

Comparative Study - Theme

30 / 40 Split

- ✦ These questions usually focus on key moments in the texts.
- ✦ You are required to discuss one text on its own for the 30 mark question and compare the other two texts in response to the 40 mark question.
- ✦ You can mention the first text when discussing the other two if you wish.
- ✦ The aspects of theme you chose need not be the same in the 40 mark answer as in the 30 mark answer unless that is explicitly stated in the question.

2013 Examination

- ✦ 2. “In many texts, a theme or issue may not be resolved to the complete satisfaction of the reader.”
- ✦ (a) Discuss the extent to which a theme or issue is resolved to your satisfaction in one text on your comparative course. (30)

Marking Scheme

- ✦ Expect candidates to select a theme or issue in one text, and to discuss to what extent it is/is not resolved to their satisfaction. Allow for a broad interpretation of “resolved”.
- ✦ Code TR +/- for theme/issue is/is not resolved to reader’s satisfaction

- ✦ Possible points of discussion:
- ✦ - establishment/development of theme leads to a convincing/unconvincing resolution
- ✦ - key moments highlight expectations of satisfactory/unsatisfactory conclusions
- ✦ - characterisation, language, visual/aural effects can be fulfilling/unfulfilling
- ✦ - impact of author's approach to the denouement (*the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved*)

Introduction

- ✦ The text I have studied as part of my comparative course is Jennifer Johnston's 'How Many Miles to Babylon?' The theme I have chosen to discuss is that of Escape. I believe that the theme is partially resolved to the reader's satisfaction in that we feel the principal characters - Alec and Jerry - have at least managed to gain some measure of control over their fate. However, their escape is at a terrible cost.

Point one: establishment of the theme

- ✦ From the outset, we know that Alec is trapped in that he is sentenced to be shot by firing squad.
- ✦ We know, therefore, that the resolution of the theme will not be a happy one.
- ✦ The complexity of the issue is compounded by Alec claiming that he loves 'no living person', is indifferent to his parents' reaction to news of his execution, and clearly views death as an escape from the misery of life.

Point two: Key moments show us how difficult it is for anyone to escape

- Alec's recollections of his life to date show us just how difficult it has been for him to escape both his dysfunctional, miserable family and society's expectations of him.
- The issue is a complex one as his mother is equally determined to escape her unhappy marriage and uses young Alec as a pawn in her and her husband's 'terrible game'.
- (K) A key moment which shows us clearly how complex and difficult Alec's situation is and how his hopes of escape are inextricably linked with the similar desires of those close to him occurs early in the book. Alicia's determination to escape a future in which she is left alone with Frederick means that she will not allow her son to escape his home even temporarily: she denies him the opportunity to go to boarding school.

- ✦ Alec's social class is a restrictive one. Although privileged, he sees his membership of the Ascendency as a barrier to happiness rather than an advantage. A key moment which shows this is the conversation between Alec and his mother at the lakeside in which she says that Alec's one hope of escape from loneliness and unhappiness - his friendship with Jerry Crowe - is out of the question due to his social class. Frederick Moore agrees with his wife in this, calling it a 'sad fact' that Alec is bound by the 'responsibilities and limitations of the class'. The complexity of Alec's home life is compounded by both his parents' disastrous marriage and the social class in which he lives. The more we learn of his life, the more we understand that the resolution, while tragic, was Alec's only method of escape.

- When Alec does finally manage to escape his mother's clutches, it is only to replace one restrictive, uncaring, controlling situation with another. Major Glendinning is a mirror image of Alicia in many ways, but he is even more of a threat to Alec in that he has the power of life and death over him.
- Both want to force Alec to become the sort of man they want and we realise just how difficult his escape will be as we see Glendinning's steely determination to have his way.
- Similarities between Alicia and Glendinning highlight the fact that Alec has simply gone from the frying pan into the fire and is, if anything, less likely to escape the control of others than he was before he left home. Once again, the bleakness and despair of Alec's life make us see that the resolution of the theme was, in some ways, a blessed escape.

Conclusion

- ✦ As the story draws to a close, Alec's situation becomes more and more desperate.
- ✦ He is unable to escape the control of Major Glendinning
- ✦ He is unable to help Jerry when the latter goes AWOL and then returns.

- ✦ When Alec asks Jerry why he came back, Jerry replies that 'There didn't seem to be any place else to go'.
- ✦ The net has tightened around both men until there is no possible chance of escape.
- ✦ Each attempt to get away from restrictive influences has simply left them in a situation which is even more restrictive than the previous one.

- ✦ At the outset, we are saddened at the thought of Alec facing a firing squad, particularly as he seems so calm about it. However, as his story unfolds and we learn more and more about the complexities of his situation, we are more inclined to regard his situation with understanding.
- ✦ Having been drawn into Alec's world, we see that his decision to kill Jerry and thus end his own life too was actually a form of escape. He has gained some measure of control over his life and he does succeed in denying his mother and Major Glendinning the satisfaction of turning him into the sort of man they think he should be.

Final lines

- ✦ In the final lines of the book, Alec says that 'They will never understand', so he says nothing. However, once we have heard his story and understood the complexity of his situation, we do understand.

- ✦ We realise that the resolution of the theme is more satisfactory than it might have appeared when we first learned of it in the opening pages. Certainly, it is tragic, but it is also a celebration of one man's bravery. Alec is willing to allow Jerry to escape the agonising wait until his execution and afford him a quick and clean release. That this should mean he, Alec, takes Jerry's place instead is something he is prepared to do. Now that Jerry is gone, nobody can hurt Alec and there is nothing left to tie him to the world so, to that extent at least, he has escaped.