

How to answer the comparative question

Comparative Question -- sample answer using TWO texts.

'Comparing texts allows us a deeper understanding of a theme or issue'.
Compare the texts you have studied in your comparative course in the light of the above statement. Support your comparisons by reference to the texts.

Of Mice and Men John Steinbeck 1937 (OMM)
A View from the Bridge Arthur Miller 1955 (AVTB)

Both AVTB and OMM explore a variety of issues including family, love, identity, violence and loyalty. For this particular purpose, however, I have chosen to focus on relationships as a comparison of a theme or issue in both texts. Both OMM and AVTB feature a central, dominant relationship. In AVTB it is a relationship between Eddie (E) and his niece Catherine (C) and in OMM it is the bond between George (G) and Lennie (L) that is focused on. These relationships differ in a number of obvious ways. E is a man in his forties and his niece C is in her late teens. In contrast, G and L are two men of similar age. Both relationships contain a central, dominant character. In AVTB it is E who plays this responsible role, whereas in OMM it is G who guides L and assumes responsibilities over his actions. In AVTB, C allows E to assume this role but she does not require it. However, in OMM, L needs G to guide his every action.

The stage that the relationships are at in both texts differ. Whereas G and L's relationship is relatively constant and unchanging, C in AVTB has reached a point where she is ready to break free from E and gain independence. The relationship between G and L is more balanced than that between E and C. G and L's lives are developing at a similar rate, whereas E and C are taking different routes. C is growing into a young woman and is ready to grow up, whereas L's childlike state is a constant feature of his personality. Though E and G both assume the responsible role in the relationship, their motivations for doing so differ. Whereas G and L's relationship is based on companionship, and G's objective is to take care of L, E's driving force for responsibility is derived from possessiveness, protectiveness and jealousy. There is a further difference in this regard in the nature of the control that the responsible characters have over the other. In OMM, G's control does not extend beyond ordering L what to do in a practical sense, whereas in AVTB, E wishes to control C's life on so many levels.

The relationship between G and L is more even, despite G's superior capability, than that of E and C. G relies on L for his physical strength and companionship and L needs G to guide his actions and take care of him. In AVTB, however, E does not 'need' C in any regard other than to keep her from developing her own life. C relies on E to an extent but this is more driven by her desire not to hurt her uncle. Both relationships are unusual. An uncle and his niece, and two men working together are both unconventional. In OMM the relationship is perfectly sustainable, however, whereas in AVTB the

relationship transcends the barriers of correctness and it becomes clear that E is in fact in love with C. Setting and work are dominant features in both relationships. Whereas in OMM, G and L are migrant workers, constantly on the move, in AVTB, E and C's life is more established. They live in an apartment and hence their relationship becomes more of an issue than in OMM. G and L's relationship is driven by a functional role, namely to go out and get work, whereas E and C's relationship is based around their interaction on a personal level more than anything else. G and L rely on each other to survive physically, whereas E and C's relationship is driven only by emotional needs. In OMM there is no 'complicating character' in the relationship. This differs from AVTB, however, where E's wife Beatrice (B) and Rodolpho (R), C's suitor complicate things from E's point of view. Whereas G and L's relationship is not open to threat, E and C for the very reason that it is wrong is very vulnerable to outside complications. The relationship between E and C is one-sided, certainly on some level, whereas the bond between G and L is deep-rooted and mutual. Both relationships feature strong love bonds, but in the case of E this love turns sexual and inappropriate. G's outlook in the relationship is reasonable and rational, whereas E's is quite the opposite. In AVTB there is much tension in the relationship between E and C, whereas in OMM the relationship continues on free of any underlying sense of wrongness or inappropriateness.

It is interesting to compare the fate of the characters in the relationships in both texts. Both relationships end in the death of one person. In AVTB, it is E, the 'dominant' character who comes to this tragic end, whereas in OMM, L, the 'weaker' does. The circumstances of the death differ in both texts. Whereas E's death is the result of revelation of deceit, hatred and treachery, L's death is an act of love by G. The stage where the relationship ends differs enormously. Whereas E and C's relationship ends in a state of unease, horror and anger, when G kills L nothing has changed in the relationship. G kills L as he is looking out across the water thinking about their common 'dream' and G remarks 'I ain't ever been mad, L, no really, I want you to know that'. G and L's relationship contained a common dream, whereas E and C could never share the same aspirations for a life together. G's love for L was deeper than his desire for his own happiness, whereas E's own selfish needs and naïve hopes dominated his actions. G's final decision to let L go, despite the prospect of loneliness in the future, contrasts with E's refusal to do so regarding C which determined his tragic end. Both AVTB and OMM give us an insight into relationships but from very different perspectives. The nature of both relationships tell us much about life and relationships.

THE COMPARATIVE QUESTION

Paper II Question 2 70 marks and 70 minutes to answer it.

From a long list of prescribed texts the Leaving Certificate pupil is invited to focus on THREE texts at Higher Level and TWO [sometimes THREE] at Ordinary Level. For the exam the candidate is expected to study these texts under a number of named headings including:

at ORDINARY LEVEL

*Theme

*Relationships

*Social Setting
*Aspects of Story: tension or climax or resolution

* Hero, Heroine, Villain
at Higher Level

- . The Cultural Context
- . Theme or Issue
- . Literary Genre
- . General Vision and Viewpoint

Comparing is a natural and instinctive activity. Comparing one text with another helps us to understand the individual texts - their unique strengths, qualities.

How to go about it.

First read through or look [in the case of film] at the chosen texts. Unlike the Main Text which is to be studied in depth the texts for the Comparative Question are to be approached differently. Put it this way. You have 70 minutes to write on THREE [at Ordinary Level usually TWO] texts and you talk about them in general under specific headings. There is no need to quote at length and the most important thing to remember re the Comparative Question is that you, just like the successful juggler would, "keep all the balls in the air" simultaneously.

To complicate matters the Comparative Question is sometimes divided into two parts. In part one the candidate is asked to write on ONE chosen text under a specific heading and in part two to write on the other TWO chosen texts. But in the question which asks you to focus on three texts at the one time the best thing to remember is the pupil who said:

'The thing to remember about the Comparative Question is: Whenever you mention a text, always mention the other text(s). That way you cannot avoid comparison'.

If a Martian were to look at the ideal Comparative answer it would see a page where the chosen texts are mentioned continually throughout each paragraph AND key words and phrases [cf. list below] are forever alerting the reader that you are comparing and contrasting from beginning to end.

Answering the question:

FIRST: Write down the name of the texts you have studied, the name of the author and the date. In a square bracket indicate the shorthand you will use when referring to these texts. No one has time to write out *Of Mice and Men* every time you want to mention the novel. So, MM will do and it saves time.
e.g.

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck (1937) [MM]

A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller (1954) [View]

On the Waterfront by Elia Kazin (1954) [WF]

KEY WORDS and PHRASES

These pivotal words and phrases will indicate to the reader of your work that you are engaged in the business of COMPARISON and CONTRAST.

Remember that the person marking your exam script is obliged to put a C for comparison or contrast in the right hand margin of your answer book everytime the candidate compares and contrasts. The more Cs there are, the better the chance that you will produce a successful and focused answer.

'In all three texts'

'Unlike'

'However'

'On the other hand'

'Whereas'

'Both'

'This compares well with'

'In exactly the same way'

Again in'

'this differs from'

The question is general in order to accommodate different combinations. But let's say that a question of theme is as follows:

'Compare the way a similar theme or issue is expressed in the texts you have studied for your comparative course.'

The Plough and the Stars [1926] Sean O'Casey [P&S] On the Waterfront [1954] Elia Kazan [OW] Regeneration [1991] Pat Barker [Reg]

Among the many themes in these three texts, such as relationships, violence, courage, the one I find most interesting/ engaging/ absorbing/ striking is the theme of individuality. In these texts all three main characters, Nora [P&S], Terry [OW], Sassoon [Reg], experience an identity crisis, they question who they are, they struggle to express their individuality. When we first meet Nora she is a confident, young, loving, ambitious wife. Terry on the other hand is a follower rather than a leader when we first see him on screen. He does what he is told and doesn't fully understand the situation that he finds himself in. This contrasts with Sassoon's very definite and dramatic rejection of the Military Cross and his soldier's declaration. Both Nora and Sassoon are strong-willed at the outset but Nora becomes weaker as the play progresses whereas Terry whose transformation from 'deaf and dumb' to 'canary' is gradual becomes more and more confident. We admire Sassoon on page one but Terry, by contrast, slowly earns our respect.

A character's individuality is revealed in many different ways: in how they dress, for example. Nora's hat, the gloves scene in OW, Sassoon's uniform, when compared and contrasted, tell us something important about their individuality. Nora is interested in creating domestic stability and love. Her birthday present symbolises her love for finery, her hopes and dreams. Sassoon, in uniform, hopes and fights for democracy. Unlike Nora he wears clothes that lack individuality for the common good. Initially, he will selflessly fight for his country but Nora rejects her country in favour of Jack and personal happiness. On the other hand 'Me, I'm with me' is Terry crude, self centred philosophy but when he puts on Edie's gloves his true individuality, a more sensuous and caring side, emerges.

Individuality is also found in what the characters say; in the decisions they make; in what they do; in how others view them. In all three characters discussed here their individuality is threatened and key moments from each text illustrate how each struggles and copes with this

Comparative Modes 2006

Higher: Theme/Issue; Cultural Context; Literary Genre

Ordinary: Theme/ Social Setting/ Aspects of Story: tension or climax or resolution

THEME/ISSUE - a main idea, a central preoccupation, a focus of the author

CULTURAL CONTEXT - where, when - what an individual, a group, a community

inherit at birth; those aspects of life that shape a life [gender, nationality, social status, politics, religion, place - rural/urban, value system]

LITERARY GENRE - how the story is told

SOCIAL SETTING - human interaction

TENSION - creating an interest, involvement of reader, viewer

CLIMAX - high point - danger or excitement - extreme emotion

RESOLUTION - outcome - the reasons for this outcome -by accident, by design

- happy or sad -

HOW TO PREPARE

Identify the theme/issue that interests you

List those aspects of the text which creates its cultural context

How is the story told - list FIVE aspects of each text

Pick TEN KEY QUOTATIONS from the text

Pick TWO KEY MOMENTS from each text