Tense Use in Literary Response Essays

It can be difficult to decide when to use the past and present tenses in an academic paper. It is common practice to use the literary present when relating events from a story, novel, play, or movie.

Sometimes, though, you will need to shift between tenses. In the following excerpt from an essay on Max Frisch’s play, *The Arsonists*, notice the shifts in tense. While the writer consistently uses the present tense in her essay, she is required to switch to the past tense for specific purposes.

Max Frisch’s 1958 play, *The Arsonists*, serves as a parable for the bourgeoisie’s abstentious role during Hitler’s rise to power. In fact, the play is commonly considered a criticism of the middle class’s passivity in stopping the spread of Nazi ideology. The protagonist, Gottlieb Biedermann, lets two arsonists, Schmitz and Eisenring, enter his home and bring barrels of gasoline into his attic. Despite clear warning signs, Biedermann denies the potential danger in order to maintain his public image as a do-gooder, allowing the two beggars to sleep under his roof. By the end, he is convinced that they are not arsonists and even supplies them with matches, thus bringing about the destruction of the city. Biedermann represents all of German society, which did not actively try to stop the Nazis despite citizens’ knowledge of the Holocaust’s atrocities. But this play can be applied to a broader scope of social issues. Although it easily translates to Nazi Germany, its message depends on the audience’s personal interpretation, as Frisch leaves its morality open-ended.
Frisch subscribed to Bertolt Brecht’s theories, which pushed him to address historical issues. The older dramatist introduced a new form of theater, called epic theater, which rejected dramatic theater’s cathartic values for a more critical approach. Before, theater had been meant to allow the audience to identify personally with the characters, but for Brecht and Frisch, plays were supposed to engage the audience not emotionally but rationally (Brecht, 71). Thus, when Frisch wrote The Arsonists, he intended it as a representation of a historical moment, meant to heighten its audience’s awareness.

In The Arsonists, the chorus of firemen that intervenes between scenes brings up the main moral criticism in the play: Biedermann’s passiveness in stopping the arsonists. Frisch frames the issue as a choice between reason and fate. On the one hand, “Reason can save us from evil” (Frisch, 3). On the other hand, “Fate means we don’t need to ask / Why the city is burning / No need to ask how the terror began” (3). By accepting fate, Biedermann lets himself be transported by the events and ultimately allows for destruction. When the leader of the chorus confronts Biedermann by asking “What were you thinking?” the protagonist responds, “Thinking? ... I have the right not to think at all” (42). Biedermann thus refuses to use reason, as it is easier to accept fate than to risk being blamed for inhumanity towards Schmitz and Eisenring. The chorus concludes the play by denouncing this choice: “Stupidity dressed up as fate, / Always stupidity / Blazing and burning / Until it can not be put out” (80). The chorus guides the audience towards a critique of Biedermann and blames him for not having used reason to understand what was happening in his house and to stop the arsonists.