The Godfather
Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Background

• Based on best-selling novel by Mario Puzo, published in 1969
• Coppola clashed with the studio when casting. Marlon Brando – “box-office poison”
• Other cast member largely unknown (Al Pacino’s breakthrough role)
• Released in cinemas in 1972
• Won three Academy Awards – Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay & Best Actor (Brando)
• Grossed $245 million worldwide
Film & TV Drama

Answers to questions on film and TV drama should address relevantly the central concerns / themes of the text and be supported by reference to appropriate techniques such as:
Film Techniques:

- Key sequence(s)
- Characterisation
- Conflict
- Structure
- Plot
- Dialogue
- Editing / montage
- Sound / soundtrack
- Aspects of mise-en-scene (such as lighting, colour, use of camera, costume, props…)
- Mood
- Setting
- Casting
- Exploitation of genre
Themes

- Justice / Morality
- The American Dream
- Death
- Father / Son Relationships
- Flawed Heroes / Anti-Heroes
- Corruption is Everywhere
- The Different Worlds of Men and Women
- The Conflict Between Respect and Legitimacy
- Good and Evil within Humanity
Themes / Ideas

• Morality/ pressure of family values
• We never see the results of the Corleone’s criminal activities on ordinary people – everyone who suffers deserves it in some way
• Police ineffective & corrupt (don’t see effective & honest cops). Don Vito has set up an alternative policing system
• Those who offend good man’s code (Woltz, Sollozzo, McCluskey, Sonny, Carlo) deserve what they get
• Could be said to represent nostalgic desire to return to the old days which reflects people’s concerns about the modern world
• Patriarchal male-dominated society. Man as breadwinner but real men spend time with family. Women as homemakers, cooks, sexual objects. Kay (naïve), Connie (spoilt, hysterical), Mama Corleone (would never question her husband). Male child valued over female. Masculinity as machismo valued over femininity. Toleration of misuse of women for sex
Key Sequences

- The Opening Sequence
- Michael at the wedding
- Michael at the hospital
- Michael in his father’s chair
- Michael’s killings
- Michael in Sicily
- Michael’s return
- Michael at his father’s funeral
- Baptism
- Final scene
The Opening Sequence

• How do the events in the opening sequence foreshadow what is to follow in the film?
• How are the themes of Death, Family, Morality and Justice established?
• Identify any key quotes.
• How are Don Vito, Sonny and Michael Corleone portrayed at the start of the film?
• How are setting and mise-en-scene used to create atmosphere?
Characterisation

• Large cast of over 30 characters

• 5 families: Corleones
  Tattaglias
  Barzinis
  Cuneos
  Straccis
Characters

Character Profiles

• Don Vito Corleone
• Michael Corleone
• Santino (Sonny) Corleone
• Fredo Corleone
• Tom Hagen
• Kay Adams

Consider these characters. How would you describe them? Think about their thoughts, actions, principles, morals... What do other characters think of them? Do they change in any significant way as the film progresses? Are they deserving of their fate?
Character Map

• 3 groups = Michael / allies / enemies

• Place Don Vito Corleone in the centre

• For each character add notes on:
  – Who they are / their biography
  – Their occupation
  – Their character traits / development
  – Their relationships with other characters (using arrows to show any connections)
Characterisation

Michael Corleone

- Clever/ college boy – prospective ‘senator’ or ‘mayor’ according to Vito.
- American army / war hero
- Sensitive – cares for Kaye / his father / Appollonia
- Strong bond with his father (wedding photo / hospital scene / garden)
- Disassociates himself from family business (“That’s my family, Kaye. That’s not me.”)
- Chivalrous (his courtships with Kaye and Appolonia). Not impulsive or sexually promiscuous like Sonny.
- Controlled (shows no fear at the hospital / carries out his first killings)
- Patient (waits it out in Sicily until it is safe to return and take action)
- Family man (loyal to his father and his wives until the end of the film)
- Turning point when his father is shot (“I’m with you now.”)
- Negative self-discovery – capable of murder (McLuskey & Sollozzo)
- Ruthless – will do what it takes to protect his father and their business. Arranges murder of his own brother-in-law and lies to his wife
- A monstrous criminal whom we identify & sympathise with. His revenge seems justified.
- Final scene – complete transformation info ‘The Don’
Portrayal of Female Characters

• Kay (naïve). Aware of the family business from the beginning but not willing to admit to her husband’s involvement at the end of the film. Takes Michael back after he abandons her.

• Connie (spoilt, hysterical, bullied). Gets everything she wants for her wedding day and doesn’t seem to question how it is provided. Tries to cover up for her abusive husband.

• Mama Corleone (would never question her husband). Has no dialogue with other characters. The homemaker / tranquil and smiling – happy in her role.
Conflict (Themes & Plot)

• Own family v. Mafia family
• Church (God) v. Mafia (Devil)
• Don Vito (good) v. Other Dons (bad)
• War hero v. Murderer (Michael)
• Men (active) v. Women (passive)
• Control v. Impulse
• Don Vito (benevolent) v. Michael (vindictive)
• Order (Mafia control) v. Chaos (Mafia wars)
• Domesticity (making a family) v. Business (making money & death)
• Young v. Old
• Honesty v. Hypocrisy
• Sicily v. USA
Conflict within Michael’s Character

- Defends country in a just war v. Mafia mobster
- Upholds Constitution v. Kills policeman
- Protects father v. Breaks father’s heart
- Protects family v. Kills sister’s husband
- Respectful to Apollonia v. Fails to protect Apollonia
- Loyal to second wife v. Lies to Kay
- Publicly renounces Satan v. Mass murderer
Sound / Soundtrack

• Refer to the presentation ‘Use of sound in The Godfather’

• Use of music & sound to fix down meaning of images & create mood e.g. use of music at wedding; role of use of screeching rails as Michael kills Sollozzo & McCluskey; use of organ music & sound in baptism/assassination scene

• Use of ‘lietmotifs’ – The Godfather theme, Michael’s theme & Sicily theme.
Essay Writing - Character

Choose a film or TV drama in which a complex character is revealed.
Show how the film or programme makers reveal the complexity and discuss to what extent this aspect of the character contributes to your personal response to the text.

Answers to questions on film and TV drama should address relevantly the central concern(s)/theme(s) of the text(s) and be supported by reference to appropriate techniques of film and TV drama such as: key sequence(s), characterisation, conflict, structure, plot, dialogue, editing/montage, sound/soundtrack, aspects of mise-en-scène (such as lighting, colour, use of camera, costume, props . . .), mood, setting, casting, exploitation of genre . . .
Structure – Filmic & Narrative

• Linear structure - speeds up/ gathering intensity
• Linear shift to parallel editing at end of film

• Built round religious ceremonies (wedding / funeral / baptism)
• Faustian - an arrangement in which an ambitious person surrenders moral integrity in order to achieve power and success (‘deal with the devil’)
Narrative Structure
Mysteries & Tension

• Opening wedding sequence & its foreshadowing
• Horse’s head sequence (leaving audience to fill narrative gaps in sequence)
• Carlo’s betrayal of Sonny (‘hanging’ enigma for 45 min)
• Sollozzo killing sequence & building of tension
The Godfather is lengthy & has more complex structure – 5 acts with 4 turning points:

1. Setup: initial situation – 2 plotlines: Don Vito & Michael
   – Turning point 1: Don Vito refuses Sollozzo (37.5min)

2. Complicating action: warfare
   – Turning point 2: Michael leaves Kay & goes to see father in hospital (59min)

3. Development 1: Michael saves father & kills Sollozzo & McCluskey
   – Turning point 3: Michael exiled to Sicily (93 min)

4. Development 2: Michael marries Apollonia who is killed; Sonny murdered; Michael returns to woo Kay
   – Turning point 4: handover of power to Michael (133.5min)

5. Climax: Don Vito dies & Michael takes revenge; he is the new Don Corleone
Other Narrative Structures

Can also use Todorov’s narrative structure of stability-disruption-return to stability:

• Stability: Opening sequence showing Don Vito’s power
• Disruption: Sollozzo, Don’s shooting, war
• Return to stability: Michael succeeds father & eliminates opposition
Narrative Structure – The Quest / The Hero’s Journey

- Hero in ordinary world: peacetime USA
- Reluctant hero
- Crosses threshold into underworld through love for father (mentor)
- Helped by allies: Clemenza
- Tested by enemies: Sollazzo, McCluskey, Barzini
- Approaches inmost world: becomes assassin
- Supreme ordeal: assassinates Sollozzo & McCluskey
- Reward: Apollonia
- Road back: return to USA
- Resurrection: new Godfather
- Elixir: power
Structure – The Myth

Myth – *in modern literature a theme or character type embodying an idea / historically a story of how a natural phenomenon / social custom came to be.*

The Godfather represents a perverse myth because family is evil – changes universal myth to tragedy in which Michael’s worship of his father turns him into a monster.
Plot

• The arrangement of events in the film (this may involve flashbacks or flash-forwards).
• Beginning > Middle > End.
• Exposition > Conflict > Climax > Falling Action > Resolution.
• Look at features of narrative structures.
Dialogue

• Plot developments
• Insights to character
• Highlights themes / ideas

“....I work my whole life, I don't apologize, to take care of my family. And I refused - to be a fool - dancing on the string, held by all those - bigshots. I don't apologize - that's my life....”

“That’s my family, Kaye. That’s not me.”

“Do you renounce Satan?”

“I do renounce him.”

“We're not murderers, despite of what this undertaker says.”
Use of camera

• Refer to presentation on ‘Camera Work used in The Godfather’
Editing / Montage

• Refer to the presentation ‘Editing in The Godfather’
Aspects of mise-en-scene

• Refer to the presentation ‘Mise-en-scene in The Godfather’

• Lighting (dark office / bright sun at wedding and in Sicily / soft light in hospital)

• Costume (army uniform v. funereal suits / Kaye’s bright outfit at start)

• Symbolic props (orange representing death / fishes)
Mood

- Relates to plot
- Relates to mise-en-scene
- Relates to music
- Relates to development of characters

- Violent / threatening / tense / romantic etc. Varying moods throughout the film.
Setting

- America/ Sicily - contrast
- Wealthy gangster land / seductive nature of family
- Italian society / men & women
- Michael’s isolation
- Coppola saw films as metaphor for the USA. Although set in post WWII 1940s, film reflects concerns of early 1970s (discontent at US role in Vietnam / corrupt politicians / failing justice system / police corruption / disintegration of nuclear family / effects of the profit motive / corruption of the American Dream / conspiracy theories about invisible forces controlling world events)
Casting

- Cast of relatively unknown actors (no baggage / stereotypical roles)
- Method actors – convincing performances
- Controversial choice of Brando
- Italian-Americans - authenticity
Exploitation of genre

Doesn’t fit the stereotypical notion of a single genre:

Gangster genre:
chronicle of criminal career – rise & fall (mob leader, corrupt cops, crime-spree couple, street gang, many films noir)
  – characters (wise guys, tough guys, psychopaths, gangsters’ molls, corrupt cops, bent lawyers, official heroes (good good guys), outlaw heroes (good bad guys))
  – dress (hats, suits)
  – props (guns, cars, telephones, drinks, cigarettes)
  – setting (city locations)

Thriller genre:
• Syntax: toys with audience expectations of violence – may occur or may be deferred & erupt when least expected; ordinary person thrust into nightmare who must eventually kill the monster

Romance
• Syntax: boy meets girls, boy loses girl, boy & girl reunited

Tragedy (Aristotle)
• Central hero with tragic flaw
• Dramatic high point which is a point if no return
• Hubris: hero cannot see own flaw
• Retribution for sins: hero dies when he realises what he has done
• Emotional catharsis for audience