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# Introduction

## EMC Advanced Literature Series

EMC Advanced Literature Series is a resource for A Level English Literature (and elements of Language and Literature). It is designed to meet the requirements of the new AS/A2 specifications for 2000 in challenging, innovative and practical ways. Each publication includes:

- texts for study, both literary texts and extracts from literary criticism
- student activities
- teachers' notes.

Despite the shifts in emphasis implied by Assessment Objectives 4 and 5 – contextual issues and different interpretations – the text remains central. A Level students are still expected to focus primarily on the texts set for study in each module, and to:

- read closely and carefully
- get to know the text really well
- get below the surface and between the lines
- interpret and make meanings
- see patterns – big ones and small ones
- make links with other things they have read
- be alert to ways writers choose to use language.

The activities in the resource are intended to develop these critical reading skills. However, they are also intended to support teachers and students as they get to grips with the requirement to 'articulate independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers' (AO4); 'show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood' (AO5i) and 'evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences upon literary texts and study' (AO5ii).

## Teaching towards the new types of examination questions

Questions on pre-1770 drama texts from the Examining Bodies Specimen Papers, such as those in the box below, reflect the new emphases.

'The social and cultural conventions of the play [*The Taming of the Shrew*], have offended some readers. To what extent do you share this judgement?' (WJEC)

'How important are ideas about Kingship in *Edward III*? (AQA B)

'Re-read the opening soliloquy of *Faustus*. In what ways does this prepare you for the events that are to follow and at the same time take you back into the Renaissance world?' (EDEXCEL)

'What do you feel that Webster has gained by setting this play [*The Duchess of Malfi*] in Italy? Include in your answer some consideration of views of Italy current at that time.' (WJEC)

'Read the following extract ... In what way does this dialogue develop your understanding of Shylock and his role in the play? In your answer you should:

- make detailed reference to language and tone and characterisation of both Shylock and Tubal
- express your own reaction to Shylock as well as suggesting how other readers or audiences might respond to him, both here and in the rest of the play
- show some awareness of Elizabethan attitudes to the issues explored in the passage.' (OCR)

The demands made by questions such as these are very different from those of previous A Level syllabuses and consequently require a very different approach to teaching. The material in the book has been designed to help students to answer these kinds of questions.

### Using the publication

Each unit has a particular focus, whether it be introducing ideas about genre, or staging at different periods in time, or issues about culture and society in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The ideas are developed through close work on speeches or scenes from selected texts. These are followed by suggestions for applying what is learnt to other plays. Even if a speech is not from the play being studied as a set text, working on the material will provide important contextual background. For instance, by working on short extracts from *Richard II*, *Coriolanus* and *Troilus and Cressida* to explore ideas about order and disorder, students would gain an understanding of the issue in relation to many other plays. Likewise, the activity on reading from different critical positions, which focuses on speeches from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*, would be a good way of introducing students to the role critical theory can play in developing ‘independent opinions ... informed by different interpretations’.

Some of the longer ‘case studies’ will be of prime interest to students studying those particular plays. The Teachers’ Notes suggest ways in which some of the longer units could be abbreviated in order to make them appropriate and manageable for all students.

The units of work are not offered in a strict sequence, as some may be more applicable to the set text being studied than others and teachers will want to choose appropriate moments to introduce particular contextual material and ideas. However, we would suggest that the first unit, which introduces the period, should be offered before any of the others regardless of the set text being studied. Many of the following units assume some understanding of the prevailing climate in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, which is explored in this first unit.

# An introduction to the age

In this unit you will:

- gain an overview of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and the contrasts between them
- begin to think about the idea of the 'context' of literature and explore how useful and relevant it is to developing an interpretation of the play you are studying for AS or A2
- read and interpret paintings, just as one reads and interprets literary texts.

## A portrait of Elizabeth – what it can tell you about the Elizabethan Age

- In groups, look at the painting of Queen Elizabeth I on page 8. Jot down your first ideas about it.
- Share your thoughts as a class, then record agreed ideas about the painting in the first column of a chart like the one below, numbering each point made.

Portrait of Elizabeth I	Elizabethan Age	Portrait of James I	Jacobean Age

- In your group, look at the quotations you have been given about the Elizabethan Age. See whether you can match any of these statements to your points about the portrait. Use the statements to help you further develop your response to the portrait.
- The painting of Elizabeth has been described in the ways listed below. Choose at least one detail from the painting to support each description.
  - It represents the state 'reinforcing Protestantism'.
  - It represents 'majesty' and a 'potent and victorious monarch'.
  - It represents the 'feminine'.
  - It represents 'naval power' and 'the securing of English boundaries'.
  - It represents the conquering of 'the forces of evil'.
  - It represents the 'economic success' of the Elizabethan era.
  - It represents 'England's dominion of the seas' and 'plans for imperialist expansion into the New World'.
- Share your ideas as a class, then fill in the second column of the chart with adjectives and phrases that seem to you to sum up key aspects of the Elizabethan Age.

## A portrait of James I – what it can tell you about the Jacobean Period

- Look at the portrait of James I on page 11 and, in your group, jot down your first ideas about it. Share these as a class and fill in column 3 of the chart.
- Now read the second set of quotations you have been given, this time about the Jacobean period. Try to match your quotations to the points you made about the portrait of James I. Use the statements to help you further develop your response to the portrait.
- The painting of James I has been described in the ways summarized on page 7. Choose at least one detail from the painting to support each description.

- It represents the gloom created by ‘the evaporation’ of Britain’s ‘greatness’.
  - It represents the ‘legitimacy of his succession’.
  - It shows him both ‘ill at ease and ill’.
- As a whole class use what you have learnt about the Jacobean period to fill in the last column on the chart.

### Elizabethan and Jacobean plays

The preoccupations and mood of an age are often reflected in the literature of the times. This is very true of the plays of this period.

- Look at this list of features of plays from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. For each feature, talk about whether it is most likely to be a feature of Elizabethan or Jacobean drama, or both. Be prepared to explain your thinking.
- Comedy as an important genre
  - Tragedy as an important genre
  - Poisonings
  - Intrigue
  - Violence
  - Women disguised as men in tragic situations
  - Women gender-swapping in comic situations
  - Women involved in dangerous intrigue
  - Women resolving intrigues, or potentially tragic situations
  - Love, happiness and praise of human virtues
  - Fear, hatred, anger and a low opinion of humanity
  - Idyllic, rural or make-believe settings.
  - Metropolitan settings

### Thinking about the play you are studying

- Think about what you have learnt about the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, in relation to the play you are studying. You will need to decide:
  - which aspects of the paintings relate to your play and in what ways
  - which descriptions of the age relate to your play and in what ways
  - which features of plays, if any, are displayed in your play and in what ways (for example, through language, themes, mood, what characters say).

You should bear in mind the following points:

- although written during the Elizabethan or Jacobean period, the play you are studying may not be *set* in that period
- that Shakespeare wrote plays in both periods. Can you begin to speculate about whether the play you are studying is an early or a late play? What makes you think this?

### A false comparison?

One danger of studying the past is that of applying twentieth century thinking uncritically. This can result in misunderstandings and over-simplifications. One critic has stated that, ‘The simplified approach to literature as social criticism has produced many false antitheses between Elizabethan optimism and Jacobean pessimism’. There are two further points to be aware of:

- the attitudes and beliefs of individual writers affect the way they present the issues of their age so Webster, Shakespeare and Marlowe all had their own individual perspective on their world
  - the attitudes and beliefs of each critic or member of an audience affect their interpretation. Shakespeare has been presented by some people as *reflecting* the concerns and attitudes of his age and by others as a radical who *challenged* these attitudes.
- As a class talk briefly about these problems and issues in interpreting texts from the past:
    - how easy is it to see whether a playwright’s view of their times is typical of the period
    - how helpful have you found it to think about the mood of the age as a way of understanding the play you are studying?

# Introducing contexts

## ‘What a piece of work is man’

In this unit you will:

- learn about some of the key contexts of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama
- take further your understanding of how contextual information affects reading and interpretation
- focus on an extract from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which can itself provide a context for thinking about any other play from that period.

### First reading

- Individually, read the speech from *Hamlet* on page 22, underlining any words or phrases which you don’t understand.

### Preparing a performance of the speech

- In pairs, explore the speech in the ways listed below.
  - In pairs, break the speech down into three or four sections, by marking in any breaks or changes of thought. Use the punctuation to help you.
  - Make an initial decision about the dominant mood or tone in each section. Are there any changes, for example from factual to bitter?
  - Thinking as an actor, decide upon the things you would like to know in order to be able to interpret it properly. Annotate the text with any questions which you would like answering. They could be as simple as ‘Who is Hamlet talking to here?’.
  - As a class, share your questions. What *kinds* of information might help you to answer these questions?

### Using contexts

On pages 16-21, there are five ‘contexts’ for the speech.

- Working in pairs or small groups, focus on one of these contexts and use it to interpret the speech more fully, selecting information that you find interesting or helpful.
- Choose the three pieces of information that you found most helpful or which gave you the most new insights into the speech and prepare to report back on them to the whole class.

### Discussion – context and interpretation

- As a whole class, talk about the speech in the light of all the contextual information you have been given.
- Consider how the contexts have altered your interpretation of the speech. What does each one contribute? Is there one contextual area (for example, language or plot) which seems more valid or useful than the rest?
- As a class, decide which five pieces of contextual information have been most useful in helping you to interpret the speech.

## Performance interpretations

- Now that you know more about the speech, return to the process of preparing it for performance, thinking about how you might convey your interpretation through your performance. You should consider the points suggested here.
  - Intonation (Should the voice be raised or lowered at particular moments? How might this influence the audience's interpretation of the speech?)
  - Intention (What adverbs could you attach to different sections of the speech, for example 'sincerely', 'ironically', 'thoughtfully', 'dramatically' or 'sadly'?)
  - Pace (When should you pause for effect, slow down or speed up, and why?)
  - Movement (Should the speech be performed walking, sitting, standing or using a combination of all three?)
  - Interaction (Given that there are two other characters on stage apart from Hamlet, should the speech be acted internally, as though Hamlet is thinking aloud as in a soliloquy, or externally, to either the other characters or the audience?)
- Perform the speech, preferably on your feet in a space, using the other group members as either a support, audience members, or listening characters. Talk about which version works best, and which contexts you now consider to be most useful in interpreting this speech.

## Applying what you have learnt to the play you are studying

- Think about the insights this activity has given you:
  - into the period
  - into the way that contextual information can contribute to interpretation.
- You could go on to apply what you have learnt to the play you are studying. What fresh insights does it give you?

# ‘What a piece of work is man’

## Context 1 – plot and genre

### The plot of *Hamlet*

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, and successor to the throne. In the play he discovers from his father’s ghost that his father was murdered by his uncle, Claudius. Claudius married Hamlet’s mother, just after his father’s death, and is now king. Hamlet should therefore avenge his father’s murder and kill Claudius. In a typical revenge tragedy of this period, it would take some time for the revenge to happen, (otherwise the drama would be over too quickly), but there would be no agonising over whether this was the right thing to do. Hamlet, however, delays for an unusual length of time, in a state of turmoil and confusion about whether to take revenge, kill himself or do nothing. He churns over his own position in the court and life in general.

At this point in the play, early in Act II, Hamlet has been spied on by the councillor of State, Polonius, and has just discovered that Claudius has sent his two old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (now on stage with him), to spy on him as well. He is tormented by his doubts and anxieties and appears to many in the court to have gone mad. Just how mad he really is, is unclear and has been the subject of much discussion among critics; it has encouraged directors to develop very different interpretations of the play.

### Revenge tragedies

The features of typical revenge tragedies of the period are as follows:

- the main action springs from private revenge in the name of family honour
- lots of violent and bloody acts
- intrigue and complex plotting
- characters of noble birth
- a melancholy hero who needs to take revenge but hesitates
- a villain, whom the hero needs to kill
- a suffering heroine
- a play within a play
- a ghost, often of a murdered person, calling for revenge
- madness, real and feigned
- sexual intrigue and lust
- sensationalism and excitement, including physical horror, such as torture or poisoning
- the action ends violently with several deaths.

### Francis Bacon on revenge (1625)

Public revenges are for the most part fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

# 'What a piece of work is man'

## Context 2 – Elizabethan character and personality types

Critics are divided as to whether Hamlet pretends to be mad in this play, as he says, or whether he really is mad. Some interpret his mood as a kind of 'melancholia', or depression.

### The Melancholy character

Elizabethans thought that everything was made up of four 'elements': Air, Water, Earth and Fire. In the human body there were four liquids, the 'humours' which corresponded to these elements and affected a person's behaviour. People's personalities were blamed on their 'humour'. This chart shows the relationships between the humours and the elements.

Fire	Choler (yellow bile)	hot and dry	Choleric (angry, violent)
Air	Blood	hot and moist	Sanguine (happy, loving)
Water	Phlegm	cold and moist	Phlegmatic (slow, calm)
Earth	Melancholy (black bile)	cold and dry	Melancholic (sad)

According to Renaissance psychology, anatomy, and physiology the attraction of humours towards the heart, as a result of excessive emotions, subjected it to a physical strain. The sigh of the melancholy man literally eased his heart.

**B.L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting*, 1951**

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
 Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbraced,  
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,  
 Ungartered, and down-gyvèd to his ankle,  
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,  
 And with a look so piteous in purport  
 As if he had been loosed out of hell  
 To speak of horrors – he comes before me.

**Ophelia, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 1, lines 77-84**

### Malcontents

As mouthpieces for [their] satiric concern, the dramatists use the character type known as the malcontent. Often, ... a graduate embittered by his inability to find suitable employment in a highly stratified society, the malcontent is a man divided within himself. On the one hand he is a blunt moralist, ruthlessly exposing the vices and follies of mankind. On the other he participates in the viciousness and self-seeking of the world he rails against.

**David Gunby, *Introduction to John Webster: Three Plays*, 1972**

the embodiment of the 'new tragic hero'

**D.J. Palmer**

### Machiavels

[*The Prince* was a highly influential and controversial political treatise written in 1520 by the Italian, Nicolò Machivelli.]

... *The Prince* lays it down as a major premise that men in general are selfish, treacherous, cowardly, greedy, and above all, gullible and stupid. It therefore advises a prince, and particularly a new prince who hopes to destroy the liberties of those he rules, to employ hypocrisy, cruelty, and deceit, to make himself feared even at the risk of making himself hated, to divide the people and destroy their natural leaders, and to keep faith with no-one, since no one will keep faith with him ... there is no reality but power, and power is the reward of ruthlessness, ferocity, and cunning.

**J.H. Plumb, *The Penguin Book of The Renaissance* , 1961**



Albrecht Dürer's engraving of 'Melancholia', 1514

## ‘What a piece of work is man’

### Context 3 – The Renaissance

The Renaissance began in Italy in the fourteenth century and spread throughout Europe. It was a period of great change and energy, fuelled by a revival of interest in, and admiration for the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. New forms of art, architecture, music and literature blossomed. Existing beliefs were questioned and nothing was taken for granted. This led to exciting philosophical debate in all spheres of life which is reflected in plays of the time.

The Renaissance was based upon a new belief in the dignity of man. Man was no longer limited by his birth as he was during the Middle Ages; now he was envisioned as a being capable of transformation through acts of his own will, a demigod to whom all things were possible ... men were taught to cultivate learning, connoisseurship, and the social graces, not as ends in themselves, but in order to enable them to act – and, above all, fight – more effectively.

**Lacey Baldwin Smith, *The Horizon Book of the Elizabethan World* , 1967**

### Renaissance man

A kind of ideal of mankind. This term is still used today about people who seem to excel in a wide range of fields. Hamlet is sometimes seen by critics as a ‘Renaissance man’, and this comes out in Ophelia’s speech about him, in which she describes him as he used to be before being overtaken by the tragic events in the play.

O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!  
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,  
Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite down!

**Ophelia, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1, lines 151-155**



*Sir Francis Drake* by an unknown artist, 1580, © National Portrait Gallery



*Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester* by an unknown artist, 1575, © National Portrait Gallery