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HERMIA

WHO IS HERMIA?

- Hermia is Egeus's daughter.
- She is threatened with death or imprisonment in a convent unless she marries her father's choice of husband, Demetrius.
- Instead she elopes with her preferred suitor, Lysander.

HERMIA'S APPEARANCE

Hermia is the darker and shorter of the two young women. 'Who will not change a raven for a dove?' asks Lysander (II.2.120), contrasting her complexion and hair colour with Helena's. Later he calls Hermia an 'Ethiophe' and a 'tawny Tartar' (III.2.257 and 263), a 'dwarf', a 'bead' and an 'acorn' (III.2.328–30). Dark hair and skin were considered unfashionable in this period, but before the magic juice distorts their reactions both men still perceive Hermia as highly attractive.

CONTEXT

A02

The lovers use the standard language of Elizabethan love poetry, featuring exaggerated comparisons of the beloved to objects in nature, mythology and religion, except when they quarrel and drop into a lower register of abusiveness. These sudden shifts from compliments to insults are so extreme and ridiculous that they guarantee laughter from the audience.

STUDY FOCUS: HERMIA'S PERSONALITY

A02

It may be her unfashionable appearance that has encouraged Hermia to be self-assertive, or perhaps she just takes after her father Egeus, who does not seem bashful in expressing his opinions. In the first scene she is prepared to defy not only her father but Duke Theseus. Although she inserts the maidenly disclaimer, 'I know not by what power I am made bold' (I.1.59), she has plenty of reserves of courage left shortly afterwards to agree to elope with Lysander. On her arrival in the forest, she firmly insists that Lysander sleeps separately from her. When she thinks Demetrius may have killed Lysander she becomes highly aggressive ('Out, dog! Out, cur!', III.2.65) and when she thinks that Helena has stolen Lysander's love she threatens her with violence ('my nails can reach unto thine eyes', III.2.298). She is rather mercurial (active and changeable) in temperament, and her name appropriately enough seems to derive from that of Hermes, the ever-moving messenger of the Greek gods, known to the Romans as Mercury.

KEY QUOTATION: HERMIA

A01

Hermia says she would rather suffer punishment than marry Demetrius to 'whose unwished yoke / My soul consents not to give sovereignty' (I.1.81–2).

Possible interpretations:

- Hermia has too much self-respect to marry a man chosen for her by her father and is not afraid to say so.
- She feels she is being treated like an animal, yoked to a plough without choice.
- She wants to marry Lysander whom she loves.

Other useful quotations:

Helena's assessment of her: 'though she be but little, she is fierce' (III.2.325).

Hermia's confusion at the end of the night: 'Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double' (IV.1.186–7).

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

A03

Hermia seems a resilient character, but Norman Holland argues that her dream of being attacked by a snake while Lysander watches (II.2.151–62) shows her inner vulnerability. The snake is a **symbol** of loveless desire, triggering a fear of betrayal in us all. Do you agree that her nightmare adds emotional depth to the play?

HELENA

WHO IS HELENA?

- Helena has been rejected by Demetrius, but she still loves him.
- She continues to pursue Demetrius, even to the extent of letting herself be humiliated.
- By the time that the magic juice causes both Demetrius and Lysander to reject Hermia and fall in love with Helena, she has lost so much self-esteem that she does not believe it when they tell her how attractive she is.

HELENA THE VICTIM

Helena's name means Light, fittingly as she is fair in colouring, as well as tall. She seems at first to be confident of her own attractiveness ('Through Athens I am thought as fair as she', I.1.227), but having been rejected by Demetrius before the play begins, she has less self-esteem than Hermia and is comparatively timid. Her betrayal of the elopement plans to Demetrius, her undignified pursuit of him to the wood, her inability to credit that Demetrius and Lysander have fallen in love with her, and finally her lengthy appeal to Hermia to respect their childhood friendship, culminating in a call for 'pity' and an absurd forecast of her own 'death' (III.2.235 and 244), are all the actions of someone who has come to see herself as a victim. Her final lines express wonderment that she has been reunited with Demetrius, coupled with a lingering uncertainty. After all that she has been through, part of her feels he is still 'not mine own' (IV.1.189).

STUDY FOCUS: SILENT WOMEN

A02

There are several interesting moments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* brought about by what is not said. The silences force us to read between the lines in order to get at the characters' possible reactions. In Act I Scene 1, Hippolyta makes no comment on the forced marriage with which Hermia is threatened. The actors and the audience, or the readers of the play, have to put themselves in her place and imagine how she might feel. Similarly, Helena and Hermia are on stage for most of Act V, but neither of them speaks. We do not know how they act towards their husbands or their elders or how they respond to the performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. Some critics have speculated that they are still in shock at their treatment in the wood, but it may simply be that they are no longer so significant to the story once they are married and that it would not be proper for young wives to join in the banter over the play.

KEY QUOTATION: HELENA

A01

'Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave, / Unworthy as I am, to follow you' (II.1.205–7).

Possible interpretations:

- Helena will endure any treatment from Demetrius, so long as he notices her.
- Helena may even be getting some kind of pleasure out of her humiliation.
- Helena is someone who likes to exaggerate her feelings for effect.

Other useful quotations:

Demetrius started the relationship: he 'made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena' (I.1.107).

Demetrius reappraises her under the spell: 'O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!' (III.2.137).

Helena admits her own folly: 'You see how simple and how fond I am' (III.2.317).



CONTEXT

A04

We feel sorry for Helena, but her self-pity is also a source of comedy. In a production directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1990, Emma Thompson as Helena swooned melodramatically in Act III Scene 2 when she spoke of escaping further misery through her death, then suddenly jerked backed upright with a second thought and added 'or absence' (line 244).

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

FIVE KEY AREAS

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ANSWER / ESSAY

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follows up with evidence or a detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't always be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references, which help the essay flow.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to say that adds a further dimension.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Oberon) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as the puck). Or, they write about one aspect from the question (for example, 'comic action') but ignore another (such as 'serious themes'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here's an example of an opening paragraph that gets straight to the point, addressing the question: **'Bottom may be foolish, but he is also the hero of the play.'** **How do you respond to this viewpoint?**

Bottom's foolishness cannot be denied. The puck quickly recognises him to be 'the shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort' and some of the most entertaining moments of the play depend on his shameless, boastful antics. Yet he also has contrastingly heroic qualities of enthusiasm, self-belief and openness to experience which we have to admire.

Immediate focus on task and key words and example from text

2. USE OF TITLES, NAMES, ETC.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, name of authors and so on. Present them correctly, too, with double quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'In Scene 1 of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" ...'
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the terms 'play' or 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. EFFECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant
- Not too long
- Integrated into your argument/sentence.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here is an example of a quotation successfully embedded in a sentence:

Coming after the lovers' confusion, Bottom's homely comment that 'reason and love keep little company together' shows his underlying common sense.

Remember – quotations can be a well-selected set of three or four single words or phrases. These can be easily embedded into a sentence to build a picture or explanation around your point. Or, they can be longer quotations that are explored and picked apart.

4. TECHNIQUES AND TERMINOLOGY

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions or people (for example, **dramatic irony** or 'Apuleius') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly.

5. GENERAL WRITING SKILLS

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (*Egeus's attitude is cruel and villainous*), but analyse closely, with clear evidence and textual detail.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Note the professional approach in this example:

Egeus is a stock character of comedy, the self-righteous father determined to thwart his daughter in her choice of a husband. Although he threatens to have Hermia executed, the nagging tone and exaggerated complaints which accompany his threat imply that Egeus is merely blustering. The power of execution is in the hands of Theseus, a far more sensible figure, and from this we can infer that, despite Egeus's bullying, Hermia is unlikely to perish.

GRADE BOOSTER

A02

It is important to remember that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright, but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.