

Comparative Study Explained

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.)

The comparative modes we will be studying for the exam in June 2013 are:

Social Setting

Tension or Climax or Resolution

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 friendship.

Key moments can overlap; one may be an illustration of both the social setting and a moment of great tension, 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?

Note:

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

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

Aspects of Story: Tension OR Climax OR Resolution

2004 Leaving Certificate Exam

1. Tension, climax, and resolution are important aspects of good story-telling.
 - (a) Choose one of these aspects (tension or climax or resolution) and describe a key moment in one of the texts you studied which shows this aspect clearly. (30)
 - (b) Compare this key moment to a key moment in another text you studied for your comparative course, and point out how it is similar and/or different.
N.B. You must keep your focus on the aspect of story (tension or climax or resolution) which you chose in part (a) above. (40)

OR

2. Tension, climax, and resolution help to make any story more enjoyable.
 - (a) Name a text on your comparative course in which you enjoyed the tension or climax or resolution. Explain what you enjoyed about the tension or climax or resolution of the text you have chosen. (30)
 - (b) Keeping your focus on the part played by tension or climax or resolution, compare the text you have already chosen with another text on your comparative course. Begin your answer with one of these opening statements:
 - *My second text, X, was also enjoyable...*
 - *My second text, X, was not as enjoyable...* (40)

2006 Leaving Certificate Exam

1. (a) Name a text on your comparative course where you found that the tension **or** climax **or** resolution held your interest in the story being told.

Explain what it was about the tension **or** climax **or** resolution you have chosen that held your interest. (30)
 - (a) Compare the way **the same aspect** (tension **or** climax **or** resolution) in another of your comparative texts held your interest in the story being told.
Support your answer by referring to each text. (40)

OR

2. The following are key aspects of stories: tension **or** climax **or** resolution.
 - (a) Choose **one** of these aspects and describe its importance in any one of the texts on your comparative course. Illustrate your points by reference to a key moment from the text. (30)
 - (b) Focusing on the aspect of story you chose for part (a) above, show how the text you wrote about is similar to or different from another text on your course. In your answer make sure to focus on tension **or** climax **or** resolution. (40)

Sample Answer – 2004 Leaving Cert Exam

Note: The sample answers in these notes are longer than you would be expected to write in the exam. However, I hope that by showing you all of the possible areas that can be explored, you will be able to focus on those that seem most relevant to your study of the texts.

1. Tension, climax, and resolution are important aspects of good story-telling.
 - (a) Choose one of these aspects (tension or climax or resolution) and describe a key moment in one of the texts you studied which shows this aspect clearly. (30)

The text I have studied as part of my comparative course is John. B. Keane's tragic play Sive. The aspect of story I believe contributes most to the story-telling in Sive is the tension that exists from the opening moments to the tragic end.

A key moment which I believe shows the tension very clearly and also illustrates what a superb story teller John B. Keane is occurs in Act 1 Scene 3. Unbeknownst to the girl, Sive's unloving and unscrupulous aunt Mena has agreed to the matchmaker's plan to sell the innocent young girl in marriage to the lecherous old farmer Seán Dóta in exchange for £200. Sive is deeply in love with a young man called Liam Scuab, but is slightly suspicious that there is a plan afoot which involves her and Seán Dóta. Her worst fears are realized one afternoon when she arrives home from school late – her bicycle had a puncture again - and Mena gets her alone in order to explain the plan and attempt to persuade her to agree with it.

The tension in this scene begins the moment Mena speaks. Unusually, she is kind and considerate to Sive, offering her tea and cake and saying that she will have to get new tubes for Sive's old bicycle tyres. This is so unlike Mena and is such a contrast to the way she behaved the last time Sive was late for the same reason that the audience is immediately on alert. Part of the tension here is created by the fact that poor Sive, who is far too innocent and gentle to cope with a woman as tough and amoral as Mena, is surprised and 'befuddled' by this sudden show of kindness on her aunt's part, but is not suspicious. The audience, having

been privy to the plan hatched by Thomasheen and Mena, know that Mena is just following Thomasheen's advice to 'Be silky then, be canny!' We are keenly aware that this was not the only option the pair discussed, and that if this approach should fail, Mena will more than likely fall back on a harsher method. The tension is heightened by the fact that we know Mena will fail: there is no possibility of Sive instantly agreeing to marry the man she has described in tones of revulsion as an 'ould sick thing'.

Mena tells Sive that she 'won't have much more of that schooling now' as she forces Sive to sit down, and Sive is bewildered. Mena carries on quickly, telling Sive how lucky she is to have the chance to marry so well and to have 'the handling of thousands and the fine clothes and perfumery'. Sive's agitation is obvious as she 'shakes her head continually' and begs Mena not to ask her to do such a thing. Sive's pleas may touch our hearts, but we know that Mena is ruthless and utterly determined to have her way in this. The young girl and the older woman are worlds apart in their view of life, and it is plain that they will not come to an easy agreement.

As Mena talks, she pushes Sive down into the chair and stands behind her with her hands on the girl's shoulders. This is a clever piece of staging as the audience can now see both women's faces but they cannot see one another's. Mena's face 'becomes shrewd' and Sive stares 'vacantly' at the audience. Mena's position behind and above Sive adds to the sense of tension. Sive is trapped and vulnerable now and at Mena's mercy, not that Mena has any mercy at all!

Mena changes tack now when she realises that simple persuasion won't work. She cunningly makes a reference to Sive's birth, saying the girl will change her mind when she thinks of the way she was born. Sive's illegitimacy has been a source of tension already in the play, so the audience is on tenterhooks, as is Sive, wondering what version of the story Mena will tell. Mena slyly and cruelly tries to break Sive's spirit by telling her that her father abandoned her mother and 'was never a father'. She tells Sive that her mother died of shame as a result. To her chagrin, Sive is not as crushed as she expected by this story, and just wants to know about her father and what he was like. Now Mena shows her true colours, turning viciously on Sive and telling her that she is 'a bye-child, a common bye-child – a bastard!' This, while not completely unexpected in the light of Mena's previous behaviour, is nonetheless shocking for the audience in that Sive is such a gentle, sweet girl and undeserving of such treatment. The

contrast between the pair and Mena's mounting anger creates a compelling if disturbing tension in the play.

At this stage, Mena drops all pretence at kindness and 'roughly pushes [Sive] back in her chair when the distraught girl attempts to get up. Mena is not slow to resort to physical violence and the tension increases when she shoves Sive back down and, taking her schoolbag, flings it across the room. She announces that Sive will not be going to school any more, nor will she be sharing a bedroom with Nanna. It is obvious that Mena will have her way no matter what. Bitterly and angrily, she tells Sive that at her age she would have jumped at the chance to escape the poverty of her home. She denounces romance as 'rameish and blather' and tells Sive to go to her room and think about what she has said. Sive instinctively makes to go to her old room, but stops short when she remembers Mena's instructions, and exits instead by the far door to Mena's room.

The audience is left shaken by this encounter between the pair, and wondering how Sive can possibly fight such an unscrupulous and determined opponent as Mena. Although this is not a comfortable scene, it is gripping because of the way the tension mounts until Mena sends the defeated and distressed Sive out of the room.



1. (b) Compare this key moment to a key moment in another text you studied for your comparative course, and point out how it is similar and/or different.

N.B. You must keep your focus on the aspect of story (tension or climax or resolution) which you chose in part (a) above. (40)

Another text I have studied as part of my comparative course is the film Casablanca, a romantic drama directed by Michael Curtiz. A key moment in the film which I believe shows the tension clearly occurs when Ilsa goes to Rick's apartment on her own late at night to try to persuade him to give her the letters of transit. This is similar to the key moment discussed in Sive in that two of the principal characters are alone together, one badly wants something from the other, there is a threat of violence, and secrets from the past are revealed. However, unlike Sive and Mena, Ilsa and Rick love one another and their conversation, though undoubtedly tense, is more heart-rending and less disturbing than the key moment discussed in the first part of this answer.

As is the case with Mena and Sive, the audience is well aware of the tension that exists between Rick and Ilsa. Their exchanges so far in the film have been strained at the least and Rick has been insulting and hostile to Ilsa just as Mena has been to Sive. There is a difference, however, in that we know Rick has been deeply hurt by Ilsa's leaving him in Paris without any explanation. There is, therefore, a good reason for his attitude towards her, even if he does express it cruelly at times. This is different to the relationship between Mena and Sive in that Sive is innocent of any wrongdoing.

The scene begins with Rick finding, to his surprise, that Ilsa has come to his apartment uninvited. Like Sive when Mena talks to her after school, Rick did not expect to be having a conversation with Ilsa at this time, but he recovers from his surprise more quickly than does Sive. He cynically remarks that he knew she would come back to him, but didn't expect it to happen so soon. His attitude creates tension because the viewers wonder if this conversation is going to go the way of the ones they have had so far in Casablanca.

Both Mena and Ilsa want something in these key moments, and they want it badly. For Mena, the £200 she will get if Sive marries Seán Dóta means security and freedom from the fear of

poverty, while Ilsa desperately needs the letters of transit from Rick so that Laszlo can escape the Germans. This desperation means that both women are willing to try everything possible to get what they want, and this, of course, creates great tension as we wonder how far they will go and to what extent they will succeed. Ilsa, like Mena, tries a number of different approaches. The stakes are higher for her than they are for Mena, of course, in that this is a matter of life and death. We watch the suspense-filled drama unfold as Ilsa begs Rick to think of the greater good that will be served by helping Laszlo to escape and, when this fails, reminding him of the love they shared in Paris. There are similarities with the situation between Mena and Sive here as Ilsa searches in vain for a way to get through to Rick. However, there is a major difference in that her motivation is not selfish, nor is she trying to break Rick's spirit in order to achieve her goal. Also, Rick is cynical and bitter, unlike the naïve and sweet Sive. He is not so easily manipulated. He tells Ilsa that he wouldn't believe anything she told him now, as he thinks she'd say anything to get what she wanted. This is the complete opposite to Sive, who trustingly accepts all that Mena tells her about her parents, even when it is not what she was told by Nanna earlier in the play.

The music in the film is dramatic and low-pitched at this point, emphasizing the seriousness of this suspense-filled scene. Like Mena, Ilsa resorts to insults in her desperation. She calls Rick 'a coward' and 'a weakling'. However, she instantly regrets her words, unlike Mena when she called Sive a 'bye-child' and 'a bastard'. Ilsa changes tack once more and begs Rick once more to think of the consequences if he does not help her. Her tears flow as she tells Rick that he is their last hope. Mena was never similarly open with Sive, and she did not reveal the reason the outcome of their conversation was important to her. She could not as, unlike Ilsa, she was not working for any greater good.

In both texts, when all else fails, the dramatic tension is heightened by threats of violence or by violent acts. In Sive, Mena pushes Sive roughly into the chair, and throws her schoolbag across the room while speaking in the harshest tones to the vulnerable young girl. Similarly, Ilsa is so desperate to get her way that she pulls out a pistol and threatens to shoot Rick if he does not hand over the letters of transit. There are a number of significant differences between the texts at these points, however. The first is the attitude of the women in each case. Mena hates Sive, but Ilsa loves Rick. This dissipates the tension somewhat. It is hard for the viewer to believe that she would really kill him if he did not comply. She is under a great deal of pressure - and the camera zooms in to show a close-up of her strained face at

this point - but Ilsa has done nothing so far to show that she would harm the man who means so much to her. This impression is reinforced by the playing of their love song, 'As Time Goes By' in the background. Also, Rick – unlike Sive – is not in the least intimidated by this introduction of a note of violence. While Sive attempts to flee Mena's attack on her, Rick walks towards Ilsa and encourages her to shoot him, saying bitterly 'You'll be doing me a favour'. The tension here is not so much caused by the possibility that Ilsa will shoot Rick but rather by the suspense surrounding Ilsa and Rick's relationship. She appears to be asking him to choose between life and death, but really he is asking her to choose between Laszlo and him. As Rick says 'If Laszlo and the cause mean so much to you, you won't stop at anything.'

At this point, the atmosphere changes as Ilsa realises how much she has hurt Rick by abandoning him in Paris. She breaks down in tears and turns away. We wonder how Rick, who ignored her distress when she came to him the night before to try to tell her story, will react to this. The music rises in volume and intensity, matching the rising tension at this point.

This is where we see the most striking difference between the two key moments. Seeing Ilsa's distress, Rick moves to comfort her. Their love theme plays once more as he holds her in his arms and prepares to allow her to tell him the whole story. We are, of course, curious to hear what Ilsa has to say, but the tension has lessened considerably and we relax a little as we wait to see what explanation Ilsa will give the man she has hurt so much. This key moment ends with both Ilsa and Rick in one another's arms. This is a far more uplifting end to such a tense situation than the bleak isolation Sive faces as she walks, distressed and alone, away from the room she shared with the only person in the family who could comfort her, and towards a place where she will be even more firmly under Mena's control.

The one unifying feature of these key moments in both texts is that they capture and hold our attention and serve to draw us even deeper into the respective stories. The conflict and tension created in both Casablanca and Sive serve to keep us enthralled as we wait to see what the outcomes will be.

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