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Cambridge IGCSE / IGCSE (9-1) / O Level Literature in English

The aim of this video is to give you and your learners a breakdown of how Assessment Objective 2 is assessed. However, remember that for each candidate answer, all four assessment objectives are considered by the examiner. The best candidate responses will consider all four when answering a question.

Drama Assessment Objective 2:

AO2: Understand the meanings of literary texts and their contexts, and explore texts beyond surface meanings to show deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes.

Notes
Unlocking the deeper meanings in Shakespeare requires both knowledge of different contexts and an ability to connect the text with the world around it. To fully explore how to find these deeper meanings we will look at two of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. To demonstrate how the assessment objectives work together, we will use these two plays for all of the assessment objectives: AO1, AO2, AO3 and AO4.
Assessment Objective 2 requires you to **understand**, and then **explore** not one, but the *many* **contexts** and **meanings** found in Shakespeare's works. You are also required to look **beyond the surface meaning** of the text to show a **deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes.** Understanding these contexts helps us understand both the surface meaning (AO1) and develop our deeper awareness of attitudes and ideas, needed for AO2.
The **understanding of characters, relationships, situations and themes** needed to succeed in looking beyond surface meaning and demonstrating deeper awareness goes further than the knowledge of the text found in AO1. Assessment Objective 2 is essentially all about the question 'Why?' To find the answers, we need to look at two main areas of context: the context of production and the context of reception. We shall begin by looking at the context of production and what we expect from a Shakespearean tragedy.
Macbeth is a typical Shakespearean tragedy. Our knowledge of the text tells us that Macbeth and, in many ways, Lady Macbeth are tragic heroes. They both have the fatal flaw of ambition. They reach dizzying heights of power which is ripped from them by the manipulation of the witches and a series of strange, supernatural events.
However, our knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet* shows it does not conform with these common features. Neither Romeo nor Juliet are noblepersons – they are the children. They gain no power or wealth. If anything they lose power during the play. There are external pressures which lead to their downfall but they are not really created by fate, or evil spirits, or even a manipulative character.

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Romeo and Juliet's downfalls come about through love, circumstance, and youthful, passionate inexperience. So *Romeo and Juliet* does conform in all but one way with the common features of Shakespearean comedy. We have young lovers separated by their parents' 'ancient grudge'. They are separated and reunited. They are masked when they meet and their identities are 'known too late'. The nurse and Friar Lawrence are both examples of clever servants. The plot is fairly complex and there are a lot of comic scenes in the rising action. Therefore, *Romeo and Juliet* is a comedy even though it hasn't got a happy ending. This is the *context of production.* We understand Shakespeare deliberately produced the play using what most people who go to plays would understand to be features of comedy.
But why would Shakespeare use comic features for his tragedy? Here we need to think about the *context of reception*.
Shakespeare wrote more comedies than histories or tragedies, and he wrote three comedies in the same year as *Romeo and Juliet*. The fact that his comic structures are usually used to create a happy ending filled with love and reconciliation makes the audience feel like Juliet will wake up and stop Romeo drinking the poison. The fact that she wakes up *after* this moment would have been emotional and shocking to a Shakespearean audience. By understanding this *context of reception*, we understand the *context of production*.
When thinking about the audience, and this is crucial to Assessment Objective 4 (creating a sensitive and informed response), it is important to remember who the audience is. You are one audience: you are modern, you study the subject and therefore look at it critically, you are looking at the play with 'work' eyes and not with 'relaxing trip to the theatre' eyes. However, as you are not the only audience, understanding different audiences will help your response to Assessment Objective 2. The original audience would have been at the theatre for pleasure, understood every joke and political reference, and been cheering and booing. A very patriarchal audience would probably not publicly appreciate Juliet's rebellion as much as a less patriarchal one. Similarly, a very feminist audience might not appreciate *Romeo and Juliet* at all, as it mainly conforms to traditional male and female stereotypes.
Another context to consider is masculinity and femininity. Shakespeare loved to play with gender and identity.
Lady Macbeth is an excellent example of how Shakespeare manipulates gender and identity. Here we will need to apply our Assessment Objective 3 (language, form and structure) knowledge. The part of Lady Macbeth is given equal status in the structure up until Act 2 Scene 3. She has an equal share of the dialogue and is presented on equal terms with the male characters.
The audience's first encounter with Lady Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 5 instantly presents her with traditionally male characteristics, with levels of ambition and violence equal to or even greater than Macbeth. Her concern that Macbeth is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness' implies that she considers Macbeth is

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too feminine, and he lacks the brutality to do what he ‘must do’. Shakespeare’s choice to have ‘milk’ as the substance of the ‘human kindness’ Lady Macbeth spurns has connotations of motherhood, a sacredly female role. **Act 1 Scene 5** **Lady Macbeth** …….Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way:
Lady Macbeth refers to milk and motherhood again later in the scene, but this time in relation to herself. She demands the spirits ‘unsex’ her, and fill her full of ‘direst cruelty’, the opposite of the ‘milk of human kindness’ which her husband possesses. She asks that they ‘Stop up’ her reproductive system and prevent the menstrual ‘visitings of nature’ and the milk from her ‘woman’s breasts’ is to become ‘gall’ or poison. It’s worth considering how masculine Lady Macbeth really is, as she never demands to be male, just free from the restrictions of being female. As soon as Macbeth assumes the ‘man’s role’ and commits the murder, all her masculinity vanishes, and to some extent so does she. Her fainting can be seen as a very ladylike response and completely alien to the earlier bloodthirsty Lady Macbeth. Ironically, Macbeth becomes so fuelled by the masculinity and ambition she desired in him, that he has no time to even mourn her death. **Act 1 Scene 5** **Lady Macbeth** The raven himself is hoarse That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan Under my battlements. Come, you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood; Stop up the access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts, And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, To cry 'Hold, hold!'

Notes
We have looked at how understanding different contexts helps us to open up and understand the text (AO1) more deeply (AO2). It also helps us to explore Shakespeare's use of language and structure (AO3), helping us to inform a sensitive and personal response (AO4).

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