

Introduction to Comparative Study

The comparative study question asks you to compare and contrast **two texts** under **one** of the **three modes of comparison**.

The comparative modes for the exam in June 2014 are:

General Vision and Viewpoint

Theme

Cultural Context

You need to know your comparative text well, but not in the same level of detail as your single text.

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 cultural context.
- A pivotal moment in a friendship.

Key moments can overlap: one may be an illustration of both the cultural context 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 text?
- Do I find certain parts of the text funny or poignant or disturbing?

General Vision and Viewpoint

This mode requires you to examine the broad outlook on life as it is presented in your chosen text. Focus on the overall impact the text makes on you.

As you read, ask yourself:

- Is the story optimistic or pessimistic?
- Is it realistic?
- What are the attitudes and values of the characters?
- What aspects of life are highlighted in the text?
- What sort of relationships do we see? Are they dysfunctional, or do they help the characters to develop in a mature and healthy manner?
- Are the characters free to make their own choices in life?
- Does the imagery in the text add to your feeling of optimism or pessimism?
- What is the writer's tone? Does it influence your feeling of optimism or pessimism?
- Is there a key scene where we clearly see the general vision and viewpoint expressed?
- Does the ending contribute to your feeling of optimism or pessimism?
- If the general vision and viewpoint is pessimistic, is there any note of hope at all in the text?

Past questions have tended to focus on:

- How the general vision and viewpoint of a text is determined by the success or failure of a character in his or her efforts to achieve fulfilment
- How the reader's attitude towards a central character can shape the general vision and viewpoint
- How you can to your understanding of the general vision and viewpoint in your chosen text
- The way in which a key moment or moments can influence your understanding of the general vision and viewpoint of a text
- How the general vision and viewpoint is shaped by the readers feeling of optimism or pessimism in reading a text
- Your understanding of the general vision and viewpoint in your chosen text
- Which aspects of the text shaped your emotional response and helped to construct the general vision and viewpoint
- What you enjoyed about the general vision and viewpoint of your chosen text

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.

It does not matter what theme you choose, as long as it is central to the text. You will not be able to develop your answer properly if you choose a minor theme. The theme we are studying is that of **ESCAPE**.

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?

Past questions have tended to focus on:

- What insights you gained from studying the theme
- How the study of a particular text changed or reinforced your view of the theme
- The way in which key moments can heighten your awareness of a particular theme
- How the presentation of the theme can add to the impact of the text
- How the theme helps to maintain your interest in the text

Cultural Context

The cultural context 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?
- Do we learn a lot about the social life of that place or time by reading the text?
- 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?

Past questions have tended to focus on:

- The way in which the world or culture the characters inhabit affects the storyline
- The way in which the world or culture they inhabit shapes the characters' attitudes and values
- What is interesting about the world or culture of the text
- How the author establishes the cultural context

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 may be divided into two parts, (a) and (b) which are worth 30 and 40 marks respectively, or asked as one 70 mark 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.
- 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

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. Avoid falling into the trap of simply describing the cultural context, for example, without saying what effect it has on the characters' lives.

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.

Film Language

1. The Shot—the image that is seen on screen until it is replaced by another image through some type of editing technique.

2. Framing—how the object will be positioned within the shot, or how much of the frame of the movie screen the object will occupy.

Long Shot—the object on the screen appears small or appears to be seen from some distance away. It gives the viewer a sense of time and place.

Close-Up—the object or subject takes up nearly 80 percent of the screen space. It forces the viewer to look at only what the director intended.

Medium Shot—a “neutral shot” that is probably the most common type of shot and is a compromise between the long shot and the close-up. Most often, the character is framed from the waist up.

3. Focus—the degree of clarity or texture through which the camera lens shows an image.

Soft Focus—a slight blurring of the image in order to, for example, create uncertainty or obscure identity or soften facial features.

Rack Focus—the sudden shift used to bring either the background or the foreground suddenly into focus.

Deep Focus—allows for all objects in the foreground as well as in the background to remain in focus.

4. Angles—the placement of the camera in relation to the subject.

Low Angle—the camera shoots from below the subject.

High Angle—the camera shoots from above the subject.

Eye Level—another “neutral shot” that places the viewer at eye level with the subject.

5. Camera Movement

Pan—pivoting of the camera along the horizontal axis, often from left to right, to take in (for example) surroundings or a situation.

Tilt—movement of the camera along the vertical axis up or down.

Zoom—a change in the focal length of the lens, making the object appear to move closer or farther away.

Tracking or Dolly Shots—movement of the camera itself to move us through the action or imaginative space of the film.

6. Lighting—the principal source of light on a movie set, called “key lighting.”

Low-Key—used to create darkness, shadows, and patches of bright key light.

High-Key—distinguished by its brightness, openness, and lack of shadows or

contrasts between light and dark.

Neutral—lighting that is even and balanced throughout the shot.

7. Sound—dialogue, music, or sound effects used to create an effect on the viewer.

Diegetic—any sound that could logically be heard by a character within the movie environment.

Nondiegetic—sound that cannot be heard logically by characters within the film.

Internal Diegetic—internal sounds that one character hears (for example, in memory) but others in the scene do not.

8. Editing—the methods by which a director chooses to move from one shot to another.

The Fade—the slow fading away of an image on screen until the screen itself becomes entirely black.

The Dissolve—the slow fading out of an image on screen, but instead of fading all the way to black, the image is replaced by another that is slowly fading in.

The Crosscut—parallel editing which allows the director to show that events occurring in different spaces are happening simultaneously.

The Flashback and the Flash-Forward—connected shots designed to give the viewer important information about what has happened in the past.

The Eye-Line Match—a series of three or more shots used to show point of view or the thoughts of a character.

9. Mise en Scène—briefly, a term used to describe what appears on film in a scene, such as set, costumes, props, lighting, and blocking.

*Source: John Golden, *Reading in the Dark*, Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001