A problem play?

Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare

Task one

‘De tragoedia et comoedia’ were fourth century essays by Donatus and Evanthius, reworking ideas from their predecessor Aristotle, about what a tragedy and a comedy play should be like. These essays were used in Renaissance schools and universities and were well known at the time Shakespeare was writing. Below is a summary of their ideas:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Comedy</th>
<th>Tragedy</th>
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<td>• Plot should be based on fiction</td>
<td>• Plot should be based on history</td>
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<td>• Characters should be middling men</td>
<td>• They should concern men of rank and address serious issues</td>
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<td>• They should contain small perils and happy endings</td>
<td>• The end should be unhappy</td>
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<td>• They should start with a situation of turmoil but end in harmony</td>
<td>• They should start with a situation of prosperity but show a process of downfall</td>
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<td>• Often contained lots of disguises and deceptions</td>
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1. Consider the plot and characters of Measure for Measure. What aspects of comedy and tragedy can you see within it?
2. Now think about other Shakespeare plays you have studied. Do these fit the descriptions of either tragedy or comedy better than Measure for Measure?

Task two

Three plays: Measure for Measure, All’s Well that Ends Well and Troilus and Cressida are often called Shakespeare’s ‘problem plays’ because they don’t seem to fit easily into the categories of either comedy or tragedy. Read the following description and then answer the questions below:

Problem plays ‘share a grittiness not apparent in Shakespeare’s earlier comedy, addressing deep-rooted perversions in both individuals and societies resistant to the magico-metamorphic strategies that heretofore had produced satisfying comic conclusions. The harsh imperatives of class division and rampant sexual appetite involved by these experimental plays push uneasily against the fairy-tale devices that move their plots forward and supposedly resolve them.’

From ‘The genres of Shakespeare’s Plays’ by Susan Snyder

1. What ‘grittiness’ can you see in Measure for Measure?
2. What ‘perversions in … individuals and societies’ are discussed in the play?
3. Can you think of any ‘fairy-tale devices’ which help create the plot of Measure for Measure? (it may be helpful to think of any situations which you think are not believable)
4. In what sense does the ending of Measure for Measure only ‘supposedly’ resolve the issues it discusses?
5. How does the quotation above help your understanding of the play?
Task three

Problem plays can also be considered as tragi-comedies or black comedies. Read the following description and answer the questions below:

‘In tragi-comedy Shakespeare and his close contemporaries often present characters as spiritually transformed by some intense crisis brought about by melodramatic abrupt turns of plot: sudden disclosures of concealed identity, or of survival of persons supposed dead, or evil schemes averted in the nick of time. Tragi-comedy stresses the peaks and troughs of the emotional trajectory proper to romance; it experiments by accelerating the development of experience proper to tragedy and reversing its thrust to exert a maximum of stress on the persons in the play and on its significance.’

From Measure for Measure edited by Brian Gibbons, Cambridge University Press, 1991

1. In what senses are characters ‘spiritually transformed’ in Measure for Measure?
2. What examples of ‘abrupt turns of plot’ can you think of in the play?
3. What ‘peaks and troughs of emotional experience’ can you identify in the play?
4. In what ways do characters develop through their experience in Measure for Measure?
5. How does the quotation above help your understanding of the play?
Teaching notes

These activities focus particularly on improving students’ abilities in:

**AO3:** Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

**AO4:** Explore connections across literary texts.

**AO5:** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

1. Task one would lead easily into a close analysis of the differing characters in the play: Pompey/Lucio/Madame Overdone and The Duke/Isabella/Angelo. Students could start by considering Act 2 Scene 1, focusing on how Angelo’s initial serious proclamations in the scene: ‘We must not make a scarecrow of the law ... and let it keep one shape till custom make it / (the birds) perch and not their terror’ (line 1) and ‘Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus/Another thing to fall,’ are played out in the later part of the scene. A starting point would be the discussion between Pompey and Escalus from line 180.

2. *The English Review* published an article called ‘How Liberty plucks Justice by the nose’ in *Measure for Measure* by Patsy Hall, which discusses the use of comedy in the play especially relating to Lucio. This essay could be used as a starting point for students considering this aspect of the play. Some sections are printed below with ideas of how to approach them:

   a. ‘Lucio offers a decadent spectacle of degeneracy. He’s a libertine, a braggart, a liar whose associates are the inhabitants of brothels and whose appetites are fed by Pompey and Mistress Overdone. He can be very funny, even sad; pleasant and mean by turns. He epitomises irresponsibility and as such is the exact antithesis of Angelo. By the end of the play they share the same fate.’

   There are many different points about Lucio in the above quote. Students could be directed to short sections of the play to find evidence for each of them. Sections could include Act 1 Scene 2 (123 - 181); Act 1 Scene 4 (16-83); Act 3 Scene 2 (42-74); Act 3 Scene 2 (82-178); Act 4 Scene 3 (149-157); Act 5 Scene 1 (324-353).

   b. ‘Given the debauched nature of his character, it’s inevitable that Lucio is associated with the lower orders but, because he’s also part of Claudio’s world, he becomes important in the main events as a messenger, a commentator and a catalyst.’

   Look at Act 2 Scene 2 (43-7). How much is Lucio responsible for the continuation of the plot in the play? Imagine if this speech wasn’t there. What would change in the play?

   c. ‘Lucio, like the licensed fools elsewhere in Shakespeare’s plays, has the franchise to make [serious points]’

   Consider the above quote in relation to Act 3 Scene 2 and his conversation with the Duke. For candidates taking the OCR specification, this quote could easily be turned into a practice exam question.
3. There is a lot of sexual innuendo and many sexual jokes in the play. Students could use the notes on their texts to help them identify these and consider why there are so many. A starting point could be Act 1 Scene 2 with its discussion between Lucio, the Gentleman, Overdone and Pompey. In what sense do these jokes help to present the issues of sexual morality and sexual judgement in the play? Why did Shakespeare always include sections of slapstick and humour in his plays?

4. Students could research and present their findings on the texts considered to have influenced Shakespeare when writing Measure for Measure, and consider the connections between the texts: G.B Giraldi Cinthio’s Hecatommithi; Whetstone’s Promos and Cassandra; Middleton’s The Phoenix and Marston’s The Malcontent.

5. According to E. Schanzer in Shakespeare’s Problem Plays, a problem play is ‘A play in which we find ourselves concerned with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible and even probable.’

More able students could brainstorm any moral problems which the play considers. Weaker students might benefit from being given some to consider e.g. how much of a role should forgiveness play in justice? Should leaders be judged in the same way as ordinary citizens? What should a sister be prepared do to help her brother? etc. Then students should divide into groups each considering one of the moral issues and the divided responses which might be possible. Weaker students could use the Teachit English resource ‘Indecent proposal’ to help them consider the moral question about a sister’s role.

6. Using this extended list of characteristics of tragedy and comedy, students could carefully position Measure of Measure by considering which apply to it

7. Watch the Goodman Theatre’s ‘Behind the Scenes’ video www.youtube.com/watch?v=alMapfVRthc. Students should consider how the modern 1970s New York setting works to highlight the ‘problem play’ aspect. Where and when would they stage the play?

NB Text references relate to the Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury (2013) edition.