

What an essay should do...

- Show knowledge of the text
- Answer the question

2016 Higher Past Paper; Drama Section.

3. Choose a play which explores an important issue or issues within society.

Briefly explain the nature of the issue(s) and discuss how the dramatist's presentation of the issue(s) contributed to your appreciation of the play as a whole

- Richard II by William Shakespeare explores a very important issue in society - namely that of insurrection; of leading an uprising that overthrows the established order. In Shakespeare's play this is seen in the character of Bolingbroke rebels against the established and corrupt rule of King Richard. In doing so Shakespeare asks many questions; **what makes a poor king**, what duties do kings have, **and importantly what happens when you overthrow even a corrupt ruler?** *This contributes to my appreciation of the play as raises a timeless issue, one that can be seen as clearly as it was when Shakespeare wrote his 'history', or later in the great revolutions of France and Russia, or today as protest movements such as 'Brexit' or supporters of Jeremy Corbin take power.*

- First it is worth pausing to discuss the **ambiguity** in the character of **Bolingbroke**. It is possible to present the play where Bolingbroke always wanted the crown and targeted that from the first scene where he makes pointed note of his '*high bloods royalty*'. But it is **equally valid** to suggest that Bolingbroke never intended to become the king, in fact while he was forcefully arguing to have his titles returned, he found himself at the head of a popular rebellion against a king who had grown out of touch and corrupted in peoples eyes, this rebellion then set him - without his desire - on the throne. **This second reading seems to be the one taken in the BBC production 'The Hollow Crown'**, and it is the one I will follow in this essay to fully explain why the play highlights the problems of campaigning as a change - using hatred of the current system as the definition of your argument.

- So, the play opens and Shakespeare establishes that Richard II is a poor king.

Richard is introduced centre stage, in full pomp and ceremony - he is holding the orb and scepter, he is on the throne and wearing the crown, and he is fulfilling one of the monarchs most important roles - dispensing justice to his nobility. Only the audience can clearly see he is not just. Bolingbroke and Mowbray are arguing over the death of Woodstock (Richard's uncle who he probably had Mowbray kill) and it is clear Richard favours Mowbray - "*so much as a thought of ill in him*" and is condescending and sarcastic toward Bolingbroke; a retort to Bolingbroke's accusations is the sneering '*how high a pitch his resolution soars!*' Richard is negligent in his role as justice keeper preferring to make witty epigrams, such as '*Forget, forgive; conclude and be agreed; Our doctors say this is no month to bleed*'. Richard is unable to make these '*leopards tame*' and is forced to set a date for their duel. This he then interrupts as they are about to fight and chooses, in what seems a rather petulant and childish move, to banish them both.

- Richard is really seen to be a *'most degenerate king'* when in Act 2 Sc1 he rejects Gaunt's dying advice and chooses to seize Gaunt's possessions to fund his own Irish wars. Doing this, as he is warned by York, is to *"take Hereford's [Bolingbroke's] rights away, and take from Time His charters and his customary rights,"* basically disrupting the natural order of inheritance that Richard's own authority relies upon - it was this natural order that passed him the crown. **Richard's rule is further made detestable** as he refers to the common people as *'slaves'* he chooses to *'farm his royal realm'* (not tend it like a good gardener) and two of his sycophants (Bushy and Green, who have grown rich under Richard's reign) accuse the common people of not loving Richard only their money. The irony of two very rich men accusing the commons (who's taxes provide their riches) was not lost on Shakespeare's audience - or a modern one who read of how bankers still collect bonuses while harsh austerity is imposed on those who bailed them out.

- In the play Richard is clearly a poor king who has neglected his kingly duties (*'farming'* this *'blessed plot'*, not carefully gardening it). After Gaunt's death, when Bolingbroke chooses to press his right to re-claim his inheritance he finds himself on a rising tide of dissatisfaction with Richard. Indeed it is Northumberland, not Bolingbroke, who first talks of overthrowing Richard, of removing the *'slavish yoke'* and *'redeeming from the brooking pawn the blemish'd crown'*. Bolingbroke claims later to York (acting as regent of England while Richard is in Ireland) he is only looking for his *'inheritance of free decent'*. He is angry, as is most of England, and this leads him to violent and dangerous statements - such as when he condemns Bushy and Green to death - they were the chief profitters from his lands removal. Maybe he thinks, like it is suggested of many of the Brexit side in the referendum, that he could dispense with normal conventions of debate (perhaps even with the truth) as he never expected to have real power. This could also explain Bolingbroke's most violent piece of rhetoric - when at Flint Castle he claims *"I'll use the advantage of my power / And lay the summer's dust with showers of blood / Rain'd from the wounds of slaughter'd Englishmen"*. Here Bolingbroke is still claiming he wants his titles restored and banishment repealed, but his violent imagery, or Northumberland's dangerous presence, or the fact that Bolingbroke's troops try to attack the king (they are only held back by Northumberland's *"The king of heaven forbid our lord the king Should so with civil and uncivil arms Be rush'd upon!"*) convince Richard to hand over the crown.

- This may have become Bolingbroke's intention or it may have been an accident of pressing his case too strongly and stirring up too much anger (could Bolingbroke be a Donald Trump like figure who ran a campaign to attack and humiliate those he did not like but ends up achieving a position he never wanted and perhaps is unsuitable for?) He has achieved his insurrection and **now must deal with the consequences.**

- The next act begins with Bolingbroke attempting to hold court. He has not been crowned but is the king in waiting (the king-elect if we continue the Trump analogy). All is not well, **having just set out a path showing how to rise up and overthrow a ruler many others seem to be trying the same.** His nobles sense that order is poor and are constantly challenging each other - to the point where Amerle runs out of gages to throw down! Bolingbroke is overshadowed at the handing over of the crown by Richard who is able to use the ceremony to draw a harsh contrast between himself (usually dressed in white robes, at his most Christ like) and Bolingbroke. Richard makes clear this is not a natural handing over of power as he teases Bolingbroke to make physical his claim - *'here cousin, seize the crown.'* He also compares the insurrectionists to Judas. Beginning with these questions over his legitimacy will trouble Bolingbroke, and in act five he will have to put down a plot against him. **In this act we also see that having rode a wave of popular anger to the throne Bolingbroke has trouble controlling it.** Northumberland, who has always been more aggressive towards Richard demands he read out a *'list of crimes'*. It seems that Northumberland is not content with taking power but now feels he must use it to punish the old regime. Although these events were written well before it, and set hundreds of years before then, there is a chilling echo of the French revolutions guillotine, or the execution of the Czar's family in Northumberland's actions. Bolingbroke (now Henry IV) seems to see that they may go too far and says: *'Urge it no more'* making one of his first acts as king to plead to his nobles and showing that by gaining power by challenging the old king he has weakened the role of king in other's eyes.

- The final act then seems fated. Bolingbroke, who we took in act one as the hero who would wipe away the corruption and misrule of Richard and his flatter's is stuck in a position where his power is questioned, he himself stands as an example of how rebellion against an unjust king an acceptable thing to do (his reign proves that to the nation!) if he is to remain in power let alone be an effective ruler he must do something. Amazingly Shakespeare foreshadows what will happen in both the French and Russian revolutions - the new regime must put on a show of strength to cement it's power. Thus Bolingbroke pardon's his cousin Aumelre for plotting against him but makes an example of the other plotters by having them all beheaded. Although he states he did not order it "*I hate the murderer, love him murdered,*" he admits he is in a better position with Richard now dead.

- *This is Shakespeare's final warning to those who seek to overthrow the established order - what will you have to do after? What will you have to do with their power?* It is almost too much for the new king Henry, who claims he will: *"make a voyage to the Holy Land, To wash this blood off from my guilty hand."* But serves as a warning to us; as we live in a time when anger against a ruling super rich elite (either the Eurocrates or the 1%) is reaching fever pitch and elections are giving power to anyone who runs against them - perhaps even those like Bolingbroke who began by just wanting to register as a protest. What happens when they have to take power, when the vacuum they create requires to be filled, what will those who fill it do?

- 1. Knowledge of the play:
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- *Careful choice of what part of the play to 'zero in on'. Shows a knowledge of the whole text, but confidently picks out the sections applying to the line of thought - i.e. those concerning Richard's poor rule and then the problems faced by Bolingbroke. Skips around the plot with confidence: deals with the ambiguity in Bolingbroke first to avoid it distracting from the rest of the essay; drops in the quote from Northumberland 'degenerate king!' to make a point without getting bogged down in explaining the context. Shows knowledge of supporting characters - Gaunt, Bushy, Green, Aumerle, Mowbray and Northumberland. Doesn't try and write extensively on sections it does not need for the question (Richard on the beach or Richard at Pomfret castle). It also discusses different interpretations of the play (naming the BBC Hollow Crown production) and elements of the staging of the play - costume props etc.*

- 2. Answers the Question:
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- *Does this with some skill. The writer outlines first the issue - a political issue that affects society. The writer chooses to split this in to two 'sub - issues' a. Poor Kingmanship and b. The Repercussions of Insurrection. The essay then selects Richard in Act one and Two as an example of poor rule, they bring in Bushy and Green to highlight how the corruption is not just personally Richard's problem but one for society. They draw parallels between the play the modern world showing knowledge of the text and a committed evaluative stance. The writer then expands on the problems Bolingbroke experiences once Richard chooses to stand down. Here they follow through what they said they would do in the introduction; and details some of the lessons of the play - how the seizure of power results in a state of disorder that then turns into a violent subjection. Finally they draw the essay together by returning to the issue as they have defined it - and suggest how it still has a great impact on the modern world.*