

There are a number of ways you can organise information to answer this question, but essentially you should:

- Explain what you understand by “the significance of loyalty” and how Shakespeare shows this through his “portrayal of human experience”
- Support your explanation by evidence from the play
- Explain what else you find significant in the play, justifying your views with evidence
- Explain how other interpretations of the play are possible and how these can be justified by the text itself.

You do not need to address these elements in this order. It may better suit your argument to introduce others’ readings at particular stages throughout your discussion, to demonstrate how other ideas have influenced the points you are making.

Sample response: Shakespearean drama

Prescribed text: Hamlet, William Shakespeare, c. 1600

Starts with a quotation – this can be dangerous if it is not carefully integrated into the introduction

Thesis directly responds to the question

Discussion on context within the play and in the Elizabethan world

Further definition of the word *loyalty*, linking this to a tradition of thinking

Close reading of classical allusion in the play

Polonius’ advice to his son Laertes, “To thine own self be true”, rings throughout the play as a message about loyalty for all characters, but more specifically (and ironically, given that Hamlet kills Polonius) this is a message about Hamlet. Loyalty to king and country and loyalty to family become insignificant without loyalty to oneself and one’s beliefs. Hamlet’s dilemma about what to do, his inaction and his confusion can all be seen to emerge from the conflict of Renaissance idealism and belief in the individual at a time when Christian morality still reflected medieval values.

The unnatural becomes a repeated metaphor in the play, from Hamlet’s first soliloquy, about “an unweeded garden that grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature” to the statement, “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. Denmark represents the restrictions of medievalism and the disjunction of thought in such an environment; it is “a prison ... Denmark being one o’ the worst. For there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so”. In all of these references, there is an implicit reflection of the changing context of Elizabethan England, a place where the crown was still valued and respected, but there was also fear of treasonous acts against the crown, and where the cult of individualism and humanism, which was part of the Renaissance, was becoming a powerful challenge.

Loyalty therefore undergoes a reinterpretation in this play, with Hamlet representing the opposition of the new and the old. Revenge is his desired outcome, but revenge goes so much against Hamlet’s humanist values, and seems such an unacceptable response to his problems, that he loses his life when he finally carries out his father’s will to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder”. He understands that revenge is the logical course after Claudius’s act of treason, but it is a course of action linked to a violent Roman past and belonging to the medieval imagination, not to the world of humanist philosophy. In carrying out revenge, Hamlet would be disloyal to the beliefs that he brings with him from his university studies, following a course of action that stretched from the ancient times of the Romans.

The relationship of revenge to the ancient past is reinforced through the classical allusions. Early in the play, when discussing the apparition with Marcellus, Horatio comments on how the fall of the “mightiest Julius” led to “dews of blood / Disasters in the sun”. In so saying, Horatio draws the

attention of the audience to a tradition of revenge tragedy, drawing from Seneca. He is aware of the bloody impact of revenge but, paradoxically, by using Caesar as his example, suggests the greatness of Hamlet (the father) and the necessity for revenge against Claudius as an act of loyalty. His reference, however, follows a discussion about Fortinbras, the son of the Fortinbras who was vanquished by the previous King. Young Fortinbras now seeks to avenge his father by claiming restitution of his land. The very ghost who pushes his own son, Hamlet, towards revenge has provoked another young man's revenge. Fortinbras's retaliation against Denmark stands in stark contrast to Hamlet, who usually thinks before he acts. There is a consciousness of opposing attitudes to revenge in the varying responses of the sons to the deaths of their fathers. References to Roman times further draw attention to the way revenge is enacted. Polonius in the days of his youth played the role of Julius Caesar, who was killed by Brutus, and in reality Polonius is killed by Hamlet; Hamlet, conscious of Roman history, desires not to be a Nero in his treatment of his mother ("Let me be cruel but not unnatural") but his death from a poisoned foil is reminiscent of Nero's "unnatural" predilection for poison. The past acts as a lesson to Hamlet, reminding us of the bloody consequences of revenge.

Critics are discussed but only insofar as they support the argument

The conflict in the play is centred in the character of Hamlet who, by wavering in making a decision about his loyalty to his father, raises questions of Christian morality, but on this point even nineteenth century critics are divided. For Herman Ulrici the Christian excuse was a strong factor. Coleridge felt that Hamlet's "great enormous intellectual activity" justified his inaction but Nietzsche contended that "Hamlet speaks more superficially than he acts". Hamlet's conflict is demonstrated outwardly in his dress, his mad musings, his apparent indecision, and yet this masks a Hamlet who is capable of action, sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths and manipulating the players in the Mousetrap scene to set a trap that will allow him to "catch the conscience of the king". Despite his ghostly father's insistence, Hamlet shows a calm and organised mind in advising the players. In some ways this suggests a distrust of the ghost or, like a true Renaissance man, a need to verify the accusation.

Introduction to other characters to set up a contrast with Hamlet

In contrast to Hamlet, Fortinbras and Laertes are clear about their allegiances. Fortinbras readies himself to take over his father's kingdom and Laertes seeks revenge for his father's death, egged on further by Claudius. A comparison between Laertes and Hamlet is drawn by Claudius, who reminds Laertes of his duty:

Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like a painting of a sorrow
A face without a heart?

Ironically, it is Claudius, saved by Hamlet's lack of vengeful action, who says to Laertes, "Revenge should have no bounds". When critic Lionel Charles Knights describes the world of Denmark as "evil" and talks about the "logic of corruption", he could be directly referring to these statements of Claudius, who twists the concept of honour to suit his needs. The final act of retribution comes from Hamlet, who gives his "dying voice" in support of Fortinbras. The new King Fortinbras instructs:

Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal.

In so saying, Fortinbras acknowledges a new type of kingship, one that thinks and forms judgement carefully rather than being violent and impetuous.

Conclusion ties back to the introduction

Ultimately it is thinking that is valued. The character Hamlet shows that duty is not just to others but to oneself and to one's ideals and it is this that receives the final respect.

Working with the sample response

1. Cloze exercise using Notes from the Marking Centre.

Read the Notes from the Marking Centre below. Place the correct word from the shaded box in the right space in the Notes, so that the Notes make sense. Check your answers on the Board of Studies website.

Informed; plot; evaluations; narrow; descriptive; critics; cited; reinforce; language; over-reliance; analysis; issues; loyalty; thesis; definition; complexity; personal; skilfully; textual; integrated; sustained; reception; discriminating; personal; clarity; describing

Notes from the Marking Centre: General Comments on Module B

Stronger responses argued the extent to which their own understanding of the prescribed text reflected the view presented in the statement, using carefully selected references to support their arguments. These responses perceptively a discussion of language and structure and presented a analysis which demonstrated strong personal understanding of the text. Discerning responses used insights gleaned from how their text had been received and the context of its to strengthen the demonstration of their own understanding of the text.

Better responses were, fluent and tightly structured, revealing a strong voice as well as of expression. The notion of personal engagement was vital in addressing the question. Unfortunately, some responses relied too heavily on readings rather than developing an personal response.

Weaker responses were driven, incorporating only limited reference to the text and its forms and features. They showed little appreciation of the of the text and lacked development, reflecting a limited understanding of the demands of the question.

While literacy and expression were generally of a high standard, some responses lacked the structure and the vocabulary to advance a well structured and carefully developed response.