

Theme or Issue Comparative Study Q (b) 40-Mark Sample

Macbeth and *A Doll's House*

At Leaving Cert English (Higher), candidates must answer on Shakespearean Drama. The Shakespearean play can be studied on its own for SECTION I – The Single Text or as an element in SECTION II, The Comparative Study.

The Higher Level Comparative Modes for Examination in 2023 are:

- i. General Vision and Viewpoint
- ii. Literary Genre
- iii. Theme or Issue

Exam Focus

In Part (b) 40-mark Comparative Study questions, you are required to:

- ◆ respond to the question, comparing your two chosen texts
- ◆ discuss the particular aspect/s of the mode you have chosen
- ◆ explain the impact these aspect/s have on the reader or audience

Selected Texts

Macbeth (William Shakespeare)

A Doll's House (Henrik Ibsen)

- ◆ The following Part (b) 40-mark sample answer uses *Macbeth* as one of the two prescribed texts for comparison.
- ◆ The candidate would not have chosen *Macbeth* for either the Single Text section or for the Part (a) 30-mark Comparative Study question.

Exam Focus

In the Comparative Study two-part question:

Part (a) requires discussion of **one** prescribed text (30 marks)

- ◆ (Aim for around 400 words over 30 minutes)

Part (b) requires comparison of **two** other prescribed texts (40 marks)

- ◆ (Aim for around 600 words over 40 minutes)

Sample Question

Theme or Issue

'The experience of the central character can highlight the complex nature of a theme or issue for a reader.'

- (b) Compare the extent to which the experience of the central character highlighted the complex nature of the same theme or issue in each of **two other** comparative texts you have studied. Develop your response with reference to your chosen texts. (40)

Sample Answer

1. The theme of conflict is explored in both 'Macbeth' and 'A Doll's House'. In each play the central character, Macbeth and Nora, faces challenges. However, the depth of Macbeth's experience is much greater than that of Nora due to Shakespeare's use of heightened language. The audience is able to experience Macbeth's psychological turmoil through his dramatic language. He knowingly destroys himself as he struggles to obtain and hold onto the Scottish crown. In contrast, the audience witnesses Nora's struggle for self-identity rather than participating in her sufferings. This is less complex. We know from early on that she simply wants to be a more independent person.
2. While Macbeth waits for his wife's signal that Duncan's murder scene is set, Macbeth visualises an approaching world of moral confusion due to his act. His heightened imagination uses dramatic personification, 'withered Murder' who stalks the land with 'stealthy pace'. His inner conflict is intense. He fears that the 'sure and firm-set earth' will 'Hear' his footsteps as he goes to murder his king and kinsman. The audience is shocked by the violent depths to which Macbeth will go to achieve his goal.
3. In contrast, the audience observes rather than participates in Nora's turmoil over the possibility that Krogstad's letter will reveal her loan and forgery to her husband. She exclaims to herself, 'now we are lost'. The stage directions reveal her 'suppressed cry' while she 'rushes through the room'. While Nora confesses her crime, 'I have forged a name' as does Macbeth, 'I have done the deed', the audience does not feel the same intricate exploration of the theme of self-conflict.
4. Macbeth explores the harrowing consequences of his action which he knows will follow his criminal act. He is fully aware that he has sacrificed his peace of mind because of his ambition. He admits he has destroyed his peace of mind forever by murdering sleep which 'knits up the ravelled sleeve of care'. The audience feels Macbeth's deep anguish in his exclamation of instant regret at what he has done, 'wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!' Nora's despair at her predicament is also upsetting to experience, 'never see the children again'. But the audience sympathetically observes rather than entering Macbeth's tormented mind.
5. The resolution of Nora's interior conflict is conveyed in the stage directions, a 'door is heard shutting ominously in the lock'. The newly liberated woman is leaving behind patriarchal society to seek her true identity. Throughout the play, there has been no mystery about the kind of conflict she experienced. But Macbeth's conflict was much more complicated and multi-layered. As someone who was once honourable, he himself struggled for a long time to come to terms with his personal conflict between good and evil.

6. In the end, Macbeth understands that he has defeated himself and he takes the responsibility for his downfall. He made a catastrophic moral choice, destroying the better part of himself. His wasted life is 'a walking shadow'. In contrast, Nora seems to blame her predicament on others – especially Torvald, 'I saw you were not the man I had taken you for'. She blames the patriarchal society rather than her acceptance of it, 'I have been your doll-wife just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child'.
7. Both central characters are caught up in conflict with others, with society and with themselves. But in my opinion, the complexity of the theme of conflict is seen much more in Shakespeare's play than in Ibsen's.

(570 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ Good introduction responding to the question, focusing on the mode of Theme or Issue and taking a comparative approach.
- ◆ Interesting focus on the different degrees of inner conflict experienced by both central characters.
- ◆ Sustained discussion on the relative treatment of conflict as a key theme in both dramas (e.g. the 'multi-layered' nature of conflict experienced by Macbeth in paragraph 5).
- ◆ Effective use of illustrative reference and accurate quotation – particularly in paragraphs 3, 4 and 6.
- ◆ Language use is reasonably controlled throughout. Top-grade standard, overall.