



Form, structure and language

This section is designed to offer you information about the three strands of AO2. This Assessment Objective requires you to demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which form, structure and language shape meanings in literary texts. To a certain extent these three terms should, as indicated elsewhere, be seen as fluid and interactive. Remember, however, that in the analysis of a play such as *The Winter's Tale* aspects of form and structure are at least as important as language. You should certainly not focus your study merely on lexical features of the text. Many features of form, structure and language in *The Winter's Tale* are further explored elsewhere in scene summaries and sample essays.

Form

The Winter's Tale has at different times been variously categorised as a tragicomedy, a romance, a late play and a problem play. Generic categories, however, are not fixed. Genres can be variously defined, overlap, and are constantly in a state of flux. To label *The Winter's Tale* simply as a romance, for instance, may be to undervalue the realistic way the play depicts character and events. It is, anyway, often hazardous to try to force Shakespeare's plays into a particular compartment.

Nevertheless, it is easy to identify many of the characteristic features of tragedy in the first half of *The Winter's Tale*. It has often been pointed out that if the play had concluded with Act III scene 2, it would have fulfilled many of the expectations of a tragedy, with Leontes condemned to a sort of death-in-life. Leontes plays the part of a traditional tragic protagonist in that his own weakness and error bring down destruction on himself and those around him. He finds himself increasingly isolated and he lacks self-knowledge and understanding of the world in which he lives. Human society seems unable to protect itself against the onrush of evil; madness supplants sanity, and Sicilia finds itself contemplating terrible waste and loss. However, the whole direction of the play alters at its midway point, and takes on a very different form.

Leontes plays the part of a traditional tragic protagonist in that his own weakness and error bring down destruction

Shakespeare's last plays

When Shakespeare began work around 1608 on what we now think of as his last plays, he was striking out in a new direction. Since the turn of the century, he had focused on a series of powerful but diverse tragedies; he had interspersed these with two dark, ironic comedies, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, exploring complex moral issues with only partial or ambiguous resolutions, and with the bitterly satirical drama of love and war, *Troilus and Cressida*. In the plays that followed, though, the potential for tragedy is diverted into a series of positive outcomes, as Shakespeare embraces the increasingly popular genre of tragicomedy. These plays have a great deal in common with each other, including some striking verbal echoes.

Presumably, when Shakespeare began writing *Pericles* in about 1607–08, he did not consciously consider that he was embarking upon his final sequence of plays. In retrospect, however, critics have seen it as the first of a group of related works with which he closed his career as a dramatist. The plays in this group consist essentially of the four 'romances', *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. There can be no doubt of the many similarities between these plays, some of which are outlined below. However, these parallels have perhaps been given too much weight in the past, obscuring the fact that the differences between the plays are just as striking as their similarities, and that there are also frequent parallels with plays written much earlier in Shakespeare's career.

Similarities between the last plays

The principal parallels between these plays lie in their plots, characters, themes and imagery. Children are separated from their royal parents, often in ignorance of their own true identities, but finally reunited. Evil acts committed in corrupt courtly societies are mitigated by a transfer of the characters to idealised rural landscapes or remote islands. The qualities of particular flowers are celebrated as they are 'strewn' on the dead and the living. Characters repent their sins and are rewarded by reconciliation with those they wronged, including at least three wives and one husband who had been thought dead. Characters are battered by storm and tempest, but the elements that threatened eventually prove merciful. Dreams, visions and prophecies relate the stories to a legendary world ruled by the gods: Diana and Jupiter make dramatic personal appearances, Apollo's voice is heard through his oracle, and Iris, Ceres and Juno are conjured up in a magical wedding celebration. Loyal old counsellors stand firm against tyranny and offer moral guidance and



Taking it Further

Read or watch a performance of *The Tempest*. What significant points of contrast and comparison can you find with *The Winter's Tale*?

Context

The genre of tragicomedy was popular in the early years of the seventeenth century. The King's Men, in particular, led the fashion in this respect, not only with Shakespeare's plays but with other popular works such as Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (1609) and *A King and No King* (1611); other companies soon joined the bandwagon.

Pause for Thought



How applicable to *The Winter's Tale* is the idea that tragedy can be distinguished from tragicomedy through the treatment of death as described here?

practical advice. The mistakes of the old are rectified by the love and energy of their children. Tragedy is shown to be only a partial response to a life in which the natural cycle brings rebirth, regeneration or, as Leontes calls it, 'recreation' (III.2.237). Winter must always be succeeded by spring. The happy endings, though, remain provisional: not all those who die along the way can be reborn, and not all the evil characters can be brought to embrace repentance and forgiveness.

Tragicomedy

Tragicomedy has at times been regarded as an inferior genre, lacking both the joyous exuberance of comedy and the philosophical seriousness of tragedy. It has been defined in many ways, but it is usually thought of as combining elements of tragedy and comedy either through the provision of a harmonious ending to a story that had seemed to be heading towards tragedy, or through mixing light and serious elements throughout the play.

Treatment of death

One way in which tragicomedy has been distinguished from tragedy is through its treatment of death. Whereas tragedy conventionally ends with the death of the central protagonist, tragicomedy often places a dramatic emphasis on the danger of death, but a death from which the central characters escape.

Romance and pastoral modes

Associated with tragicomedy were the literary modes of romance, dealing with unrealistic episodes often involving lovers; and pastoral, set in an idealised country landscape inhabited by shepherds and their flocks. Both modes can be seen at work in *The Winter's Tale*, though Shakespeare had used them much earlier in *As You Like It* (1600), a play that has a great deal in common with these later works. The plot of *The Winter's Tale* also contains strong parallels with another earlier comedy, *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598–99).

Resolution

Shakespeare's use of Time as the chorus to *The Winter's Tale* points up another issue about genre. It is implicit in Time's speech that healing and regeneration are not the end — merely the arbitrary conclusion imposed for the purposes of the genres known as 'comedy' or 'tragicomedy'. Time makes it clear that he controls 'both joy and terror/Of good and bad', and

that he ‘makes’ as well as ‘unfolds’ error (IV.1.1–2). Shakespeare ends most of his comedies with a sense that the comedic closure is only provisional, undercutting the final harmony with unsettling elements. What kind of a marriage is in store for Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing* or Helena and Bertram in *All’s Well that Ends Well*? ‘All yet seems well’ says the King at the end of that play; perhaps the same linguistic qualification — ‘seems’ rather than ‘is’ — needs to be applied to all of Shakespeare’s so-called ‘happy endings’, including *The Winter’s Tale*. The section on Act V scene 3 in the *Scene summaries and commentaries* (on pp. 33–35 of this guide) examines some of the ambiguous undercurrents that potentially darken the resolution of this play.

Taking it Further

Many critics have explored the masque-like qualities of Act IV scene 4. Court masques became very popular in the reign of James I. Find out what you can about these entertainments and discuss what elements of the masque appear in this scene.

Structure

There are several different ways of considering the structure of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Three movements

One view can see the play as almost symphonic in its creation of three movements, each with its own particular mood, but with echoes of the others interwoven throughout. The first movement, consisting of Acts I–III, is a bold and passionate statement of Leontes’ irrational jealousy. In its final scene, the baby’s rescue by shepherds sows the seeds for the pastoral second movement in Act IV. The low-key beginning of Act IV is soon succeeded by the celebratory mood of the sheep-shearing festival, with Autolycus and Perdita as its contrasting presiding spirits. Echoes of the first movement emerge in Polixenes’ violent anger, but there are enough hints of a positive resolution to prevent this from being the dominant mood. Act V, the play’s third and final movement, is subdued, steeped in an air of spiritual sadness that develops into the transcendental joys of forgiveness and reconciliation. As in a symphony, leitmotifs from all the previous movements recur here.

Two parts

These three movements are unequal in length, and in modern productions the play is usually performed in two parts, with an interval after Act III. We do not know whether intervals were taken at outdoor theatres such as the Globe, though many plays of the period do build up to a point about three-fifths of the way through that seems designed



for such a break. In *The Winter's Tale* this coincides with the play's 'wide gap of time', and Time's chorus is a striking and apt way to pick up the story after an intermission.

Five acts

Shakespeare carefully subdivides the opening movement of *The Winter's Tale* to cater for the five-act structure. With the first scene as a kind of prologue, Act I provides the play's exposition, setting up Leontes' jealousy and preparing the ground for his confrontation with Hermione. Act II sees Leontes in conflict with all around him, and it reaches a climax with the removal of the baby to its fate. Act III focuses on Hermione's trial and its dramatic conclusion, but is framed by two quite different scenes — first, the calm description of the oracle and finally, the storm-tossed arrival of the baby on the Bohemian coast, the destruction of the agents of its exposure and its rescue by the Shepherd and Clown.

Acts IV and V are carefully structured and paced. Act IV, for example, begins with an unexpected chorus that makes way for the flatly written scene between Polixenes and Camillo, which is engineered deliberately to enhance the impact of Autolycus's freewheeling incursion into the action. Act V scene 1 builds carefully towards the play's anticipated denouement, only to toy with the audience in the anticlimactic discussion between the three Gentlemen in order to heighten the surprise ending. Perhaps the only moment in the play when Shakespeare's pacing falters is at the end of Act IV scene 4, when Florizel and Perdita's escape plans take a disproportionate amount of time to establish, which dissipates the dramatic tension that has been built up.

The play, then, has a number of alternative structures layered one on top of another: two parts, three movements, five acts, and each act carefully structured with its own dramatic shape geared to the rhythms of the whole play.

Advantages and disadvantages of the time gap

Some considerations of the structure of the play have been more negative. The 16-year gap has not always met with critical approval; it has been seen as awkwardly artificial, and dividing the play into two halves which drift away from each other. There are, however, counter-arguments that Shakespeare establishes many connections between the two halves of the play that help to create a sense of dramatic unity, such as the part played by Camillo, a threat posed by a jealous king, and the sea journey that Perdita is forced to endure. Another argument, when

Context

Structuring of plays at the indoor Blackfriars theatre demanded a distinctive dramatic framework, with regular breaks to trim the candles that lit the theatre. The five-act structure familiar from printed play texts probably developed to serve this need; indeed, there is evidence that some of the King's Men's existing plays were revised to this end when they began to perform at the Blackfriars, for example Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, which was probably restructured by Thomas Middleton.

comparing the play to *The Tempest*, is that the device of Time and the 16-year gap allow the audience to witness the effects of the passage of time, rather than the somewhat awkward early scenes in *The Tempest* when a long narrative is required to explain the events that led to Miranda's presence on the island.

A representation of the seasons

Another way of looking at the structure of the play is as a representation of the pattern of the seasons. The play begins in winter, as identified by Mamillius at the beginning of Act II, 'A sad tale's best for winter', and metaphorically represented in the harshness and sterility that overtakes the Sicilian court. A Lenten period of fast and repentance follows before the fourth act brings both spring-like imagery of swallows and daffodils and the rich plenty of summer and autumn harvest. The arrival of Florizel and Perdita to what is still a wintry Sicilia is like the coming of 'the spring to th' earth' (V.1.151), and the ending of the play anticipates the renewal of the natural cycle.

Task 9

Another way of exploring the structure of the text is to look at the pattern of appearances of the main characters. Construct a grid or chart in which you mark the scenes in which the different characters appear. Are there any significant patterns to their appearances or equally significant 'groupings' of characters?

Language

Verse and prose

Verse is language that is organised rhythmically according to particular patterns of metre and the arrangement of lines. In plays of Shakespeare's time and earlier, verse was the conventional medium of dramatic discourse. Plays were not regarded as naturalistic slices of life, and the heightened language of verse was felt to be appropriate to their non-realistic status as performance texts. However, dramatists increasingly varied the range of their dramatic language to include speeches and scenes in prose, the language of everyday speech and writing. Verse tended to be given to noble and royal characters, expressing romantic or elevated feelings, while prose was generally used by characters of lower social status, for comic or domestic scenes, for letters read out loud, or to indicate mental disturbance. In *The Winter's Tale* approximately one-third of the play is in prose, and two-thirds in verse.

Verse

By the start of Shakespeare's career, one particular verse metre had come to dominate the language of plays. This was based on a line



of ten syllables, arranged so that the beats, or stresses, fell on every second syllable. Thus, each line consisted of five units (or metrical feet), each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as follows:

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /

Each of these units is called an iambic foot, and since there are five of them in each line, the metre is called iambic pentameter. Here are two typical examples from the play:

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
To tell | he longs | to see | his son | were strong. (I.2.34)

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
I am | appoint | ed him | to mur | der you. (I.2.412)

As Shakespeare's career developed, he became more flexible in his use of...metre

In the earlier drama of the time, including Shakespeare's first plays, the rhythms of the iambic pentameter tended to be kept very regular, at the risk of becoming monotonous. As Shakespeare's career developed, he became more flexible in his use of this basic metre.

Again, in early plays, each verse line tended to be a unit of meaning. Later in his career, Shakespeare much more frequently ran the sense of one line into the next, a technique called enjambement; he also created more heavy breaks in the middle of a line, known as caesuras. Both of these have the effect of obscuring rather than emphasising the underlying rhythm of the lines. Look, for example, at this speech of Leontes, where the frequent use of enjambement, caesura and metrical irregularity all help to destroy the rhythms of the verse and suggest Leontes' disturbed state of mind:

**Nor night nor day no rest. It is but weakness
 To bear the matter thus, mere weakness. If
 The cause were not in being — part o'th'cause,
 She, th'adultrous; for the harlot king
 Is quite beyond mine arm, out of the blank
 And level of my brain, plot-proof; but she
 I can hook to me — say that she were gone,
 Given to the fire, a moiety of my rest
 Might come to me again. Who's there?** (II.3.1-9)

In *The Winter's Tale*, the basic verse contains absolutely no rhyme at all. Iambic pentameter without any rhymes is called blank verse, and this is the standard verse form of the play. The only use of rhyme in the play is for two particular purposes:

- the songs, which are in a variety of verse forms; and
- the speech of Time, which is in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets

Prose

Most of Shakespeare's plays contain sections in prose as well as verse, and *The Winter's Tale* is no exception.

It is a mistake to think that prose is somehow more naturalistic or realistic than verse. Prose can encompass the language of novels, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, letters, diaries and legal documents, and it can be as structured and artificial as verse. It is the everyday language, in speech and writing, of people of varying degrees of education and literacy, and is consequently infinitely varied in its rhythms, grammatical structures and vocabulary.

In *The Winter's Tale*, the following sections are in prose:

- the opening scene — the conversation between Camillo and Archidamus (I.1)
- the indictment against Hermione (III.2.12–19)
- the dialogue between the Shepherd and the Clown (III.3.58–119)
- the scene between Polixenes and Camillo (IV.2)
- the scene between Autolycus and the Clown (IV.3)
- the entertainments within the sheep-shearing scene (IV.4.181–321) — except for the songs
- most of the conclusion of the scene, from the re-entry of Autolycus (IV.4.574–780), though the courtly characters, other than Camillo, stick to verse
- the scene between Autolycus and the Gentlemen, Shepherd and Clown (V.2)

For all the above sections of the play, you need to consider a range of issues relating to the use of prose, such as:

- What kind of characters are speaking, and in what context?
- Do these characters use prose throughout the play? If not, why do they use it here?
- What precedes or follows each prose section? Does the prose have the effect of lowering the dramatic temperature after a verse scene? Does it heighten the impact of a verse scene that follows? Or does it simply provide a contrast of tone?



- What kind of prose is it? Is it elaborate, courtly and artificial, or rustic, colloquial and comic? Does it employ long, complex, balanced sentences or short, straightforward ones? What linguistic devices does it employ, and what effects do these create?

Imagery

An image is the mental picture conjured up by a particular word or phrase. When writers use related patterns or clusters of images, they are using imagery as a literary technique. Such imagery may serve a number of purposes: it may be a feature of characterisation, infusing characters with particular associations; it may contribute to the creation of mood and atmosphere; or it may support the thematic significance of the text.

It can be misleading to generalise about Shakespeare's imagery, but it is useful to recognise the broad contrast in its use between the tragedies and the comedies.

- In the tragedies, the imagery tends to create unpleasant emotive associations. Violence, blood, disease, darkness, evil and the supernatural, lust and appetite walk hand in hand with images of wild animals, winter weather and storm and tempest.
- In the comedies, the overriding images are of love and friendship, spring flowers, birds, calm weather, good health and spirituality, with a particular emphasis on song, dance and music.

When it comes to the last plays, one striking aspect of their imagery is the way it combines the characteristic images of the tragedies and comedies. Images of disease and cure, winter and spring, youth and old age, tempest and music work side by side, suggesting a more inclusive and balanced view of life. All of these opposing image clusters are employed in *The Winter's Tale* as well as the other romances, and seem appropriate for plays that deal in the mode of tragicomedy.

Also significant is the combination of concrete and abstract images whereby Shakespeare is able both to present a vividly realised physical world and to explore the workings of the mind and imagination. Autolycus, for instance, is portrayed both through his own words and those of others as a complex of clothes, movements, words and gaudy items for sale. Leontes' twisted imaginings move from an obsessive focus on the workings of the body to abstract references to disgrace, despair and nothingness.

Task 10

Consider the following key image clusters, giving careful consideration to the effects they create:

- disease and cure
- sleep, sleeplessness and dreams
- the seasons and weather
- birds, animals and flowers
- storm and tempest
- time
- grace and graciousness
- the gods
- nature and natural processes
- youth and old age
- texts, tales and printing