Article by Blair Mahoney

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Robert Bolt

INTRODUCTION

Since its initial publication and performance in 1960, Robert Bolt’s play A Man for All Seasons has become an enduring classic, notable for its sensitive portrayal of a man who remains true to his principles even as it leads to his ultimate destruction. Yet the play is much more than a mere character study; it advances a humanistic worldview that highlights the problems of self-serving pragmatism and delivers its themes via witty dialogue and an innovative style that breaks down the barrier between stage and audience.

The role of Sir Thomas More was made famous by Paul Scofield on the stage and later in the 1966 Fred Zinnemann film version, also scripted by Bolt, which won six Academy Awards. Charlton Heston played Sir Thomas in a later version made for television that also starred Vanessa Redgrave and Sir John Gielgud.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Despite the well-known historical context for the play – the wish of Henry VIII to obtain a divorce and the subsequent martyrdom of Sir Thomas More for refusing to take the oath acknowledging the supremacy of England’s King over all foreign sovereigns – Act One opens with a resolutely domestic scene that highlights Sir Thomas’s love for repartee with family and friends.

After a dispute with his guest Richard Rich, who reveals himself to be a recent adherent to the ideas of Machiavelli and therefore avers that ‘every man has his price’ (p.4), Sir Thomas is summoned to see the powerful Cardinal Wolsey, who wishes to secure his support in allowing the King to obtain a divorce. Leaving Wolsey disappointed, Sir Thomas is then accosted by secretary to the Cardinal, Thomas Cromwell, and Sigñor Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador, who each attempt to acquire information that will be of use to them in their own scheming.
Causing much consternation to everybody except Sir Thomas, the King decides to pay a visit to personally secure his Lord Chancellor’s support for his divorce, support which once more is not forthcoming despite Henry’s self-centred bluster. Meanwhile, having been rebuffed by Sir Thomas in his search for advancement, Richard Rich has come under the sway of Cromwell, who wishes to use him for his own ends.

Act Two begins two years later. The Church of England has been established, of which Henry VIII is the head, and all his subjects are being asked to accede to the Act of Supremacy. Sir Thomas is forced to resign his position as Lord Chancellor, but is very careful to avoid making any sort of public statement on the King’s Supremacy or his imminent divorce in order to avoid a charge of treason.

Sir Thomas’s circumstances become much reduced following his resignation and he is forced to relinquish his staff and eke out a meagre living with his family. Cromwell and Rich are, however, becoming steadily more influential and wealthy as they seek to enact the King’s wishes and find reason to imprison Sir Thomas through whatever means possible. Those means turn out to be an oath affirming the Act of Succession which states that the offspring of the now Queen Anne will be recognised as heirs to Henry VIII. Thomas refuses to take the oath, which leads to his imprisonment, but he refuses to state why, relying on strict legal interpretations of his silence to save him from a charge of treason. The law and his skilful argument serve him well until he is undone by an act of perjury from Richard Rich and is consequently executed.

**BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**

Robert Bolt explains much of the historical context for the play in his in-depth and fascinating preface, which rewards careful reading. Broadly speaking, the historical period is often referred to as the Reformation, with the Catholic Church (at that time the one and only Christian Church) the body that people were seeking to reform. The frustrations felt by King Henry VIII towards the Church as a result of his efforts to secure a divorce from his first wife Catherine were part of a larger social context in which a number of people were critical of the Church and its power base surrounding the Pope in Rome. The German
theologian Martin Luther had been excommunicated in 1521 for his questioning of the economic power of the Church, and Sir Thomas More’s friend, the Dutch philosopher Erasmus, had also criticised a number of aspects of the Church.

In England at the time a large number of people were opposed to the power of the Church in Rome but were still pro-Catholic and Henry’s personal desires and political will allowed the country to break from the influence of Rome once he had himself declared Supreme Head of the English Church. This of course had wider political implications, especially for relations between England and Spain. The King’s wife, Catherine of Aragon, was Spanish and the Spaniards, visible in the play through the figure of the ambassador Chapuys, were understandably reluctant for the divorce to go ahead.

Bolt wrote the play in the context of the late 1950s, during the Cold War, when the influence of the Church was steadily declining but international tensions were high and there were many instances of a person’s individual conscience coming into conflict with the wishes of the State. Bolt himself was prominent in the movement for nuclear disarmament in the early 1960s and was arrested and imprisoned following a protest when he refused to sign a declaration that he would not engage in similar activities in the future. In many of his later screenplays, such as those for Lawrence of Arabia (1962) and Doctor Zhivago (1965), Bolt depicted charismatic men whose actions set them apart from prevailing attitudes.

**STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE**

The play is divided into a simple two-act structure, with the second act taking place some two years after the first, but with unspecified lengths of time passing during each act. The rising action during Act One depicts Sir Thomas as a respected man of substance who advances in status, becoming Lord Chancellor after Wolsey’s death, but is subject to increasing pressures in order to support the wishes of the King in conflict with his personal conscience. Soon after Act Two begins, however, Sir Thomas is divested of his chains of office and begins the slide that ends with his imprisonment and execution. Meanwhile, Richard Rich, who starts off desperate for Sir Thomas to give him some sort of position, steadily rises in status as he performs the wishes of the equally ambitious Thomas Cromwell. By the play’s conclusion he has gained
resplendent robes and the role of Attorney-General for Wales but has experienced a concomitant fall in his moral standing, resorting to perjury in order to achieve Sir Thomas’s ultimate downfall.

The most notable aspect of the play's style is Bolt’s adoption of what is popularly known as the ‘alienation effect’, which is a translation of the German verfremdungseffekt, the technique employed by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The effect is most obvious through the character of the Common Man, who emphasises the artificiality of the play from the outset. Instead of allowing the audience to 'lose themselves' in the proceedings on stage, the Common Man’s direct address and overt adoption of various roles forces them to remain detached and consider the play in a more intellectual and engaged manner. The Common Man is intended to embody, as Bolt puts it in the preface, ‘that which is common to us all’ (p.xix), and is therefore appropriate for someone who successively plays the roles of Steward, Boatman, Publican, Jailer and Headsman.

Bolt uses a wide range of metaphors in the play, many of which are associated with water. Thus, of William Roper’s wilful obstinacy and changeable views, Sir Thomas says, ‘Now let him think he’s going with the current and he’ll turn round and start swimming in the opposite direction’ (p.33), and soon after, ‘If Wolsey fell, the splash would swamp a few small boats like ours’ (p.35). Later, when Roper complains that Sir Thomas’s principles are such that he would ‘give the Devil benefit of law’ (66) and that laws should be dispensed with if they do not achieve the desired purpose, Sir Thomas responds that, ‘This country’s planted thick with laws from coast to coast … and if you cut them down … d’you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?’ (p.66).

A less obvious feature of Bolt’s language is the way he uses repeated lines in different contexts in order to drive home the differences in outlook between characters. When More refuses to tell Norfolk what his views on the King’s divorce are for fear of persecution, Norfolk responds, ‘Thomas. This isn’t Spain, you know’ (p.91), implying that he has faith that his friend will not be ill-treated for his beliefs. Yet, when Cromwell forces Norfolk to participate in the actions against Sir Thomas and Norfolk angrily asks if he is using the King’s name to threaten him, Cromwell calmly retorts, ‘My dear Norfolk … This isn’t Spain’
The ironic repetition of Norfolk’s earlier statement drives home the fact that England has become a country where divergent opinions will not be tolerated.

**KEY SCENES**

**Sir Thomas’s house (pp.3–17)**

Bolt begins with the Common Man addressing the audience directly and questioning his own placement in the opening scene, seeing his position as ‘perverse’ among the ‘Kings and Cardinals’ (p.3) who populate the play. His costume consisting of simple ‘black tights’ (p.xxiii) and his joking preference for nakedness are contrasted with the ‘intellectuals with embroidered mouths’ (p.3). Costume is an important symbol in the play, and the Common Man’s ‘bit of black material’ (p.3) bespeaks his adaptability and ability to take on multiple roles, the first of which is Matthew, steward to Sir Thomas More.

This opening scene reveals Sir Thomas’s love of life and witty conversation with family and friends. He banteres with Norfolk and his wife Alice about falcons, with Rich about Machiavelli and jokingly asks Matthew about the wine, knowing but not caring that he has sampled it. Sir Thomas’s impending martyrdom is not obvious from this cheerful depiction.

Richard Rich enters midway through an argument, making the significant claim that ‘every man has his price’ (p.4), something that Sir Thomas immediately refutes, but that Rich goes on to suggest can be achieved through suffering, foreshadowing the trials that await Sir Thomas later in the play. Ultimately, as much as Rich seems to prove his own point through the course of the play, selling whatever he can for personal gain, Sir Thomas demonstrates equally that he is an exception to this ‘rule’. It is significant that Matthew announces Rich’s entrance ‘contemptuously’ (p.4) according to the stage direction.

Upon learning that Thomas Cromwell has urged Rich to read Machiavelli and arrive at the conclusions he has, Sir Thomas tellingly describes Cromwell as ‘a very able man’ (p.5). Rich sees this as a compliment, but as he repeats the description Sir Thomas undermines it, implying that to be ‘able’ involves certain compromises that he is not in favour of. The faint praise is later repeated of
Machiavelli, whom Margaret describes as ‘very practical’ (p.12). Although dismissive of Rich and Cromwell, Norfolk is similarly aligned to their doctrine of pragmatism, as revealed when he says that he’s ‘never found much use in Aristotle … not practically’ (p.12). His focus on what is or is not practical will ultimately separate him from his friend Sir Thomas who remains resolutely committed to ideals.

Rich sees associations as something to be translated into material gain, worrying that people will think there is something wrong with him if he has the friendship of someone like Sir Thomas yet has not been able to gain some sort of office. Yet when Sir Thomas does offer him a posting, as a teacher, Rich is scornful, seeing it as beneath him. The offer was deliberately made, however, as Sir Thomas recognises the deficiencies in Rich’s character and tells him that, ‘A man should go where he won’t be tempted’ (p.7). To reinforce his point he gives Rich a cup that had been offered to him as a bribe and suggests that this is one of the least of the temptations he has refused. Rich gratefully accepts and reveals that he will sell it to buy clothes because, as he tells Sir Thomas, ‘I want a gown like yours’ (p.8). Again, clothes are significant markers, and Rich’s desire for the trappings rather than the substance of office (he dismisses the idea that he might be a great teacher because it wouldn’t gain him recognition) reveal his superficial character. Sir Thomas is relieved when Rich’s connection to Cromwell is established, because he won’t have to offer his help after all, but Rich has a forlorn plea: ‘Sir Thomas, if only you knew how much, much rather I’d yours than his!’ (p.14). This once more foreshadows Sir Thomas’s eventual demise, because when Rich does turn to Cromwell for help the conditions of that assistance involve bringing down his erstwhile benefactor.

The scene closes as it opened, with the Common Man (as the Steward) commenting directly to the audience. He says, referring to Rich, ‘That one’ll come to nothing’ (p.17), an assessment that seems quite mistaken if we consider the material gains he does achieve, but is accurate if we think of it as a moral assessment. When the Steward observes that ‘My master Thomas More would give anything to anyone’ (p.17) he is sceptical about where that might lead, ‘because some day someone’s going to ask him for something that he wants to keep; and he’ll be out of practice’ (p.17). We can infer that the thing

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that he’ll be asked for but wishes to keep is ultimately his conscience, which everyone, even his friends and family, eventually urges him to give up, but which he steadfastly refuses to relinquish.

**The King in the garden (pp.47–58)**

The stage directions as Henry VIII enters this scene state that he is wearing ‘a cloth of gold’ (p.47), befitting his status as King, but also indicative of his somewhat grandiose view of himself. He is absurdly proud that he has managed to get mud on his shoe, and is at pains to emphasise that he considers the river to be ‘my river’ (p.47). Henry’s exchange with Sir Thomas’s daughter Margaret also reveals his hubris, with the stage direction revealing, after an exchange in Latin between the two, that ‘Her Latin is better than his; he is not altogether pleased’ (p.49). Changing tack, Henry discovers that Margaret is not a good dancer, to which he childishly responds, ‘Well, I dance superlatively’ (p.49) and then alarmingly threatens to wrestle Norfolk in his continuing attempts to impress his audience by whatever means. His actions betray a sense of insecurity about his status, an insecurity that he covers up with bluster.

Whenever Henry is present, or even mentioned elsewhere in the play, there is a sense of anxiety and people are at pains to maintain a charade. Thus Alice must pretend in this scene that the King was not expected even though she has prepared an elaborate feast for him. Henry gives some indication that he is weary of the charade when he says that he is ‘a fool to live in a Court, in a licentious mob’ (p.51), and yearns instead for the friendship of Sir Thomas, about which he seeks some reassurance: ‘You are my friend, are you not?’ (p.51).

Henry seems desperate to receive Sir Thomas’s approval for his course of action, and when he is asked why this is necessary he responds, ‘Because you are honest. What’s more to the purpose, you’re known to be honest’ (p.55). Henry needs support from the one man whom he can be sure is not simply flattering him or fearful of him, and Sir Thomas is like no other character in this respect, as Henry sums up: ‘There are those like Norfolk who follow me because I wear the crown, and there are those like Master Cromwell who follow me because they are jackals with sharp teeth and I am their lion, and there is a
mass that follows me because it follows anything that moves – and there is you’ (p.55). But much as he respects Sir Thomas and desires his endorsement he will still not tolerate his divergent opinion, leading him to repeatedly cry out in anger ‘I’ll have no opposition’ (p.56). And eventually, even though he evidently despises Cromwell, Henry is prepared to use Cromwell’s ‘sharp teeth’ to bring down the man he considers his friend, the man who he ‘would soonest raise’ (p.57) if only he would go along with his wishes.

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Sir Thomas More

Sir Thomas is obviously the character at the heart of the play, but although he remains resolute throughout and does manage to keep to his conscience, he is not entirely static. And even though he was to become a saint, neither must we necessarily accept that his course of action was completely without fault.

Sir Thomas is established early on as an intelligent and witty man who evidently loves his family and enjoys bantering with his friends, such as the Duke of Norfolk. He is also revealed to be morally upstanding when he passes on the attempted bribe of a cup to Richard Rich and talks of other far more substantial bribes that he has turned down. When Cromwell and Rich later try to incriminate him for accepting the cup in the first place, Norfolk is incredulous and indignant: ‘What! Goddammit, he was the only judge since Cato who didn’t accept bribes! When was there last a Chancellor whose possessions after three years in office totalled one hundred pounds and a gold chain’ (p.99).

The point on which Sir Thomas’s character is most dependent and which indeed the whole play turns on is paying heed to one’s conscience instead of accepting the political realities and doing whatever seems most practical. Thus, Sir Thomas tells Wolsey that he believes that ‘when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties … they lead their country by a short route to chaos’ (p.22). Sir Thomas’s conscience is inextricably tied up with his religious beliefs, and in particular his obedience to papal decree, which is what Henry wishes to move against. His belief is genuine, and he tells Wolsey that he will always have his ‘prayers to fall back on’ (p.22), a point at which Wolsey scoffs, considering it absurd to ‘govern the
country by prayers’ (p.22). Even though it is Wolsey, as Cardinal, who occupies the position within the Church, it is Sir Thomas who exhibits the only true belief in prayer and religious doctrine.

Perhaps even more than his religion, though, Sir Thomas has faith in the law, and its ability to protect innocent citizens from injustice. Thus, in his argument with Roper, Sir Thomas states that he would ‘give the Devil benefit of law’ (p.66), because it is laws, he believes, that ultimately guarantee his own safety and the security of others. Roper claims that the law has become Sir Thomas’s ‘god’ (p.66), a point that is confirmed when Sir Thomas says, ‘I truly believe no man in England is safer than myself’ (p.68) and puts his trust in the law to protect him. Even as the net closes around him in Act Two he still shows no fear to his family because he claims his case is ‘watertight’ (p.112). Yet after his meeting with Cromwell and Rich where he is read a letter from the King describing him as traitorous, the stage directions describe him as leaving with ‘his face fearful’ (p.119), as he finally recognises that the law may not be enough to save him. Still, even when he has been jailed and Cromwell tells him that he is threatened with justice he is able to respond, ‘Then I’m not threatened’ (p.134). Ultimately it is not so much the law that does fail Sir Thomas, it is Rich’s and Cromwell’s perversion of the law through perjury that brings him undone. But Sir Thomas finally realises that the world has become a place where the rule of law is unable to save an innocent man such as himself and he no longer wishes to inhabit such a world, saying, ‘I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith I long not to live’ (p.160).

It is not only Sir Thomas’s optimistic belief in the sanctuary of the law that changes during the course of the play. His conviction in his principles is also tested when he sees the effects it has on his family, and it is his determination to keep to his conscience even though it leads to penury and suffering for his family as well as himself that some see as less than admirable. Once he has been stripped of his office as Lord Chancellor and prevented from gaining an income Sir Thomas receives an offer of four thousand pounds from bishops who are sympathetic to his position, but he turns down the money to avoid any appearance of impropriety, much to the chagrin of his family, who want to know ‘why a man in poverty can’t take four thousand pounds’ (p.110). Later, Margaret
attempts to persuade her father to swear to the Act of Succession, and in an effort to sway his emotions describes their miserable life without him: ‘We sit in the dark because we’ve no candles. And we’ve no talk because we’re wondering what they’re doing to you here’ (p.141). Similarly, Alice laments to her husband the she doesn’t ‘believe this had to happen’ (p.144), and that she fears that she will ‘hate [him] for it’ (p.145) once he is gone.

Richard Rich

Richard Rich enters the play in the opening scene ‘[e]nthusiastically pursuing an argument’ (p.4) according to the stage directions, but it is only early on that he seems particularly animated. By the time he comes under Cromwell’s wing he appears subdued and less than enthusiastic about the measures that he takes to secure his advancement in society. The argument he is pursuing is that ‘every man has his price’ (p.4), and he has taken this idea from the writings of Machiavelli, recommended to him by the distinctly Machiavellian Cromwell.

Rich sees himself as hard done by, being forced to wait until someone notices him and offers him a position. He has been angling for a position with Cardinal Wolsey but has not been able to make his way past the array of servants to the Cardinal himself. The Duke of Norfolk exemplifies the lack of interest that prominent people have shown in Rich, gracing him with ‘one half of a Good Morning delivered at fifty paces’ (p.6). After Rich dismisses Sir Thomas’s offer of a position as a teacher he is offered one by Norfolk because Sir Thomas ‘point[s] him out’ (p.16) but significantly does not ‘recommend him’ (p.16). Cromwell is not slow to point out to Rich that he is in a ‘comparative backwater’ (p.36) in his position as the Duke’s librarian. Cromwell dangles the temptation of higher positions in front of him, a temptation that Rich is willing to take when he is once again rebuffed by Sir Thomas. ‘Employ me!’ he begs and tries to claim that he can be relied upon: ‘I would be steadfast!’ (p.64), but to no avail.

When Cromwell meets Rich in the inn we find out that his statement that ‘every man has his price’ was not just theory. When asked if he truly believed that he would not report anything said in friendship he replies, ‘It would depend what I was offered’ (p.72), succumbing to Cromwell’s offer of the position as Collector of Revenues for York Diocese. He recognises his own fall and laments the loss
of his innocence until Cromwell points out that it was ‘lost … some time ago’ (p.74) and that if he has only just noticed it, ‘it can’t have been very important’ (p.74), a cynical view that does however cheer Rich somewhat.

Rich’s vanity and ambition is displayed in his early comment to Sir Thomas, ‘I want a gown like yours’ (p.8). This focus on the trappings of power is hinted at when Sir Thomas is called in to be interrogated by Cromwell and Rich and sardonically observes ‘That’s a nice gown you have, Richard’ (p.113), indicating he is well aware of what Rich has sold his soul for. By the time Rich enters the trial scene at the end of the play the stage directions note that ‘He is now splendidly official, in dress and bearing; even Norfolk is a bit impressed’ (p.154). Significantly, Norfolk barely noticed Rich at the beginning of the play, but now he is unable to ignore him. Of course, Rich’s perjury is the ultimate act of betrayal that purchases him the position of Attorney-General for Wales, leading More to comment, ‘For Wales? Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world … But for Wales!’ (p.158). Interestingly, though, Rich is apparently the only man in the play who does profit through his actions. Midway through Act Two the Common Man lists the ultimate fate of each of the main players, all of whom were eventually sentenced to death for High Treason, save Richard Rich, who ‘became a Knight and Solicitor-General, a Baron and Lord Chancellor, and died in his bed’ (p.127).

Thomas Cromwell

Cromwell is in some ways the mirror image of Sir Thomas. Not only does he share a given name with his adversary but he is also a lawyer who is particularly skilled in legal argument. In some ways he is a satanic presence, certainly in the way he tempts Rich over to his side away from the positive influence of Sir Thomas. Sir Thomas is scornful of him, however, exclaiming, ‘Pooh, he’s a pragmatist – and that’s the only resemblance he has to the Devil, son Roper; a pragmatist, the merest plumber’ (p.113).

Cromwell, despite his lowly birth (‘A farrier’s son?’ (p.13) exclaims Alice early on) has proven himself very ‘able’ as Sir Thomas puts it, gaining a position first as the Cardinal’s Secretary and then, despite the Cardinal’s disgrace, a sort of indeterminate office working directly for the King. He calls himself ‘The King’s Ear’ (p.38) and clarifies this by stating simply that ‘When the King wants
something done, I do it’ (p.38). He sees his job as one of ‘administrative convenience’ (p.73) in that whatever is convenient for the King will inevitably be convenient for his own interests. Cromwell demonstrates his ruthless nature when he holds Rich’s hand in a candle flame to gleefully make a point.

Further emphasising his divergence from Sir Thomas, Cromwell sees the law merely as a tool for gaining what he desires rather than a good in its own right. Therefore, when he is searching for a way to trip up Sir Thomas he says, ‘it must be done by law. It’s just a matter of finding the right law. Or making one’ (p.104). However, Cromwell comes to realise that he is in a bind, because while Sir Thomas’s continuing intransigence vexes the King and makes Cromwell’s life difficult he recognises that ‘if I bring about More’s death – I plant my own, I think’ (p.137). Cromwell does not truly change during the course of the play, continuing to follow the course of pragmatism, but his calm demeanour does slip during the trial when he is bested by Sir Thomas in legal argument, leaving ‘His face stiff with malevolence’ (p.154) according to the stage directions, and prompting him to play the final card of having Rich perjure himself.

**THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES**

**Integrity**

Perhaps the most important value expressed in the play is that of integrity. For someone to display integrity he or she must, as the word’s Latin root suggests, remain intact or whole and be immune to corruption. Someone who has integrity engenders trust in others because of their honest motives, while someone who lacks integrity causes suspicion because they can be easily manipulated or persuaded to say something that they don’t believe.

Bolt draws clear distinctions between characters such as Sir Thomas who have integrity, and those such as Rich who lack it. Sir Thomas refuses to give in to taking an oath he doesn’t believe in even though it brings about his destruction and for refusing to capitulate he is held up as an ideal man. Sir Thomas radiates strength of character and conviction even when he is severely tested through his imprisonment and the hardships faced by his family, whereas Rich is a
picture of weakness and uncertainty even at his moment of triumph. Sir Thomas refers to him contemptuously – ‘such a man as that’ (p.156) – and Rich is reluctant to face the man he has sentenced to death.

It might conceivably be argued, however, that Sir Thomas is foolish for sticking to his beliefs so stringently, what the Common Man describes as ‘willful indifference to realities which were obvious to quite ordinary contemporaries’ (p.36). It certainly does bring hardship to his family that he could easily have avoided had he not been so intent on remaining true to himself. But even though Alice fears she might hate her husband for so resolutely accepting his fate and doing nothing to change it she in the end says ‘I understand you’re the best man that I ever met or am likely to’ (p.145), indicating that she respects his integrity.

One might also argue that in their way Cromwell and the Common Man also display a kind of integrity in that they are true to themselves in following the doctrine of pragmatism. Unlike Rich, who wishes to be a good person but is unable to live up to his own goals, Cromwell never claims to be seeking anything other than the best way forward for himself in the political climate of the time. Equally, the Common Man might engage in morally questionable behaviour such as selling information about Sir Thomas to both Cromwell and Chapuys but, as he points out, what he tells them is ‘common knowledge’ (p.43) and his main aim is to avoid trouble, which he does quite successfully.

**Justice**

Sir Thomas ultimately has faith in the law and in the concept of justice, with Roper even saying that that law is his ‘god’. Whereas Roper is prepared to jettison the law in order to put away someone like Rich who he rightfully sees as dangerous, Sir Thomas returns to what he sees as most important: ‘The law, Roper, the law. I know what’s legal not what’s right. And I’ll stick to what’s legal’ (p.65). He claims expertise in the law and sees that as his saving grace: ‘But in the thickets of the law, oh, there I’m a forester. I doubt if there’s a man alive who could follow me there, thank God …’ (p.66).
When Sir Thomas learns that he will be forced to take an oath his immediate concern is with the wording of it, because ‘It may be possible to take it. Or avoid it’ (p.125). His skilful legal interpretations are more than a match for the sophistry of Cromwell in court, and he is able to successfully claim that his silence implies consent rather than the opposite. When Cromwell threatens him with justice he is not afraid because he knows that justice is on his side. It is only when justice is ultimately perverted by Rich’s perjury that the law fails Sir Thomas, and it is that failure that prompts his final lament that he does not wish to live in a country that will convict an innocent man such as himself. But even as he makes his way to the Tower for his execution justice is still in his mind. He is confronted by the woman who had attempted to bribe him and who claims he ‘gave a false judgment’ (p.161) against her. Sir Thomas responds, ‘I remember your matter well, and if I had to give sentence now I assure you I should not alter it’ (p.162), demonstrating his concern for correct legal judgement despite his own conviction by an incorrect judgement.

**Every man has his price**

Richard Rich provides the most extreme contrast to Sir Thomas, not only because he utters this dictum at the beginning of the play, but also because he perjures himself to get ahead at the end of the play, whereas Sir Thomas is unable to lie even to himself, let alone the court and God.

Even though Rich is the most glaring example of a person willing to sell out his principles for advancement he is not the only one. Norfolk could be said to have found his price of an easy life with the approval of the King that leads him to act against his good friend. And even Alice and Margaret could be said to be proof of Rich’s claim that it is possible to ‘[b]uy a man with suffering’ (p.5) as they attempt to persuade Sir Thomas to give up his conscience for the sake of the family.

The reason that Sir Thomas doesn’t have a price and thus disproves Rich’s claim is that he feels that if he gives up his beliefs he gives up himself. As he says to Margaret, ‘When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (He cups his hands) And if he opens his fingers then – he needn’t hope to find himself again’ (p.140).
DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

There is no single correct reading of a text, nor is one reading more valid than another. Different interpretations arise from different responses to a text and each essay question may also have a number of possible approaches. An interpretation is more than an ‘opinion’ – it is the justification of your point of view using relevant examples or evidence from the text to support and strengthen it. Interpretations develop through your response to a text’s key ideas, characters and themes. You should refer to these as you pull together the various elements of a text to present a point of view of its overall meaning.

The activities below will help to open up a range of interpretations of a key idea, character or major theme. They will help you to develop your own ideas on what the text is about.

Characters

- Think about the main character in this text. How would you describe him/her? Are you critical of their actions or compassionate towards them? What are their main values? Are these values you share? Compare your interpretation of this character with another student’s interpretation. Write a paragraph discussing the ways in which your interpretation of the same character differs and provide evidence from the text to support your interpretation.

Themes

- Consider what you think is the most important theme to emerge from this text. Write one paragraph, offering evidence from the text to support your interpretation. Then choose another theme and explain why it is not as important as the first one. If you think it is also significant, but for different reasons, explain why this is so. Consider also the characters that you might draw on to support your interpretation.
Values

- In two paragraphs, explain which value you think the author of your text wants you to see as the most important. Consider how they do this and why. Do you agree that it is the most important value in the text? Does it match your understanding of what the text is about? If not, why?

ESSAY TOPICS

1. ‘Rich, Cromwell, Wolsey and the Common Man are all victims in their own way.’
   Discuss.
   (The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed by the author in this text.)

2. “We must stand fast a little – even at the risk of being heroes.”
   Is Sir Thomas More truly heroic?
   (The question asks students to explore how the author expresses views and values through the character.)

3. ‘While Sir Thomas More may have failed as a diplomat and politician he certainly succeeds as a human being.’
   To what extent do you agree with this assessment?
   (The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of a key theme by offering a point of view on a character.)

4. ‘There’s nothing wrong with Richard Rich. He makes the most of difficult circumstances.’
   Discuss.
   (The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of a key theme by offering a point of view on a character.)

5. ‘The Common Man is the real man for all seasons.’
   Discuss.
   (The question asks students to focus on how the author expresses views and values through the characters.)
6 ‘*A Man for All Seasons* shows the triumph of pragmatism over idealism.’
Discuss.
(The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the historical and cultural values embodied in the text.)

7 ‘*A Man for All Seasons* demonstrates that there are many dangers involved for the individual who disobeys authority.’
Do you agree with this interpretation of the text?
(The question asks students to develop and justify a detailed interpretation of the text using appropriate evidence to support their point of view.)

8 ‘*A Man for All Seasons* offers us a bleak world where goodness is destroyed and only the corrupt thrive.’
Do you agree?
(The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of a key theme and examine the social values embodied in the text.)

9 ‘*A Man for All Seasons* demonstrates that every man does not have his price.’
Do you agree with this interpretation of the text?
(The question asks students to develop and justify a detailed interpretation of the text using appropriate evidence from the text to support their point of view.)

10 ‘*A Man for All Seasons* shows that justice does not always prevail.’
Discuss.
(The question asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the text’s views and values and how these are developed through the narrative’s events.)
ANALYSING A SAMPLE QUESTION

8  ‘A Man for All Seasons offers us a bleak world where goodness is destroyed and only the corrupt thrive.’
Do you agree?

This topic contains the following key terms that warrant further consideration: ‘bleak’, ‘goodness’, ‘destroyed’, ‘corrupt’ and ‘thrive’.

The statement is a strong one in that it is global, suggesting that corruption is the only avenue to survival in the world depicted in the play. This provides an obvious point of divergence for individual interpretation. You might plausibly argue either that the statement is true and that only those who succumb to corruption prosper, or you might argue that although some (or even many) of the less morally upstanding characters appear to succeed, not all of the good are destroyed.

The contention in the question alleges that the destruction of good people and the success of the corrupt inevitably lead to an interpretation of the world as bleak. The contention therefore offers another point for individual interpretation in that you could plausibly argue that even though a good man like Sir Thomas More is executed his idealism and principles provide a ray of hope. You must define the term ‘bleak’, explaining what you take it to mean for a world to be bleak. In this context, to be bleak means to be lacking in hope, or to be forbidding.

You must also define the term ‘corrupt’ and decide whether certain characters fit the bill or not. Richard Rich and Thomas Cromwell are clearly corrupt, but what about Henry himself, and the Common Man, and the Duke of Norfolk? Norfolk might be weaker than someone like Sir Thomas and unable or unwilling to stand against the King, but can we necessarily describe him as corrupt?

Evidence from the text could include:

- The Common Man’s summing up to the audience of the eventual fate of each of the main characters on p.127. Although it would seem that Richard Rich does indeed thrive in the long term, as does the Common Man himself,
other ‘corrupt’ characters such as Cromwell, Cranmer and Norfolk are all convicted of high treason in the end and sentenced to death. Cardinal Wolsey is another character, who although manifestly corrupt, falls out of favour very early on in the play.

- Richard Rich’s lowly initial status and desire for a gown like Sir Thomas’s eventually leads him down the path of corruption, and it seems clear that his status has risen immeasurably by the end of the play, both in his position and his outward appearance. This appears to be clear evidence that the corrupt do thrive.

- Although Sir Thomas is eventually destroyed in a bodily sense, which appears to support the contention in the question, it could be argued that his eventual sainthood suggests that his goodness was far from destroyed and in fact lived on in the minds of many people over the following centuries.

- The hardships experienced by Sir Thomas’s family also suggest the destruction of goodness and can be used as evidence to support the proposition, but as much as a person like Margaret suffers because of the fate of her father she is not ultimately destroyed herself, and neither is her misguided and erratic but also ultimately good husband, Roper, or her mother.

- It can even be argued that we initially see Sir Thomas thriving despite, or even because of his ‘goodness’ through to the end of Act One. Although he does not take bribes he appears to live well and be very happy. He also receives a promotion to the position of Lord Chancellor after Wolsey’s death and is a favourite of the King, who suggests that he would promote him to almost any position he liked. It seems clear that under different circumstances More could well have thrived in this world.

THE TEXT

OTHER RESOURCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blair Mahoney, MA, Dip Ed, teaches VCE English at Melbourne High School. He has tutored and lectured on twentieth-century literature at universities in New Zealand and Australia.