

Comparative Study

‘A person is often greatly influenced by his or her social setting.’

Show how the social setting greatly influences a character in one of the texts on your comparative study.

2008 Leaving Certificate Examination

Key words:

Money

Marriage

Gender differences

Attitude towards love and marriage

The text I have studied as part of my comparative course is John B. Keane's tragic play, Sive. It is clear from the outset that the world in which Sive lives influences her so greatly that it ultimately leads to her being pushed into a situation from which she sees no escape but suicide. Were it not for the setting, the attitude of those around her to money and marriage, and the clear power imbalance between men and women, then I do not believe Sive would have met with such a terrible end.

Sive is set in a remote, hilly farm in the south of Ireland. Life in the house is primitive and the Glavin farm is on poor, boggy land. This is a difficult place to make a living, and the harshness of the setting is reflected in the hardness of characters such as Mena and Thomasheen. They are so keen to ensure a comfortable and secure future for themselves that they are prepared to sell Sive to the lecherous old farmer, Sean Dota. If the Glavin family's situation was not so desperate, I do not think Sive would be faced with such an appalling prospect.

The isolation of the Glavin farm makes it possible for Mena to isolate Sive from the outside world and thus to bully and browbeat her into submission when Sive voices her horror at the thought of the match.

A key moment which shows the way in which Mena isolates Sive in an effort to force her to agree to the marriage and thus make Mena's future more secure occurs in Act 1, Scene 3. Mena and Sive are alone in the kitchen and Mena takes the opportunity to attempt once more to make Sive accept the match. She tells Sive that she would be wealthy and have 'the

handling of thousands and the fine clothes and perfumery'. We can understand why Mena, who has known only poverty in her own life, would find such a prospect enticing. Sive, however, is unmoved, saying 'I do not want to give offence, but I will never marry such a man. Seeing that gentle persuasion has failed, Mena shows her true colours and tells Sive in no uncertain terms that she will not be going back to school any more, nor will she be sharing a room with Nanna. She thus makes Sive a prisoner in her own home, and effectively cuts her off from any sources of help or comfort. Alienated and alone, Sive is now more vulnerable than ever.

Mena's motivation is money, nothing more and nothing less. It is because of money that she and Thomasheen Sean Rua contrive to make the match between Sive and Sean Dota. Mike, although he loves his niece, is ultimately won over to their side by his desire to gain some wealth. He tells Mena that 'money is the best friend a man ever had'. He is corrupted by the thought of the £200 and betrays Sive in order to get it. Thomasheen has his own agenda: if he is paid for arranging the match he will at last be able to marry a local widow and will have the chance of a better life. In their greed, the three adults are prepared to ruin a young girl's life and chance of love. It is clear that the poverty of the world in which Sive lives has a huge effect on her life.

Mena and Thomasheen are prepared to sell Sive and condemn her to an entirely unsuitable match because their view of marriage is that it is nothing more than a business transaction. Thomasheen is deeply scornful of any talk of romance, and humiliates Mike when he suggests that Sive will want true love in her life. He astutely points out that there is no love in the marriage between Mike and Mena, caustically asking Mena if, when Mike came home from the bog, he ever told her that 'the length of the day was like the length of a million years when he was separated from you?' He is equally scornful of Liam's written words of love to Sive, saying that he 'will never have a woman the way he is going about it!'

Thomasheen and Mena do not understand love in the way that Sive and Liam do, and between them they bring Mike around to their way of thinking. They sully the love between Sive and Liam Scuab by persuading Mike that Liam Scuab will use Sive for his own pleasures and abandon her if she falls pregnant, just as they claim Liam's cousin did to Sive's mother. Mike is easily won around to this viewpoint, as it is something he suspects anyway. He turns his back on his better nature, and does not even listen to his own mother when she says that there is 'a sweet thing' in the love between Sive and Liam Scuab. The young couple are cruelly kept apart, and Sive's happiness is destroyed, along with her hope for the future. This drives her to such despair that she no longer wishes to live.

Sive's situation is a desperate one, and that is also because she is a young woman in a place

and time where that means she is essentially without the power to live her life the way she wants. She lives in a male-dominated world in which the men own the land and control the money. As a penniless girl, she is not even an attractive marriage prospect for most of the men in the area. When Mike hears that a wealthy farmer wants to marry her, he is astonished: 'What farmer of that size would take her without money?' Mena, for her part, had to marry Mike because that was the best match she could make with the small dowry she brought with her.

Sive is a beautiful, intelligent, well-educated girl of around eighteen years of age, yet she must obey her uncle's wishes and cannot even see the man she loves without his permission. When Mike finds her talking to Liam in the kitchen, he sends Sive to her room and forbids Liam to see her again. I think it is clear that Sive's life is greatly influenced by the fact that she is a woman in this patriarchal society.

The combination of all the factors I have mentioned are enough to ruin Sive's life and drive her to utter despair. Isolated, powerless and left with no hope, the innocent young girl is driven to taking her own life. This is a tragic end and this shocking outcome is undoubtedly a result of the cruel, harsh world in which Sive lives.

Part B

The other text I have studied as part of my comparative course is the film Casablanca, directed by Michael Curtiz. I believe that the heroine - Ilsa Lund - is, like Sive, greatly influenced by her social setting in which she lives. However, I think she has more control over her life than does Sive, and as a result her fate - while sad - is certainly not as tragic as Sive's.

Unlike Sive, Ilsa does not live in an isolated place. We see her in two settings: Casablanca and Paris. Both are large, bustling cities and Ilsa's life there is far more cosmopolitan and glamorous than is Sive's in the Kerry mountains. However, like Sive, Ilsa is affected by the places in which she finds herself. She is far from her home in Oslo, and in both Paris and Casablanca, she is fleeing from the Nazis. Neither Sive nor Ilsa is entirely secure or settled in their respective settings. They are therefore more vulnerable to manipulation by others, and neither woman has much support from those around them. They are both in hostile settings, Sive in a domestic battleground and Ilsa in a war-torn world. I believe that this lack of security and support affects Sive and Ilsa and results in their having to make very difficult life choices.

In both texts, money is vitally important. In Sive, having money means being beholden to nobody, and its lure is so great that even Mike is willing to sell his own niece into an unsuitable marriage. Similarly, in Casablanca, having money means being free. Those who can afford exit visas can get to America and start a new life. Interestingly, neither Ilsa nor Sive is unduly concerned with money, even though it governs the lives of most of those around them. Still, neither woman can avoid being influenced by a world in which greed plays such an important role. Sive is sold in a 'terrible auction' and Ilsa must battle to get exit visas for herself and her husband. Both women struggle to fight for their own causes in a world where 'life is cheap' and where few care more about their happiness than about making money. Ilsa, however, is fortunate. Unlike Sive, she has one supporter who values what is right over what is profitable. Whereas Sive is betrayed by her Uncle Mike who ultimately gives into the 'great temptation' of money, Ilsa is the beneficiary of Rick's nobility and selflessness.

Rick's actions in this instance are admirable, but they are also another example of the way in which the social setting of the text affects the characters. Like Sive, Ilsa lives in a male-dominated world. In both texts, a woman's only real hope for her future is to marry well and her happiness depends on that man being good and kind. Women are objectified to a certain extent in both texts. Rick treats his lover Yvonne with callous disregard, and Capt. Renault chides him for being so 'extravagant, throwing away women like that'. Capt. Renault exploits women, trading sexual favours for exit visas, and Rick seems generally tolerant of such behaviour, much like Nanna when she tells Sive that Sean Dota's vicious pass at her is just the way all men, old or young, behave. Women seem to have little power in the world of the text. Before he knows the identity of the woman accompanying Laszlo to Casablanca, Rick wonders why he doesn't just leave her and flee alone as it would be easier. Capt. Renault replies that he 'has seen the woman' and implies that she is so attractive that Laszlo will want to keep her with him. Ilsa's beauty is her greatest asset, and the director ensures that we are constantly reminded of this. Her costumes are stylish and elegant, and she is shot in flatteringly soft focus in the close-ups. Like Sive, Ilsa's beauty makes her an object of desire, but Ilsa is more fortunate in that the men who want her for their own are both decent and honourable men, unlike the lecherous Sean Dota. Still, neither woman is free to do exactly as she wishes, and both of their fortunes are tied to the men in their lives. It is clear that in both texts, women's relative powerlessness means that they do not have as much control over their own futures as they desire. Ilsa herself says as much to Rick, telling him 'You'll have to think for both of us, for all of us', when she cannot decide whether or not she should stay with Laszlo.

In both texts, marriage is held up as the ideal. Other forms of love are not acceptable: just as Sive is tainted by her mother's unwed state, so would Ilsa be disgraced if she were to divorce

Laszlo and marry Rick. She may love Rick more, but she is married to another man so she cannot be with him. Both Sive and Ilsa are restricted by the moral values of the society in which they live and by the fact that they are not seen as independent individuals but are expected to either stay married or marry well. Unlike Sive, Ilsa is willing to consider flaunting society's moral codes and she does tell Rick that she still loves him and wants him. Rick, however, ultimately reinforces the importance of marriage by telling Ilsa at the airport that she must go with Laszlo and that he needs her wifely support if he is to continue his resistance work. Love is all well and good, but it does not triumph over all in either text. However, although neither woman ends up with the man she truly loves, Sive's end is far more tragic than Ilsa's. Ilsa does admire, respect and even love her husband, albeit not in the same way she loves Rick. Her situation at the end of the text may not be perfect, but it is far better than poor Sive's. She is the ultimate victim of her social setting and is utterly defeated by it. Ilsa at least lives to have some chance of future happiness when 'this crazy world' returns to post-war normality.