

Comparative Study – An Introduction

Ordinary Level

In these notes you will find general notes on all of the comparative modes. Remember that it is important to check which comparative modes are being examined in the year you are doing the Leaving Cert, and which modes you are studying in school. Most teachers focus on two of the three modes.

The comparative study question asks you to compare **two texts** under one of the **three modes of comparison**. (In this case, 'compare' means point out similarities and differences.)

Remember that the Department of Education requires you to study three texts, although in the past they have only asked you to compare any two texts you have studied. It is highly unlikely that all the questions in your year will suddenly require you to talk about three texts, but you should be aware that it is a possibility. As always, reading the questions very carefully is the key to success. Perhaps one question in a given year might mention a third text, but there is always a choice, so there is no need to panic if it does happen.

The comparative modes studied at Ordinary Level are:

1. **Theme** (2013 and 2014)
2. **Social Setting** (2013 and 2014)
3. **Relationships** (2014)
4. **Aspects of Story: Tension or Climax or Resolution** (2013)
5. **Hero, Heroine, Villain**

You need to know your comparative text well, but not in the same level of detail as your single text. When you are reading through your text, it is a good idea to keep the modes of comparison in mind.

Concentrate on *key moments* in each text. (The word 'moment' here can be taken to mean an entire chapter or scene.) A key moment in your text is one which illustrates or helps in the development of one of the chosen modes.

A key moment may be:

- A moment of conflict.
- A moment of resolution.
- A moment which shows the chosen theme very clearly.
- An occurrence or description which gives us an insight into the social setting.
- A pivotal moment in a relationship.

Key moments can overlap; one may be an illustration of both the social setting and a pivotal moment in the theme, for example.

When you are reading your comparative text, as well as keeping the modes in mind, you should think about your personal response. The examiners will be looking to see how well you engaged with the text. As you read, ask yourself:

- Did I like the characters?
- Would I like to have lived in that time or in that place? Why? Why not?
- Is the theme one to which I can relate?
- Do I like the way in which the author presents the theme?
- Do I find certain parts of the text funny or poignant or disturbing?

Note:

The word 'text' refers to books, films and plays.

The word 'author' refers to novelists, playwrights and film directors.

Theme

A theme is an issue or concern in the text which the writer is trying to explore. The theme is not the plot: don't confuse the two.

There can be several themes in a text besides the main one; it doesn't matter which one you pick as long as it is central to the texts you are studying.

When you are reading the text and thinking about this mode of comparison, ask yourself:

- How is the theme introduced?
- Is there a key moment that gives us an indication of the message the author is trying to explore?
- Does one of the central characters say or do something that sets us on the path of understanding the theme?
- Or is it conveyed by the minor characters or even the setting?
- How does the author develop this theme?
- Is it through a series of small events?
- Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort?
- How does the author interest us in the theme?
- Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?
- Is there a moment of crisis or a turning point in the text?
- Does the central character have to make a difficult decision? Does the character do the right thing?
- How is this decision linked to the theme?
- How is the theme resolved?
- Are you very clear on the author's view of the ideas explored in the theme?
- Have we learned anything about human behaviour or society in general from the exploration of this theme?
- Does the author's use of setting, imagery, motifs, lighting, costumes, special effects or music (if it's a film) add to your understanding of the theme?

Social Setting

The social setting is the kind of world in which the story takes place.

When you are reading the text and thinking about this mode of comparison, ask yourself:

- In what century or decade is the story set? Does the time matter? Could the story take place now or are things in our society very different?
- Where is the story set? Does the setting matter?
- Are there political issues (war etc.) which affect the lives of the characters?
- Do we learn a lot about the social life of that place or time by reading the text?
- Who holds the power in the text? Do they use that power wisely or do they abuse it?
- What are the protagonists' attitudes and values?
- Are there class distinctions?
- Are there race distinctions?
- Are there gender distinctions?
- Are children treated well?
- What are the manners and customs of that place/time?
- How does the daily life of the characters differ from life in 21st century Ireland?
- What are their attitudes towards religion, money, love, family etc.?
- Would you like to live in that time or place? Why? Why not?

Relationships

The vast majority of narrative texts centre on relationships. They can be relationships between lovers, friends, family or even enemies.

(The central relationship in a text can also be used as the theme of the text.)

When you are reading the text and thinking about this mode of comparison, ask yourself:

- How is the relationship introduced?
- Does the relationship change or develop as the narrative progresses?
- Is it through a series of small events?
- Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort?
- How does the author interest us in the relationship?
- Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?
- Is there a crisis or complication in the relationship?
- Does the central character have to make a difficult decision?
- Does the character do the right thing?
- How does this decision affect the relationship?
- Does the relationship end well?

Aspects of Story: Tension **or** Climax **or** Resolution

You are only required to talk about **one** of these aspects of story in your comparative answer. When you are reading the text and thinking about this mode of comparison, ask yourself:

Tension

- How is the reader drawn into the story?
- Does the author use flashbacks or hint at a possible outcome in a way that intrigues us and adds to the sense of tension?
- Do we care about a particular character or characters?
- Are we anxious for this character or characters because of challenges they have to face?
- Do we become more and more anxious for the character or characters as the text progresses?
- How does the author increase the level of tension? Do the challenges mount up to such an extent that we feel there is no way out for the character?

Climax

- This is the moment of greatest tension in the text.
- The issues which have caused mounting tension now come to a head.
- How does the author create a sense of extreme tension in this section of the text?
- Do the stage directions/ camera angles, lighting, soundtrack/ descriptions, use of dynamic verbs, dialogue etc. add to the extreme tension here?
- Do you know how the issue will be resolved?

Resolution

- How does the story end?
 - Is it a happy or a sad ending for any or all of the characters?
 - Are all the issues resolved or are there still some loose ends?
 - If there is not a complete resolution, what is the effect of this on the reader?
 - What feelings are you left with as a result of the resolution?
 - What is your final impression of the characters?
 - How do you think they behaved?
- (Hint: very few Leaving Cert texts end happily!)

Hero / Heroine / Villain

A hero is someone with whom the reader can relate. He or she must be central to the plot and we must be interested in their behaviour as the text progresses.

The hero does not have to be perfect. In fact, it is almost certain that he or she will have faults and failings. This makes the hero human and ensures that the reader can relate to him or her. At the same time, the hero should be admirable in some way or ways.

Text 1: Hero / Heroine

Who is the hero of the text?

How is the hero **introduced**?

Does the author use language/lighting/sound/camera angles etc. to show us that the character is a villain?

What do you admire about the hero?

What faults does the hero have?

What **challenges** does the hero have to overcome?

Does the hero act foolishly or mistakenly at any point?

Is there a **moment of crisis (climax)** during which the hero has to make a difficult decision?

What does the hero decide to do?

How does this decision affect the **outcome of the plot**?

What happens to the hero at the end of the text?

What is your **final impression** of the hero?

When you are comparing your texts, you might find it helpful to make a table like the one below. This sort of table can be used for each of the three modes of comparison.

Hero / Heroine / Villain

	Text 1	Similar or different?	Text 2
Introduction			
Development			
Climax			
Resolution			
Final impression			

Villain

Who is the villain in the text?

How is the villain **introduced**?

Does the author use language/lighting/sound/camera angles etc. to show us that the character is a villain?

Is their villainous nature clear from the start?

Are there any aspects of the villain's character that you admire?

What motivates the villain?

As the plot progresses, does the villain's behaviour add to the tension?

Is there a moment of crisis (**climax**) when the villain does something which seriously affects the outcome of the plot?

What effect does this action have on the other characters?

Does the villain succeed or is he or she defeated?

What is your **final impression** of the villain?

Do you consider him or her to be a **completely unredeemed** villain?

Approaching the Question

This section is worth 70 marks and should take you around an hour to complete. You will be asked to answer **one** question, A or B.

The questions are generally divided into two parts, (a) and (b) which are worth 30 and 40 marks respectively. Sometimes there are two 15 mark questions followed by one 40 mark question. This is not written in stone, however, so check before you begin your answer.

You may be asked, in part of a question, to answer on one of your texts separately.

Points to note:

- When you read the question, underline the key words, 'one of the texts', 'key moment', 'describe', 'explain' etc.
- Plan your answer. It is well worth taking the time to do this.
- Think in terms of key moments; this will ensure that you refer to the text and will help you to keep the sequence of events in the right order.
- When you are planning your answer, try to think of approximately *five* key moments which illustrate the mode you have chosen.
- In your introductory paragraph, name the *text*, the *author* and the *mode* you have chosen.
- You must *compare* your texts and answer *on the mode* you have chosen.
- Do not, under any circumstances, simply summarise the plot.
- When you are comparing texts, do not write a separate paragraph for each text. Instead, you must constantly compare one with the other.
- Use a selection of the link words and phrases below when comparing texts. The examiner will be looking for them.

Link words and phrases:

Likewise	Conversely
Similarly	On the contrary
Also	Whereas
In the same way	Differs from
In the same manner	However
Just as	In contrast
Both texts/characters	This is different to
Each text	While
Like	Unlike

Hint: Using a comparative word or phrase at the start of a sentence whenever possible can help to ensure that you compare the texts. 'Unlike Alec and Jerry, Michael and Rory do not have to overcome difficulties created by class differences.'

Comparing the texts

The examiners' reports show that the two most common faults in the comparative study section of Paper 11 are:

1. Students simply summarising the plot.
2. Students treating each text separately and not comparing them.

Listed below are some sentence structures you could use when linking texts. In these sentences, T1 and T2 refer to the texts, C1 and C2 refer to the characters and A1 and A2 refer to the authors.

- We can see in both T1 and T2 that.....

- Like C1, C2 resists the pressure to conform.....
- I feel that there are many similarities between C1 and C2.
- Unlike C1, C2.....
- The same theme is handled completely differently in T2....
- A1 uses humour while A2 treats the theme more seriously....
- Both characters have to deal with....but C1 handles it very differently to C2....
- In both T1 and T2, the characters face a crisis.....but the outcome is very different.....

It cannot be stressed enough that simply retelling the story will not get you marks. The examiner knows the plot and it is assumed you do too.

In order to get high marks, you need to:

1. Answer the question asked (30%)
2. Make sure every paragraph develops that answer (30%),
3. Use varied and appropriate language (30%)
4. Keep an eye on your spelling and grammar (10%). Think about the first two points when you are planning your answer.

Make sure that you name the text and the author in your opening paragraph. You should also address the question at this point, stating your view on the topic.

The text I have chosen as part of my comparative study course is the film "Inside I'm Dancing," directed by Damien O'Donnell. The theme on which I have focused is that of escape.

The text I have chosen as part of my comparative study course is the film "Inside I'm Dancing," directed by Damien O'Donnell. The relationship I found particularly interesting was that between Michael Connolly and Rory O'Shea.

As you move through your answer, make sure that each and every paragraph answers the question asked. It is a good idea to refer to the question in the first sentence of each paragraph as this will ensure that you stay focused.