

Study Guide for Reading Drama: Sticks and Bones by David Rabe (1972)

Notes About Reading Drama

Reading drama is different from reading fiction because it is so much sparer. The author tells the reader or actor very little about the characters, usually only in the *stage directions* which the viewers of a play don't see. Both actor and reader, then, have to read the stage directions carefully and to make inferences from what is learned about characters in the dialogue. From what the characters say, you have to construct an interpretation of who they are.

Characters

The first thing you want to get straight about the play is the characters; plot in drama is largely defined by the interactions between CHARACTERS. So there are two things you need to figure out:

1. What happens and has happened to each character and who they are as a result of these events. We call this finding the "*through-line*". A good way to establish a through-line is to think about *motivation*: what makes each character tick? What do they want, what motivates their actions and words? Actors often think in terms of finding the "*SPINE*" of a character, the essential quality that holds them together.

2. How the characters interact. We call this finding the "*cross-lines*". This play is about a family, so we have to understand how each of the family members relates to each other. How does Harriet relate to Ozzie? How do they both relate to Rickie and David? How does David relate to Rickie? What is each character's relationship with every other character.



What do we find out about the history of each character in the play. What does their past tell us about them now?

Pick a character to specialize in. Using that character's past history, construct your sense of that character's spine or motivation. What makes him or her tick? What is their ruling passion. How do they relate to each of the other characters?

Plot

Traditionally (since Aristotle) plot in plays has been described in terms of a four-part movement from *complication* to *reversal* through *recognition* to *resolution*.

- The complication is the beginning of the action, where all the conflicts gets set up, the wires get crossed, the people oppose each other, the lovers get lost from one another etc. What gets complicated in this play?

- The reversal or "*PERIPETIA*" is a sudden turn in the action of a play, the moment in a

tragedy where the hero falls (like when Adam bites the apple or Macbeth murders the king). Are there any sudden turns in this play?

●Another kind of crisis can be a crisis of knowing, a sudden illumination, understanding, or recognition (like when Oedipus finally figures out that he is the murderer he has been searching for). What are the crucial moments of recognition in the play? Who recognizes what? What does this tell us about the THEMES of the play, the meanings it is exploring, the message it wants to get across?

●The resolution is the way the play gets resolved in the end. If it's a comedy, the play generally ends with a marriage, a party, a dance. Comedies end with the hero's integration into society. Tragedies are about the hero's isolation from society, so they typically end in death or exile. How does this play end? Is it a comedy or a tragedy?

What seem to be the most dramatic moments in the play? Where are the crises?

Theme

Other ways of getting at the THEME involve paying attention to what the playwright emphasizes.

1. What ideas and concerns are repeated, brought up again and again?
2. What ideas have the strongest, most vivid imagery and/or figurative language associated with them?
3. What would you identify as the most important line in the play?
4. How does the title fit in?

Specific Reading Questions for Sticks and Bones

Characters

- What does the fact that the central characters are named for the Nelson family on TV do to our sense of who they are? In what ways is each character an archetype (or stereotype) of a certain familial/ societal role?
- Pick one of the four central family members and look through the play to establish what their personal history is. What were the crucial events of their past? How did these events shape them?
- What the function of Father Donald in the play?
- What is the reality level of Zung? Why is she introduced in the play? What function does she serve?

Plot

- You can divide each of the two acts into scenes by the lighting cues in the stage directions; the lights go down and then up for each new scene. Make a *Gliederung* of each act, listing what happens in each scene.
- How are the two acts parallel to each other?
- Why begin with the slide show?
- Where is the turn or reversal in this play; where is the recognition?

Themes

- **War movies and popular culture images were important themes in *SH5*. How are images of the media and popular culture used in this play?**
- **This is very much a play about racism and the Other. What are some of the racial prejudices the Nelson family has about Vietnamese people? To what degree are these prejudices projections of flaws in themselves that they cannot accept? Make a list of specific prejudices and look for projections.**
- **What other themes does this play have in common with other works we've read in the "war" unit?**