

Sample Paper 2 (Teacher): Hamlet and Pygmalion

*How do playwrights advance their purposes by using elements which are verbal and/or physical? Consider with respect to **at least two** plays you have studied.*

Shortly before he begins his duel with Laertes, Hamlet tells Horatio, “There’s a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.” At that moment, Hamlet seems to have surrendered his desire for revenge, submitting to God’s ability to dispense justice. Hamlet’s recognition of providential power is closely related to the play’s political affiliation. A more overtly political play, George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, replaces Providence with its opposite: an individual’s ability to plan for and achieve his or her goals. The ability of individuals to accomplish their goals in both plays is fraught with difficulties. Both playwrights dramatize these challenges by manipulating verbal and physical confrontations, and in doing so they advance the unique political purposes of their plays.

The function of verbal disputes in Hamlet and Pygmalion differs significantly. In Hamlet, the audience most often sees disputes between characters who have radically different amounts of power. For an example of this imbalance, one might point to Hamlet’s diatribe against Ophelia in his “Get thee to a nunnery” speech. In this interchange, Hamlet speaks most of the time and Ophelia only responds weakly to his accusations. Her reflection on his behavior only comes after he has exited the stage. Again, Hamlet controls the dialogue when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, asking them dozens of questions about their presence in Denmark to which they can hardly respond. A possible exception to this pattern of dominance is in the closet scene, for Gertrude protests with more vehemence against Hamlet’s behavior. By the end of the scene, however, she at least verbally acquiesces to his demands.

Pygmalion, in contrast, shows a greater balance in its portrayal of verbal disputes. Although Higgins might bluster and swagger, Mrs. Pearce in Act II is able to protest effectively against him. Shaw reveals their relatively equal footing by having Mrs. Pearce influence Higgin’s physical movements—ordering him to drop Eliza’s hat, pressuring him to move to and from the hearthrug—while dividing their lines fairly equally. Most significantly, of course, Eliza in Act V is able to hold her own in long speeches against Higgins. “Aha!” she exclaims at one point, emphasizing her own power, “now I know how to deal with you!” Thus, while it is true that Higgins is a domineering and arrogant character, he is less successful at controlling conversation than Hamlet is.

One might attribute this difference to the overall purposes of the plays. Hamlet primarily develops in relation to internal conflicts: Can Hamlet trust the ghost? Does he have the necessary courage to avenge his father’s murder? Pygmalion, though, is a progressive

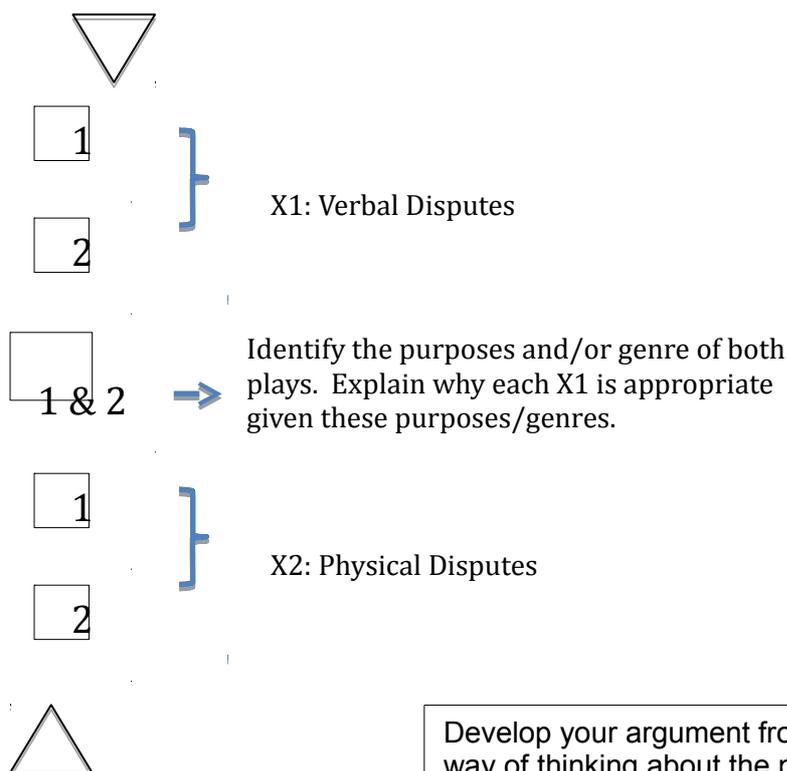
social comedy revolving around Eliza's ability to transcend the social class into which she has been born. In order for her to do this successfully, she *must* be able to spar with other characters on a more equal footing. Hamlet, in contrast, is politically conservative. Hamlet's main concern is to restore and preserve the social order, and his role in that social order is elevated. Other characters—even, to some extent, his mother—must defer to him because he is the prince. While Pygmalion's more equally weighted characters might engage in more lively debates, the disputes in both plays are appropriate for their purposes.

Conflicts that develop verbally are reinforced through the use of physical confrontations in both plays. In Hamlet, individuals are often unable to purposefully resolve conflict through physical actions. This is especially true for Hamlet himself. For example, he passes up a chance to kill Claudius while the usurper is praying. The prince misreads Claudius' spiritual condition, and reverses his vengeful intention mid-strike ("Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent"), postponing physical confrontation until he can catch the king in a state of mortal sin. Ironically, Claudius' penitent posture does not reflect interior contrition, so it would have been better for Hamlet's purpose had he killed him then. Yet later, when Hamlet chooses *not* to delay, his intentions are similarly frustrated, for his accidental slaughter of Polonius only precipitates his exile to England. In contrast to Hamlet's failed attempts, Providence (or chance) successfully orchestrates physical confrontations to bring about justice. While away at sea, it is chance rather than intention that enables Hamlet to arrange Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths and return home. Even in the bloody final scene Hamlet does not control the situation. Rather, a series of chances results in Claudius' death: Laertes' poisoned sword switches hands, Gertrude drinks from the wrong cup, and Laertes, before he dies, is able to supply the necessary public testimony against Claudius to justify Hamlet's execution of him. Thus, the play shows few connections between individuals' actions and their intended effects.

Physicality in Pygmalion operates quite differently, for its characters are entirely responsible for their own actions, and their actions produce the intended effects. While there are no gory death scenes in Shaw's comedy, a kind of physical confrontation is staged whenever one character enters another's territory and challenges the other person's dominance within that space. This confrontation always involves a lower class character entering the space of a higher class. For instance, Eliza enters Higgins' study and forces him to hold true to the promise he'd made in jest the night before. Mr. Doolittle enters the same room shortly after, and his wit enables him to finagle five pounds (and five pounds only) out of Higgins, overturning the middle class expectation that every working class man must desire money in the same way that the middle class does. Eliza enters the Ambassador's reception, and her success there challenges the guests' beliefs in their own innate superiority (though this is a challenge that only the audience perceives—an excellent

example of dramatic irony). Common to all of these physical confrontations is the fact that the character in question is always able to successfully accomplish his or her goal, through his or her own skills and abilities.

How do these different relationships between intent and action advance the very different purposes of the two plays? If, as stated above, Hamlet is an essentially conservative play, then it makes sense for the play to show Providence supporting a legitimate socio-political order, with humans being only instrumental agents of Divine justice. Polonius' death is punishment for his ceaseless spying; Laertes' is punishment for his complicity in a murderous plot; Gertrude's is for her "o'er hasty marriage", or perhaps adultery; Claudius's for treason; and Hamlet's (arguably) for his rashness in killing Polonius. None of these deaths was intentionally orchestrated by Hamlet, and the pattern therefore reinforces the theme that vengeance belongs to God alone—not to individuals—and that God will defend the correct political order. Pygmalion, written at a time when the social system was being challenged by feminism and socialism, is far more critical of the status quo. It is important, both for the play's political purpose and comedic nature, that lower-class individuals can be responsible for their own fate, successfully break social barriers through entering new spaces, and produce desired results through conscious actions. Thus, Hamlet reveals a far more negative tone towards human agency than Pygmalion does: whereas in Hamlet individuals "rough hew" Divinity's plans, Pygmalion shows characters purposefully shaping their ends "how [they] will".



Develop your argument from the "purpose" paragraph. Introduce a new way of thinking about the purpose, or identify the theme(s) and/or tones of the plays towards an idea. Finally, end by twisting your hook.