

Bridging the Gap

AQA English Literature B:

Aspects of Tragedy

Booklet

Name:

The work in this folder will prepare you for Paper One which you will study for in Year 12. The focus is on Tragedy.

The booklet is divided into 3 parts:

- *Introduction to Tragedy*
- *Research Project*
- *A Written Response*

Ensure you complete all tasks so that you are well prepared when you begin in September.

TIPS:

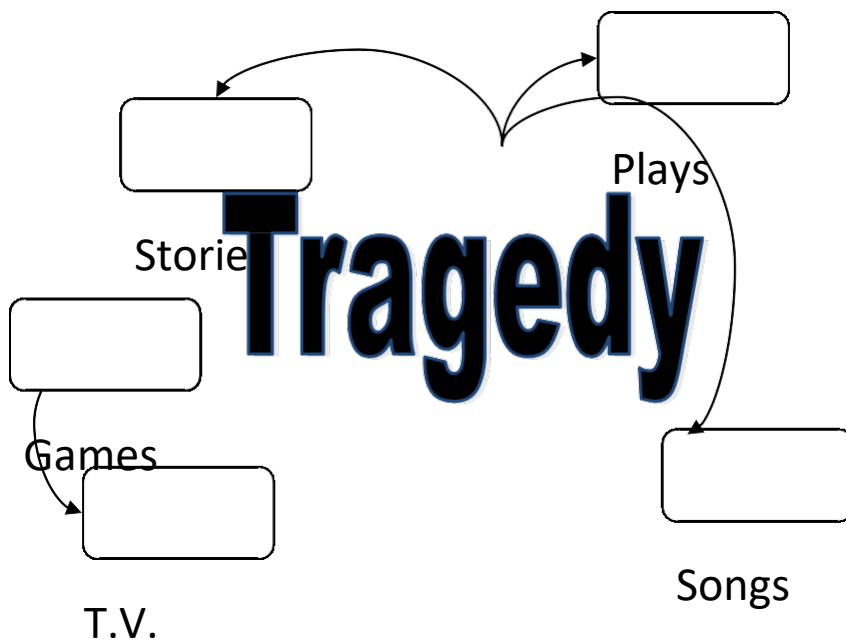
Use a dictionary for any words you don't understand.

Use the internet to complete any research.

What is Tragedy?

Create your own evaluation:

Create a mind-map of all the events, plays, stories, films, songs, television programmes and computer games you can think of that involve aspects of tragedy.



Look back at your mind-map.

1. What common features can you identify?

2. What makes the storylines particularly tragic?

3. What kinds of tragedy appeal most to young people and why?

4. Why do you think people want to watch tragedy?

5. Why is tragedy so important to humans?

6. What is the purpose of tragedy?

Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.

Chaplin



Key Terms:

Melancholy

Refute

Demean

What does this mean? What can you interpret about Chaplin's view of tragedy?

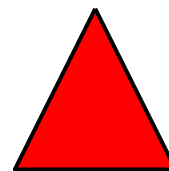
How far do you agree? Plot it on the line:

disagree

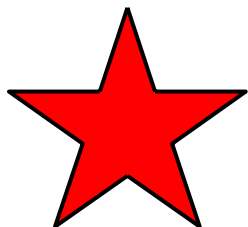
agree

Can you think of any examples to support/challenge his views?

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”



Mel Brooks

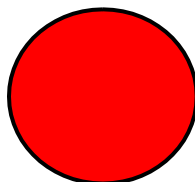


“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

Plato

“Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald



Tip:

Evaluating is a high level skill at A level—it involved not just analysing, but judging the effect of various interpretations

What do these quotes mean? What can you interpret about the authors view of tragedy?

How far do you agree? Plot your **shapes** on the line:

disagree

agree

Do they support or challenge Chaplin's view of comedy?

Watch the “Lion King” death scene on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watchv=L5xEs>

What features of tragedy can you identify?

Key Terms:

Pathos

Climax

Degradation

How does this sketch relate to the definitions of tragedy you have learned so far?

The aim of tragedy, Aristotle writes, is to bring about a "catharsis" of the spectators — to arouse in them sensations of pity and fear, and to purge them of these emotions so that they leave the theater feeling cleansed and uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of gods and men. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving change in the fortunes of the drama's protagonist (Aristotle recognized that the change might not be disastrous, but felt this was the kind shown in the best tragedies — *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, was considered a tragedy by the Greeks but does not have an unhappy ending).

How does this challenge, compliment or develop your initial ideas about tragedy?

Do you agree? Can you think of any examples?

Read through the following and highlight four words or sentences you don't understand. Link them to a box and write an explanation:

The tragedy became a popular type of drama starting with the ancient Greeks. In this era, tragic protagonists were not everyday people. Tragedies at the time had **powerful and influential protagonists**, with happy and fulfilling lives. During the course of Greek plays, the protagonists' lives are turned upside down and they suffer the deepest agony. This fall from a high status to the lowest is essential to the tragedy, since it makes the suffering all the more distressing. In addition, the protagonist usually has a **tragic flaw**, or some weakness that is the reason for his downfall. For an example, let's look at Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*. In this drama, Oedipus is a great king and a strong leader. He is beloved by the people and lives a grand life. However, his tragic flaw is his pride. This tragic flaw led him to unknowingly murder his own father and marry his mother. This leads to Oedipus' downfall, in which he gouges out his own eyes.

Another characteristic of the literary tragedy is more obvious: **a heartbreaking ending**. Some tragedies end in death, some in destruction and some in chaos, but whatever the situation, the protagonist almost always accepts **accepts responsibility for his mistakes** as well as **fights for a larger cause**. Witnessing this greatness of character often leads to something called catharsis. Catharsis is known for possibly being the reason so many people want to read or watch a tragedy. Seeing a character suffer the worst and lose everything might leave most people hopeless. However, seeing the character take responsibility and retain his goodness through everything he suffers, often causes relief in audiences. This is a **catharsis**, which is the purging of emotions, specifically pity and fear. The audience feels compassion for the protagonist, and whatever the ending, is left with an affirmation of human values, which prevents feeling despair.

The dramatic form of classical tragedy derives from the tragic plays of ancient Athens, which depicted the downfall of a hero or famous character of Greek legend. The hero would struggle against overwhelming fate, and his defeat would be so noble that he wins the moral victory over the forces that destroy him. A tragedy evoked pity and terror in the audience; it was a catharsis, or washing clean of the soul, which left the spectator trembling but purified.

Aristotle proposed the tragic unities of Place, Time, and Action, that is, the whole tragedy would take place in a single location, for example a house or a city square (this included messengers who came in from elsewhere), it would happen during the course of one day (including speeches about events which had happened in the past), and it would be a single story, without sub-plots. Compared with these strict rules, Shakespeare's tragedy is a more relaxed genre, but Othello much more than, for example, the sprawling Hamlet, observes the spirit of Aristotle. Othello, apart from Act I in Venice, is located entirely within the fortress at Cyprus. Although logically the play covers an unspecified time lapse of, we presume, two or three weeks, it proceeds, more or less, by major scenes through the hours of the day, starting in Venice with the elopement after midnight, the Senate meeting at dawn, then at Cyprus with the morning storm and afternoon landings and developments, the fateful drinking party in the early evening and the murder at bed time. This is not to say that everything happens in the same day; it obviously cannot, but the impression is of an abstract day unfolding.

The plot is fairly unified, focusing on Othello and his fate, and dealing with other people and events only in so far as they are relevant to this focus. Othello is about as near as Shakespeare gets to classical tragedy.

The Tragic Flaw

A. C. Bradley saw Shakespearean tragedy characterized by the "tragic flaw," the internal imperfection in the hero that brings him down. His downfall becomes his own doing, and he is no longer, as in classical tragedy, the helpless victim of fate. Some say that Othello's tragic flaw was jealousy which flared at suspicion and rushed into action unchecked by calm common sense. A more modern interpretation would say that Othello's tragic flaw was that he had internalized, that is taken into himself, the prejudices of those who surrounded him. In his heart he had come to believe what they believed: that a black man is an unattractive creature, not quite human, unworthy of love. Thinking this, he could not believe that Desdemona could truly love him for himself. Her love must be a pretense, or a flawed and corrupted emotion. Iago hinted at these ideas, and Othello rushed to accept them, because they echoed his deepest fears and insecurities.

The Play's Structure

Shakespearean tragedy usually works on a five-part structure, corresponding to the five acts: Part One, the exposition, outlines the situation, introduces the main characters, and begins the action. Part Two, the development, continues the action and introduces complications. Part Three, the crisis (or climax), brings everything to a head. In this part, a change of direction occurs or understanding is precipitated. Part Four includes further developments leading inevitably to Part Five, in which the final crisis of action or revelation and resolution are explained. Othello follows this pattern.

Read the article on Shakespearian comedy.

1. How did Shakespeare transform the conventions of tragedy?

2. What are the traits of Shakespeare's tragedy?

3. How does Shakespeare differ from Plato in his presentation of tragedy?

4. What influenced Shakespeare's tragedy?

5. Why was tragedy so crucial to Shakespeare?

6. Evaluate the effect of Shakespearean tragedy on his audience:

Research the following terms and write down their definitions:

Catharsis _____

Hamartia _____

Hubris _____

Fate _____

Catastrophe _____

Recognition (anagnorsis) _____

Protagonist _____

Antagonist _____

Exposition _____

Fatal error _____

Research the following terms and write down their definitions:

Pathos _____

Empathy _____

Nuntius _____

Climax _____

Fatal _____

Chorus _____

Juxtaposition _____

Foreshadowing _____

Pathetic Fallacy

Tragic Evaluation

1. Shakespearean Tragedy
2. Greek Tragedy
3. Modern tragedy
4. Roman Tragedy
5. Aristotle's theory
6. Hegel's theory
7. Nietzsche's theory

Success Criteria:

Band 6 I have evaluated the effectiveness of various features of the topic of this

Band 5 I have analysed the effect of various features of the topic

Band 4 I have explained various features of the topic in detail

Band 3 I have understood the basic features of the topic

Choose an area of research and produce an evaluation.

You need to include:

Historical background

Illustrations

Extracts from plays with commentary

Quotations from critics.

Read this extract from "Othello" and label anything that could be considered tragic

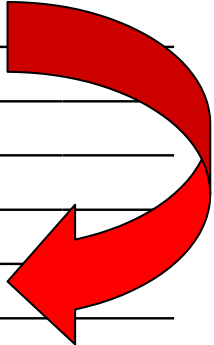
In this extract, Brabantio has been told that his daughter has run off and married an older black man and feels betrayed

SCENE i: Venice. A street.

Enter, below, BRABANTIO, and SERVANTS with torches.

160 BRABANTIO. It is too true an evil: gone she is;
And what's to come of my despised time
Is nought but bitterness. Now, Roderigo,
Where didst thou see her? O unhappy girl!
With the Moor, say'st thou? Who would be a father!
165 How didst thou know 'twas she? O she deceives me
Past thought! What said she to you? Get more tapers:
Raise all my kindred. Are they married, think you?
RODERIGO. Truly, I think they are.
BRABANTIO. O heaven! How got she out? O treason
of the blood!

Constant questions— shows his confusion and tragic state of mind



Key Questions: to consider

What is the significance of the torches?

Why is the night-time setting tragic? Consider at least two reasons

Why do you think Shakespeare chose to set this part of the play on a street? How does it link to tragedy?

Why do you think Shakespeare set the play in Venice, Italy?

Consider the context—why would all this be viewed as even more tragic in the 1600s?

Modern Translation

BRABANTIO
It's true. She's gone. The rest of my life will be nothing but bitterness. Now, Roderigo, where did you see her?—Oh, that miserable wretch!—You say you saw her with the Moor?—Oh, who would want to be a father?—How did you know it was her?—To think she tricked me so easily!—What did she say to you?—Get me more candles, and wake up all my relatives. Do you think they're married?

RODERIGO
Yes, I really think so.

BRABANTIO
Oh, heaven, how did she get out? My own flesh and blood rebels against me! Fathers, never trust your daughters just because they act obedient and innocent. Are there magic spells that can

Read this example response to the question on a different extract and fill in the progress counter.

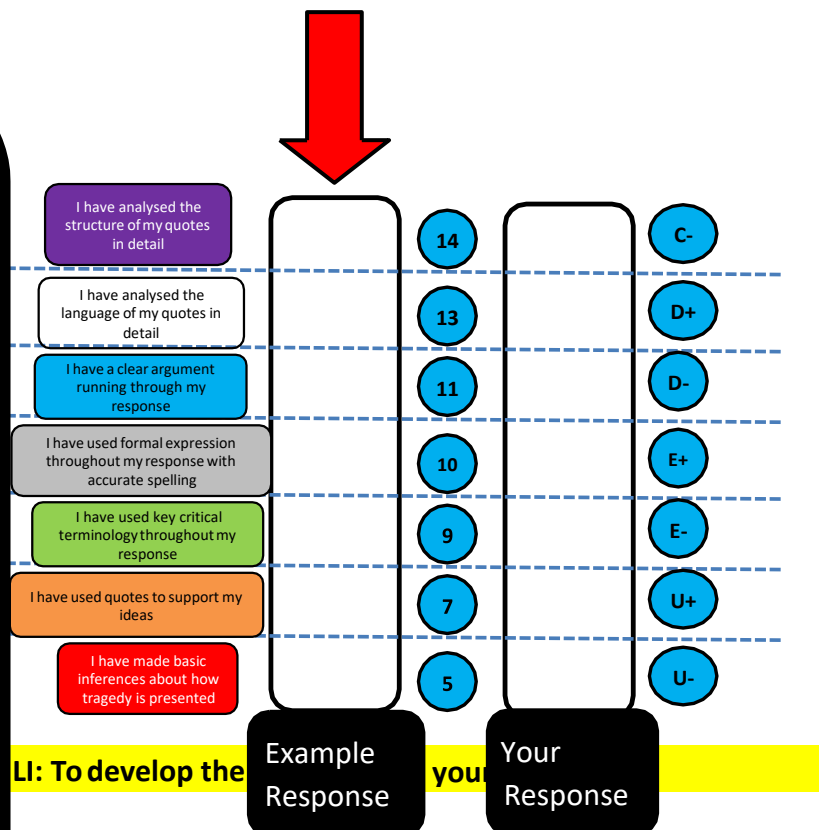
- Explore the **significance** of the aspects of **dramatic tragedy** in the following **passage**
- You should consider the following in your answer:
- the dramatic **setting**
- The presentation of **Brabantio**

The most significant aspect of tragedy in this passage is undoubtedly the presentation of the nobleman. Here Othello gives an eloquent speech, starting with “Most potent, grave and reverend signors”. In this way, Othello is presented as an honourable character as he compliments those he is speaking to, even using iambic pentameter to reinforce his eloquence. This is significant to the tragedy of the play as Shakespeare structurally establishes the fall of the nobleman, in that the more honourably he is presented at the start of the play, the more devastating his downfall will appear.

Key Questions: to consider
 What is most effective about this response?

What could you do in your own response based on this example?

Are there any targets you can identify for this student to improve?



A large, vertically oriented rounded rectangle with a black border. The interior of the rectangle is filled with 25 horizontal black lines, spaced evenly, providing a template for writing.

Progress Check: Look back at the progress counter and fill it in for your response.

The E-Mag task requires you to access an English E-Mag from Firefly: <https://swanshurst.fireflycloud.net/english/emag>

This is a fantastic resource but there is a great deal here so here are some guidelines on use:

1. Select a magazine and a particular article.
2. Read and reduce to the most important points.
3. Write a short review on the English Blog, which will inform other students and help them decide whether they should read this article. <https://swanshurst.fireflycloud.net/english/online-learning-a-level-lit-forum>

Independent tasks: you might also like to try one of the free online courses that are available and will put you in a really strong position to do well at A Level. Here are my top picks:

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/creative-writing/writing-what-you-know/content-section-0>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/what-poetry/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/start-writing-fiction-characters-and-stories/content-section-overview?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/creative-writing/start-writing-fiction/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/english-language/form-and-uses-language/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/approaching-prose-fiction/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/approaching-poetry/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/approaching-plays/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

<https://www.edx.org/course/masterpieces-of-world-literature>

<https://www.edx.org/course/modern-masterpieces-of-world-literature>

<https://www.edx.org/course/shakespeares-othello-the-moor>

<https://www.edx.org/course/fairy-tales-meanings-messages-and-morals>

Bridging Sessions

Contents:

- I. Session 1- Note Taking
- II. Session 2- Textual Knowledge
- III. Session 3- Structure
- IV. Session 4- Context
- V. Additional Materials

Session 1 – Note-taking

Maude Clare

Out of the church she followed them
With a lofty step and mien:
His bride was like a village maid,
Maude Clare was like a queen.

‘Son Thomas,’ his lady mother said,
With smiles, almost with tears:
‘May Nell and you but live as true
As we have done for years;

‘Your father thirty years ago
Had just your tale to tell;
But he was not so pale as you,
Nor I so pale as Nell.’

My lord was pale with inward strife,
And Nell was pale with pride;
My lord gazed long on pale Maude Clare
Or ever he kissed the bride.

‘Lo, I have brought my gift, my lord,
Have brought my gift,’ she said:
To bless the hearth, to bless the board,
To bless the marriage-bed.

‘Here’s my half of the golden chain
You wore about your neck,
That day we waded ankle-deep
For lilies in the beck:

‘Here’s my half of the faded leaves
We plucked from the budding bough,
With feet amongst the lily leaves, -
The lilies are budding now.’

He strove to match her scorn with scorn,
He faltered in his place:

'Lady,' he said, - 'Maude Clare,' he said, -
'Maude Clare,' – and hid his face.

She turn'd to Nell: 'My Lady Nell,
I have a gift for you;
Though, were it fruit, the blooms were gone,
Or, were it flowers, the dew.

'Take my share of a fickle heart,
Mine of a paltry love:
Take it or leave it as you will,
I wash my hands thereof.'

'And what you leave,' said Nell, 'I'll take,
And what you spurn, I'll wear;
For he's my lord for better and worse,
And him I love Maude Clare.

'Yea, though you're taller by the head,
More wise and much more fair:
I'll love him till he loves me best,
Me best of all Maude Clare.'

Christina Rossetti

Activity

1. Why do you think that Rossetti uses pronouns first before introducing names?
2. Why is the speaker anonymous?
3. Why has Rossetti used a third person narrative?
4. Why are the main characters described as 'pale'?
5. What do you think Thomas' 'inward strife' might be?
6. What do you think of Nell's response to Maude Clare in the final stanza? Consider why she begins with 'And'.
7. Why does Nell choose to compliment Maude Clare?
8. Why do you think the narrator remains anonymous?
9. What is the purpose of comparing Thomas with his parents? What do you think that Rossetti was trying to achieve here?
10. What effect does the alternating rhyme scheme have?

The Explosion

On the day of the explosion
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:
In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;

Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins,
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,
Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon, there came a tremor; cows
Stopped chewing for a second; sun,
Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

The dead go on before us, they
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,
We shall see them face to face –

Plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said, and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed –
Gold as on a coin, or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

Philip Larkin

Session 2 – Further Readings of Maude Clare

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/harrison2/1.html>

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/christina-rossetti-gender-and-power>

<https://poemanalysis.com/maude-clare-by-christina-rossetti-poem-analysis/>

Remember the importance of 'reading around' the text or task you have been given. It is important to remember though when you are doing this that you are reading another person's opinion, and at A level we are interested in **your opinion**. Therefore, read as widely as you can, and refer to critical works in your response. Fundamentally though, you must make up your own mind about it all and express this coherently – A level English literature rewards **independent thought**.

Session 3 – Structure of a Text

Drama Texts

Primarily you must respond to the text as a piece of drama which is part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. Consider how the part of the text that you are studying begins and ends in terms of its dramatic action, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how this contributes to the overall dramatic process.

One useful way to do this is to imagine the scene on stage when you are constructing your response and consider the points below. When playwrights are writing plays they are engaging with dramatic structures, exits and entrances, the dialogue used, dramatic action, those who speak and those who are silent, soliloquies and asides, narrative time etc., so these are all invaluable starting points:

- Who is on stage?
- What is going on in the space?
- Which characters can hear what is being said?
- Does any character enter or exit? For what reason is this?
- Who speaks?
- What kind of speech is it – informal, formal, scheming, friendly, insincere?
- Who is dominating the scene? Who speaks the most? Is it related to their status?
- Is there anyone who is silent? Is this of any relevance?
- Are there any indications from the dialogue about stage directions, props or tone of voice?
- Is the setting important? Is it known?
- Where is it set – location (country, city, house, room), time of day (how much light)?
- What type of action is taking place?

Don't forget too that plays are written to be performed, so go and see them for yourselves. You can visit the theatre, or view a filmed version of the play (which is readily available online or sometimes even at the cinema). It is essential to remember, though, when you view these, that they are the interpretation of that particular director – there is no 'correct' way of performing these plays. Sometimes it is useful to view several versions of the same play for precisely that reason. Consider why the director has chosen to place emphasis on a specific action, word or movement, for example.

Have a look at the RSC's website which offers a wealth of valuable resources including filmed clips of some of the key scenes of their plays.

www.rsc.org.uk

Poetry

Consider what it is that makes poetry different to prose. Coleridge's comments that prose is "words in the best order" and poetry "the best words in the best order" is a lovely way of expressing it.

Consider the points below in relation to 'Maude Clare' (a copy of the poem can be found earlier on in this booklet):

- What attitudes to love are conveyed? How are they achieved?
- How typical of love poetry are these methods?
- Does the poet create any aural effects such as consonance, assonance, rhyme, onomatopoeia etc? What do these add to the poem?

- Is there anything about the order of the words that is significant?
- Has the poet used any figurative means of expression? For example, simile, metaphor, symbol etc. How do they add to the poem?
- How does the poet use stanza form such as line length, metre and rhyme effects? Don't forget to interpret this for yourself.
- Why has the poet chosen the specific beginning and ending? Are there other structural methods used? What effect does this have on the reader?

Activity

Below are the first three stanzas of 'Maude Clare'. Track on each stanza what we learn about each character, the story and who speaks the most. The first three stanzas have been partially annotated for you:

'Maude Clare'

Out of the church she followed them – **who is she?**

With a lofty step and mien:

His bride was like a village maid,

Maude Clare was like a queen. – **comparison between Maude Clare and 'his bride'**

'Son Thomas, 'his lady mother said,

With smiles, almost with tears: – **why tears?**

'May Nell and you but live as true

As we have done for years;

'Your father thirty years ago

Had just your tale to tell; – **hinting that Thomas' father was the same**

But he was not so pale as you,

Nor I so pale as Nell.' – **why are they pale?**

Annotate the remainder of the poem and then write a response to the structure of the poem.

Consider:

- Who has the most lines?
- Who closes off the poem?
- What exactly do we discover about the characters in each stanza?
- How much of the story is revealed in each stanza?

Prose

Questions to consider with prose texts

- What is the significance of the title?
- What is the significance of the register/s used?

- What kind of novel/non-fiction is it? (Is there a relevant sub-genre term – e.g. bildungsroman, dystopian fiction, travel memoir etc?)
- What is the significance of the structure of the novel? (Is there anything distinctive about the use of parts, chapters etc?)
- What can be said about the nature of the narrative? (linear, non-linear, chronological? What point of view is adopted?)
- How is the reader given access to the thoughts and feelings of characters? (direct speech, reported speech, first person narrative, devices such as letters and journals etc?)
- If the third person is used, does the writer use free indirect discourse to give the reader glimpses of the thoughts and feelings of characters?
- How aware is the reader of the writer's thoughts and feelings?

'Othello'

Act 5 Scene 2 – An Overview

The play has been building to this tragic moment and before the curtain falls, both Desdemona and Othello die and the truth about Iago emerges.

- Desdemona is sleeping in bed when Othello enters. He reflects on what he is about to do and kisses her. She wakes and during the course of the dialogue, realises that he's going to kill her.
- Othello smothers Desdemona. Emilia enters, revealing that Cassio is alive. Desdemona briefly recovers and Emilia discovers what Othello has done. Desdemona dies. Emilia confronts Othello and declares her husband Iago a liar.
- Emilia's cries bring Montano, Gratiano and Iago on stage. Emilia confronts her husband who admits his actions. Othello, realising his error, falls on the bed.
- Emilia defends Desdemona's honour and refuses to be silent. Iago stabs her and she dies. Iago is restrained. Othello wounds Iago.
- Letters found in Roderigo's pocket confirm the truth of the situation. Othello stabs himself, dying on the bed. Iago remains silent. He is then taken away, and Lodovico promises to report these events.

Act 3 Scene 3 –An Overview

This scene is central in the sense that it occurs at the heart of the play, but is also the point where Iago's scheming comes together.

- Desdemona and Emilia reassure Cassio that Othello will soon reinstate him
- Othello and Iago enter, at which point Cassio leaves. Iago later exploits this hasty departure, insinuating that Cassio has been playing false with Desdemona
- Desdemona enters and urges her husband to look favourably on Cassio. He wants to discuss it later. Desdemona exits
- Iago now exploits Othello, but pretends to be supportive. Iago's manoeuvrings result in Othello being plagued with doubts about his wife's fidelity.

Session 4 – Context

Example 1

In the poem 'Maude Clare', Maude Clare comes across as quite a strong character as she has waited to take revenge on Thomas until his wedding day when he's marrying another, less pretty girl called Nell. She gets her revenge by returning the items they shared during their relationship. Maude Clare presents Nell with dead flowers 'were it fruit, the bloom were gone' or 'were it flowers, the dew'. This is a symbolic gesture of the love that Maude Clare and Thomas shared and implies intimacy suggesting that Maude is no longer virtuous.

Victorian society would have really looked down on Maude Clare for having been intimate with Thomas. However Thomas wouldn't have been judged harshly at all – society at the time was very hypocritical. The poem is saying that it was permissible for men to have been intimate before marriage but it wasn't the same for women. The Victorians therefore divided women into two categories, those who married and were deemed respectable and those who weren't and were viewed as a threat to society, and Maude Clare demonstrates this perfectly.

Example 2

Maude Clare is portrayed as a bitter and vindictive woman and it is evident in the poem that her 'lord' still holds feelings for her even though he is marrying the innocent and virtuous Nell. Rossetti draws on three differing female perspectives which vary in prominence and in doing this recreates a valuable insight into Victorian conventions. The ambiguity in the identification of the narrator affords the reader the opportunity to draw their own conclusions.

Typically, Victorian women were expected to serve their husbands. The poem 'Maude Clare' overturns this expectation and instead uses the character of Maude Clare as a stereotype that bucks this expectation. She is the most prominent female character, and a strong one at that, who instead of being submissive to her 'lord' puts him in his place and embarrasses him.

Some general advice:

- Be careful not to deal with context in a generalised way. Although it's possible to talk about the general beliefs held by Elizabethans for example, you should avoid making sweeping statements which assume that all Elizabethans were racist or misogynist. As a comparison, you might think about all the people you know and consider whether their views can be lumped together as 'what 21st century people think'. Instead, remember that people have a variety of viewpoints, regardless of the times in which they lived.
- It's always far more beneficial to couch any points that you make about context in tentative terms and let the contextual material arise naturally from the play, rather than 'force' contexts into the text. Writing some facts about contexts that you've memorised won't ever be helpful – it always needs to be closely applied to the question and the text you are writing about. As ever, answering the question succinctly will always be the most useful thing you can do.

Additional Information – Myth busting for the A level exams and NEA

1. You will have to guess what the hidden requirements are for each question.

There will be no hidden requirements that you will have to try to guess on **any** specification. What you need to do in order to succeed is to focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument. You will be less successful if you try to shoehorn in extraneous material, include unrelated context and unrelated comments that are not required by the question.

2. Analysing single words in any extract is a really good approach and is what you should be encouraged to do.

You need to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as you read and the speech that is being heard. Consider the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters. This will never mean a discussion of single words which is rarely productive and nearly always takes you away from the drama and thus the focus of the question.

3. You should not write general introductions where you state your intentions, or conclusions where your key points are repeated.

You should always focus on the task from the start, making a focused, concise comment in the first sentence. Don't waste precious time and words! Far too many students write introductions and conclusions which are vague, generalised and broad which do not gain them marks. See the guide below for further advice.

4. If you don't know the quotation you need, then make it up!

Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from your arguments. If you don't know quotations you are much better off simply explaining your ideas, using your own words. As long as your explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, you will be credited. Don't forget, your teachers and the examiners know these texts very well!

5. Only write about techniques such as iambic pentameter or blank verse if you have something very specific to write about.

Some students make the mistake of writing about features that they do not fully understand. Only write about these things if you know what they mean and it is fully relevant to the question.

How to answer a question – some suggestions

There are three key things that you should include in every paragraph of your response:

1. Refer to the question
2. Make a point
3. Refer to the author by name

Activity:

How does the response below include the three key points? See if you can identify them.

Explore how Larkin presents ideas about life and death in 'The Explosion'.

The poem, 'The Explosion', is split into three sections. In the first four stanzas, Larkin talks about how **everything seemed to be normal within the group of workers**. Stanza five explains briefly the event in a detached emotionless way, and the remaining four stanzas deal with ensuing events post-explosion. This structuring presents ideas about the transition from **life to death** and the people it affects very clearly. The idea of death is also presented using a semantic field of dark words such as "*chased*", "*tremor*", "*dimmed*" and "*dead*". There is also a very important link within the poem: when Larkin writes about the lark's eggs being lodged in the grass and then on the very last line referring to them again. By stating that the lark's egg remained unbroken, Larkin may be trying to portray to the reader the implication that the connection between the workers and their wives remains unbroken (the connection between life and death) although the workers were killed, and perhaps he is attempting to provide comfort in the message that death is not the end.

Although the majority of the first section of the poem appears to be explaining to the reader that everything was normal on that morning, one line at the beginning ("*shadows painted towards the pithead*") suggests the opposite. 'Shadow' could be considered as another dark word used as part of the semantic field in the poem; and because it is used after the line "*on the day of the explosion*", I believe that Larkin was **trying to imply that this day was destined to go wrong** and as the shadows were pointed towards the pithead, maybe the line implies something that really bad was going to happen at the pit; almost like a story beginning, that we all know the ending of. However, in the line following this one ("*In the sun the slagheap slept*") the calm voice begins, and for the next few stanzas everyone and everything appears to be peaceful and ordinary – "*Fathers, brothers, nicknames laughter, Through the tall gates standing open*".

The middle section, the fifth stanza of the poem, is where the whole demeanour and mood is changed: "*tremor; cows stopped chewing for a second....neat gaze, dimmed*". Here, the explosion referred to in the poem's title evidently takes place and I believe that is where the **ideas about life and death** are shown most strongly. Larkin seems to be trying to make us understand that in a split second one tiny little thing can change life into death ("*cows stopped chewing for a second*"). The message of the poem is that one minute everything may be calm and normal but no one knows what is about to happen – Larkin is referring to the unpredictability and uncertainty of life.

In the final section, Larkin states that the dead are "*sitting in God's house in comfort*". This **suggests that the men who died are now peaceful again and happy**. Larkin also states that "*for a second wives saw men of the explosion... gold as on a coin, or walking somehow from the sun*". The mood changes again, and Larkin implies that although the people still living are sad, the workers are as happy as they've ever been. This **presents us with the idea that death is peaceful** and isn't as terrible as you would envisage it to be. I believe that Larkin is trying to convey many messages to the reader; one of which is you have to enjoy life because in a second it could be gone. Larkin is also stating that whether you are alive or dead you can find peace and that death shouldn't be looked upon as a terrible circumstance and life should be celebrated. This is why, I believe, the poem was written for a memorial; not to make people sad, but to assure people that the workers are happy together.

Some final advice on what to consider during your course:

- Be prepared to take ownership of your work. This means reading your texts well in advance and several times
- Read around your subject using critical works
- Remember though to always give YOUR OPINION – have a clear, personal voice
- Always answer the question – the AOs will take care of themselves if you answer what is in front of you
- Don't subvert the question to what you'd like it to be
- You can pursue a single line of argument or you can consider differing viewpoints – both are equally valid
- PLAN – consider the argument before you begin writing it

Good luck and enjoy the course!