.** This is shown in many ways in the plays *A Doll's House* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Comment [K40]: Good clear point, clearly related to the question, although these two organising principles could be developed a little more

Comment [K41]: This is very vague and is not a very strong way to end the essay

Key:

	Topic sentences – to indicate subject of a paragraph
	Organising Principles or points relating to them
	Connective words used to join ideas together
	Quotations
	Analysis – considering the effect on the audience
	Storytelling
	Spelling / Grammatical mistakes

Examiner's Comments:

- There is a clear, detailed understanding of the two texts here. There are lots of specific references to the texts including a considerable amount of quotation. Good balance between the two texts
- Ideas are developed in detail and there is some excellent analysis / explanation of points.
- The structure is generally clear (except towards the end) and points are clearly related to the question, despite being a little heavy-handed at times

Marks Awarded:

Knowledge and Understanding	5	Detailed knowledge of both texts revealed throughout the essay, excellently supported by quotation and other precise references
Response to the Question	5	Clear focus on the question throughout and the importance of the visual as well as the spoken is considered in a number of different areas – characters
Appreciation of Literary Features	4	Some very good analysis of a variety of stage directions, clothing, movement and actions – clearly relating this back to the intended effect on the audience
Presentation	4	The structure starts off excellently as we work through the points outlined in the introduction. However the essay becomes messy towards the end as if the candidate realizes that they have more time to fill and puts down whatever they can think of
Language	5	Excellently controlled, clear, precise language throughout
23		Level 7