

Writing on a play



A thorough exam answer on a play will show awareness that the text is a script meant to be acted. Take special note of any stage directions in the passages and explain the significance of at least some of them in your response.



WWW

Go to www.insightpublications.com.au for three annotated passages from Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, as well as a sample response on them.

Sample answer on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

The sample response below is based on the three passages from *Hamlet* which were set on the 2009 VCE Literature examination. These passages are:

- in Act 1 scene 2, from Claudius: 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?' to Claudius: 'Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply.'
- in Act 3 scene 1, from Ophelia: 'How does your honour for this many a day?' to Hamlet: 'Let the doors be shut upon him ... Farewell.'
- in Act 4 scene 4, from Rosencrantz: 'Will't please you go my lord?' to Hamlet: 'My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.'

Introduction

This response opens with a consideration of key terms and ideas raised in the third passage. Elements of Hamlet's character are identified using brief quotations from the passage; the discussion then moves on to broader ideas which can be taken up in subsequent paragraphs. The paragraph ends with a comment about *views and values* explored by the play.

Hamlet's Act 4 soliloquy 'How all occasions do inform against me' conveys his great frustration with how little he has accomplished, and sets his own situation against the wider backdrop of all human purpose and action. Nowhere is his self-awareness more acute than in this speech: he knows he is 'thinking too precisely on th'event', suspects that 'three parts coward' lies behind his reluctance to act, and recognises he has 'cause, and will, and strength, and means' to avenge his father's murder. Yet self-knowledge is not enough, and larger moral questions always intrude as Hamlet attempts to think his way through his dilemma. What is the value of a life? Why do men have the capacity to reason? What does it mean to live honourably? These are the questions that Hamlet – and, through him, Shakespeare – ponders repeatedly, as he seeks a meaning and purpose for existence in a universe with few moral guidelines or certainties.

Locates the passage within the text and indicates how it is significant.

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 2 takes up the concepts of honesty and honour from the introduction and moves into a deeper discussion of them using material from Passage 1. This develops the discussion *coherently* and begins to link the passages. The opposing terms ‘seeming’ and ‘truly’ provide a core vocabulary for the analysis of how the play explores the value of honesty in a dishonest world.

At the centre of Hamlet’s problem is the value of honour: ‘honour’s at the stake’. It is his father’s honour, and his own, that he wants to uphold. In his social world, though, honour seems to have vanished entirely, while those who behave dishonourably – such as Gertrude and Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – are either in positions of power or enjoy the favour of those in power. Closely aligned with honour, in Hamlet’s eyes, is honesty, a quality that is also largely absent in Hamlet’s world. For Hamlet, being honest means being true to one’s inner feelings, in appearance and actions as well as in speech. Indeed, this idea, and the importance Hamlet places on it, is expressed in his first remarks of the play, during his exchange with Claudius and Gertrude (Passage 1). He insists that his ‘nighted colour’ is not simply the appearance of mourning, but the real thing; his interest is not in mere ‘seeming’, but in forms of expression that ‘denote me truly’. He understands that there are social conventions – ‘actions that a man might play’ – but his focus is on what is ‘within which passes show’. In other words, Hamlet seeks a perfect match between outward appearances and inner reality. Yet right from the start, Hamlet’s language is filled with double meanings, conveying one meaning to his listener and another to the audience. For instance, his reply to Claudius that he is ‘too much i’th’sun’ is a sharp repudiation of Claudius’ earlier claim on him as ‘son’, though Claudius seems only to understand the sense of being ‘i’th’sun’ as a denial of being in the ‘clouds’. It is not long before Hamlet concentrates *all* of his energies on concealing his real feelings behind a cloak of feigned madness, of ‘showing’ and ‘playing’ for others, and what is ‘true’ becomes increasingly difficult to determine.

Brief pertinent quotations are smoothly integrated into the discussion.

Good textual example from Passage 1 to make the point about Hamlet’s word play and double meanings.

Paragraph 3

This paragraph continues the close focus on honesty by considering Hamlet’s language in Passage 2. The idea of ‘playing’ allows the discussion to flow smoothly from one paragraph to the next, and from one passage to another. Close attention to the language, as well as good knowledge of the play’s narrative and characters, allows a *coherent and detailed interpretation* to be developed.

When Ophelia returns ‘remembrances’ to Hamlet, we see this ‘playing’ at its most extreme and tortuous (Passage 2). The audience knows that Claudius and Polonius are eavesdropping on this conversation, but Hamlet too seems to suspect something is up when he asks Ophelia if she is ‘honest’. That is, he suspects her desire to return his gifts is not truly her own, but a kind of performance controlled by others. In turn, Hamlet uses every verbal trick at his disposal to confuse his listeners, talking in riddles, contradictions and paradoxes while still attempting to convey something meaningful to Ophelia. He cannot, however, believe her to be ‘honest’, as ‘the power of beauty will ... transform honesty ... to a bawd’. His scathing tone reveals his cynical view of all women, engendered by his deep disgust of Gertrude’s ‘corruption’. So thorough is his loathing that he believes it were ‘better [his] mother had not borne [him]’. As Gertrude’s son, Hamlet’s loathing is also directed at himself. Overwhelmed by despair, he declares himself to be ‘indifferent honest’, but his despairing question ‘What should such fellows as I crawling between earth and heaven?’ conveys his sense of existential crisis as clearly as any line in the play. This brutish imagery conveys his feelings of confusion, of being overwhelmed by circumstances, with force and, despite the word-play that almost obscures them, with genuine honesty.

Identifies significance of the passage.

Explains the meaning and significance of the quoted term in the context of the passage; shows knowledge of the wider text.

A comment on how an aspect of language – tone – helps to convey Hamlet’s despair and view of women.

Paragraph 4

In this paragraph the discussion returns to Passage 1 in order to focus on the character of Claudius, who is contrasted effectively with Hamlet. The use of repetition is analysed, leading to some interpretive remarks about Claudius that contribute to the overall discussion of honesty.

In contrast, Claudius is determined to speak as social custom demands, whatever inner turmoil he may be experiencing. For him, outward ‘show’ is all-important: he is the king; he is charming and assured, and wields power with shrewd intent. In Passage 1, Claudius’ deeper political purpose – to move his listeners to accept his legitimacy and authority – is revealed through his public condemnation of Hamlet, whose sorrow and grief he dismisses as ‘obsequious’ and ‘unmanly’. His references to Hamlet’s ‘peevish’ opposition and ‘obstinate condolment’ are calculated to suggest Hamlet’s immaturity, while his accusations of ‘impious stubbornness’ and a ‘will most incorrect to heaven’ go even further and charge Hamlet with sinfulness. Claudius’ public criticism of Hamlet thus demonstrates his political power and skills before the assembled courtiers. However, his *actions* – committing fratricide and then marrying his brother’s wife – are immoral by any standards, causing (in Hamlet’s terms) a great disparity

Well-chosen quotations support the assertion about the assurance and skill with which Claudius wields power.

Shows knowledge of the wider text; brings this to bear on a close analysis of Claudius’ language.

between how Claudius 'seems' and how he is 'truly'. It is, perhaps, this gap that gives rise to his repetition of 'fault' as he advises Hamlet on the best frame of mind to adopt in relation to his father's death. The words 'fault to heaven,/A fault against the dead, a fault to nature' apply most accurately not to Hamlet's behaviour, but to the crime Claudius himself has committed. The 'fault' that recurs in his mind is his own terrible sin; it is himself that he is trying to reassure here, his own guilt and anxiety that he seeks to repress but which push through the surface meaning of his words.

Paragraph 5

As the essay approaches its conclusion, the discussion moves back to Hamlet and material in Passage 3 (with which it began). This allows for a more sustained and detailed analysis of Passage 3 than was possible in the introduction. The wider *views and values* explored by the text, particularly through the character of Hamlet, are considered more thoroughly here, building on the close textual analysis in the previous paragraphs.

Both Claudius and Hamlet, then, become trapped by their efforts to present a face to the world that is at odds with their inner knowledge and feelings, albeit for very different reasons. For Claudius it is all about preserving power and authority; he conceals his inner struggle, with the audience only glimpsing it briefly as he kneels, making a futile attempt to pray following the performance of *The Mousetrap*. For Hamlet, though, the struggle is evident to us in his every word, and for him it is a far more complex problem: on the one hand, the necessity of self-preservation; on the other, the wider question of upholding honesty and honour in a world of hypocrisy and self-interest. In such a world, as Hamlet reflects on it, life is reduced to little more than bare survival – to 'crawling between earth and heaven', to 'sleep and feed'. Such a life leaves so much of human potential untapped, 'fust[ing] in us unused'. Hamlet frequently identifies the values and qualities that ought to be the basis for human thought and action: honesty, reason, honour, virtue, delicacy, tenderness. And he has these in abundance; what he cannot solve is the problem of reconciling them with the bloody deed he knows he must commit – his uncle's murder. This is, in a way, the play's most potent message: there never is any real honour in murder.

Uses quotations from two passages, linking them through this idea.

Shows knowledge of the wider text – the discussion is not limited to events contained in the set passages.

A strong views and values comment ends this paragraph, and leads logically into the conclusion.

Paragraph 6: conclusion

The conclusion draws the discussion to a close, summarising the main points and reiterating the key terms and ideas of ‘seeming’ and honesty. A phrase from Passage 3 is used to look forward to the play’s final action, which leads to a concluding views and values comment.

Hamlet begins by asserting ‘I know not seems’, but before long he finds himself in a world in which he knows not what *is* – a world that is *all* seeming, full of deceptive appearances and hidden agendas, including his own. Eventually, he vows to match words with deeds: ‘from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth’. This kind of honesty, though, means conforming to the corrupt values of Claudius’ world: protect self-interest; survive at any cost. As the play reveals, such a world cannot last; when bloody thoughts lead inevitably to bloody acts, self-destruction is assured.
(1280 words)

Quotations from both Passage 1 and Passage 3 are used in the conclusion, helping to link the material and demonstrate the plausibility and coherence of the interpretation.

Assessor comments

This response shows a good knowledge of the text and develops a plausible and coherent interpretation through close reference to the set passages. Short quotations with relevant textual details and examples of language are incorporated into the discussion throughout.

The writing is expressive and fluent; the key ideas are logically developed from paragraph to paragraph to ensure the coherence of the response.

The response fulfils the criteria very well in most areas; however, there is a danger of it appearing to be more like a ‘views and values’ response (albeit one which draws strongly on the passages). In order to emphasise the focus on language, a closer focus on specific ‘moments’ in the passages is needed. It is also a good idea for students to avail themselves of opportunities to discuss the play as performance – commenting on the aspects of setting and staging that add to the audience’s understanding of the play.

At 1280 words this response is longer than most examination responses; note that all three passages are considered in some detail, but you do not need to write on all three to obtain a high grade. This response would address the assessment criteria at an A (but perhaps not an A+) level.