

6X Handout 10 - Sample 12-Mark Answer

QUESTION: “the death of Germanicus is simply a story of heroes and villains.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

EXAMINERS’ REPORT:

There were some very pleasing answers to this question demonstrating that candidates had engaged thoroughly with the set text and that they had clear opinions on the behaviour of the characters, they also focused more on addressing the question. The best answers not only provided a range of examples from across the text but also evaluated the degree to which each character was wholly or partially a hero or a villain, and those that discussed Germanicus and Piso as well as their wives were often the highest scoring. In essays of this type there is no right or wrong answer, it is the quality of the argument that wins the day, and a thorough knowledge of the text allows a range of examples to be used.

Candidate Answer (552 words, 11/12 – 5 for AO1 / 6 for AO2)

In some ways the story of Germanicus and Piso is could be dismissed as simply a story of heroes and villains as there are very clear protagonists and antagonists and the story may well have been fantasised as Tacitus never mentions any sources and even seems to disagree with some of the evidence he provides. However Germanicus dies as the hero in the story which is unusual for a typical story of heroes and villains, Piso has an honourable death as the villain and there are many deeper historical themes at play in the sense that Tiberius could have sent Piso to Syria in order to undermine and murder him.

On the one hand, the story of Germanicus and Piso has very clear protagonists and antagonists of heroes and villains, the difference being that there are two sets of heroes and villains – Germanicus and Piso, and Agrippina and Plancina. Piso is perceived by Tacitus as a typical villain as in section A he conducts “schemes” and is morally corrupt as he “won over the basest of the soldiers with generosity and bribery” which is cowardly and manipulative. Germanicus is also shown as being a virtuous hero who, although aware of Piso’s actions, prioritises his position as general and “attends first to the Armenians. Piso also supposedly poisons Germanicus which is again cowardly and kills a young man who was “endowed with a handsome figure ... and died at scarcely 30 years old.” Then Agrippina becomes the new hero and focus of the story in her pursuit of revenge which in many ways is also virtuous and heroic as she seeks justice and there is steep contrast between her and Plancina who is arrogant, “throwing insults against Agrippina and Germanicus.” The poisoner, Martina, was also a close associate of Plancina’s so it certainly seems as though she and her husband are villains.

However, as this is a historical event, it is difficult to dismiss it as simply a story and, as in real events, people are never purely good or evil. Indeed, Germanicus is not always a good general as he goes on holiday to Egypt and Tacitus doubts the comparison to Alexander the great as unlike the great king, Germanicus conquered nothing. Agrippina is also shown as being able to manipulate a crowd as she “cast down her eyes” and chose to “carry the funeral remains in her arms” to present a more pitiable scene. Even Piso has a heroic death by admitting defeat and committing suicide which is brave, and not all the villains in the story are punished as Plancina

“began to distance herself from her husband” despite there being the same hatred for her. The main protagonist also dies during the story which breaks normal stereotypes of a story of heroes and villains? As Germanicus and Piso was also a historical event there are also many other themes at play as Tiberius supposedly sends Piso to kill Germanicus so the villain was ordered to act as he did, and once again there was more than one villain as Tiberius and Livia also rejoice in Germanicus’ death.

In conclusion, as a historical event the story of Germanicus and Piso cannot simply be dismissed as just a story as there are many other themes at play than just heroes and villains.

THOUGHTS ON THIS ANSWER: very good answer and a useful example of what is very nearly full marks but falls just short – i. e. what a candidate has to be just narrowly better than to max out. Lots of direct quotations, very reassuring (though not demanded – makes it really clear they know the stuff). Bang on the question throughout. Two-sided discussion of the characters which is what the question is all about but also considers historical context without it becoming superfluous to the question. Perhaps the marker felt that the textual references could have been even more detailed and involved, hence not 6/6 for AO1. Personally I thought the answer would have been even better if it had broadened out to discuss Tiberius’ role in more detail. And does the basic discussion thrust become a little repetitive?