AQA GCSE Media Studies 2018: TV Serial Drama

**General Guidance on Unit 1**

Unit 1 External Assessment

The external assessment carries 40% of the total marks available for GCSE Media Studies (Single Award). It takes the form of a 1 hour 30 minutes supervised formal examination and is timetabled. The date and time of the external assessment on TV Serial Drama is as follows:

**Issue of Preliminary material to students: Monday, 7 May 2018**

**Examination: Monday, 4 June 2018, pm**

The Preliminary material will take the form of a brief detailing a contextualised scenario. During the period between its issue and the date of the examination, students are expected to extend and consolidate their knowledge and understanding of TV Serial Drama by completing independent research and preparation in response to the given brief.

**Introduction to TV Serial Drama**

Serial television drama has entertained audiences of all ages for many years and it remains a popular feature of television programming and schedules. In the UK, Downton Abbey consistently drew some of the biggest weekly viewing figures in recent years and, with the advent of Netflix and platforms such as Sky Box
Sets, audiences have access to a wider range of serial television drama than ever before. Even online TV channel BBC3 are committed to producing one drama a year within their usual programming, for example, Thirteen.

Serial television drama is defined as any television drama that is organised into a series of episodes – as opposed to one-off dramas. Serial television drama can contain any number of episodes, but typically contains around 3–12. If a show proves to be popular with audiences, further series or seasons will be commissioned. Season finales often feature a cliffhanger that can only be resolved in the premiere of the next season. Serial television dramas typically have story arcs that span a series and a continuing plot that unfolds in an episodic nature.

There are several sub-genres of serial television drama, all of which are appropriate for Unit 1 purposes. These include: Costume/period drama, medical drama, such as Casualty and Holby City, procedural/crime drama, and an eclectic mix ranging from Waterloo Road and Dickensian to Doctor Who.

**Forms and Conventions**

Students need to become familiar with the style and content of serial television dramas. The genre is broad and many sub-genres exist. However, there is a typical style and an accepted set of conventions that ensure they appeal to audiences. The tension and drama created, cliffhangers at the end of episodes, and plots that develop and twist and turn over episodes are important factors. Serial television dramas past and present have their characters as central to their success and appeal. Characters that we love or hate, or can relate to and feel empathy for, drive the appeal of many serials. The setting of a serial television drama often plays a key part in its success. Whether the setting is rural or urban, past, present or futuristic, its authenticity is another vital ingredient.

**Suggested revision Activities**

1. Describe and compare the settings of two contrasting TV Serial Drama programmes.

2. Watch the opening scenes of two contrasting TV Serial Drama programmes. What conventions of the genre do you see?

3. Write a treatment for a new TV Serial Drama. Include suitable conventions and explain how it would appeal to its intended audience.
Institutions

‘Who produces serial television drama’ is a useful starting place to explore institutions. Serial television drama is a regular feature on the schedules of many channels and case studies of how serial television dramas are financed, produced and distributed would be an excellent way of addressing the key concept of institutions. In recent years, the rise of on demand television providers has grown significantly. For example, one in four homes in the UK now has access to Netflix. Looking at the impact of on demand viewing and the value of synergies, convergence and multi-platform promotion would also be useful for covering the key concept of institutions.

Suggested revision activities
1. Compare the promotion of two serial television dramas on different channels.
2. Compare the financing and production of two serial television dramas on different channels.

Audience

Why have serial television dramas remained so popular with audiences? Like any other investigation into audience, it is important to consider the demographic profile of different audience groups. This work can be developed into drawing up profiles of both mainstream and niche audiences and then matching them to contrasting programmes. Secondly, why do audiences watch serial television drama? By exploring a range of examples, there is a discussion to be had about how serial television dramas appeal to different audiences for different reasons. Suspense, dramatic storylines and engaging storylines grip audiences. The characters and settings in a serial television drama can also be key aspects of audience appeal. The ways in which audiences consume serial television drama has evolved over time, particularly with on demand platforms. Now we are able to watch multiple episodes in one sitting and ‘binge viewing’ is common. This is another interesting area to look at.

Suggested revision activities
1. Compare two contrasting serial television dramas. How does the scheduling and format of each differ for different audiences?
2. Create a demographic profile of the target audience for a selected serial television drama.

3. Compare short scenes from two TV Serial Dramas. How would they appeal to different audiences?

**Representation**

Many serial television dramas are aimed at mainstream audiences and have broad appeal. Part of that appeal is having characters from all walks of life that audiences can relate to. Similarly, serial television dramas can offer a ‘window of the world’ and a view of types of characters that the audience would not normally come into contact with. A discussion about how different groups of people: age, gender, ethnicity, class etc are represented in serial television dramas would make an important starting point for work on this key concept.

**Suggested Revision Activities**

1. Compare the ways men and women are portrayed in a TV Serial Drama?

2. Create a character profile for the lead character in a TV Serial Drama. How would this appeal to the target audience?

3. Look at how particular groups are portrayed in serial television dramas. Are they portrayed in a positive or negative way?

4. Look at how ‘heroes and villains’ are portrayed in serial television dramas.