

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

1. “Important themes are often expressed in key moments in texts.”

Compare how the authors of the comparative texts studied by you used key moments to heighten your awareness of an important theme. (70)

Candidates must focus on a single/important theme, but bear in mind that a broad theme (e.g. identity) can incorporate sub-themes (e.g. place, culture, race, relationships, etc.).

Code C for each focused/developed comparison.

Areas from which comparisons might be drawn:

- key moments establish interesting aspects/perspectives
- role of events/narrative voice in raising awareness of a theme
- impact of the author’s approach – serious, humorous, tragic
- powerful contribution of characters, language, imagery, symbols
- visual and aural effects enhance awareness

Note: This question lends itself well to the introduction, development, climax, resolution approach. You need to think of a key moment to illustrate each of those points in the texts.

Remember to focus on how the author conveys his message in each case.

I find the easiest way to plan such essays is to make a table (see following pages) and jot down key moments from each text and say how they relate to the question. Obviously, my plan in an exam situation would not be anything like as detailed as this, but it would not need to be as I have practised these answers so often that a brief note will trigger more detailed memories. The more plans you write, the faster you will be able to plan an answer in the exam.

Each new section should begin with a general statement linking all three texts.

Make sure that the key moments you choose are comparable. Look at the point you made about your first text and ensure that you make the same point about the other texts, even if it is to point out how they are different.

Sive

Casablanca

How Many Miles to Babylon?

<p>In all three texts, the introduction shows us characters who are trapped in situations from which escape seems difficult or impossible. Whether it is the claustrophobic and hostile domestic setting in <i>Sive</i>, the more exotic and dangerous world of <i>Casablanca</i>, or Alec’s prison cell in war-torn Flanders, we see immediately that the characters face an uphill battle at best or seem to have no possible hope of escape at worst.</p>		
<p>Key Moment is conversation between Nanna and Mena</p> <p>Setting and introduction highlight tension in Glavin household. We learn from bitter exchange between Nanna and Mena that they feel trapped and unhappy in their current situation. Poverty, anger etc. create impression that this is not a place from which escape will be easy.</p>	<p>Key Moment is introduction – up to end of newsreel.</p> <p>Unlike domestic setting in <i>Sive</i>, theme is introduced on a more global scale. Newsreel, map, music add to tension and pique our interest. Vast numbers of people seeking to escape desperate and dangerous situation. Exotic location – we are less familiar with it than domestic setting of <i>Sive</i>, and so less sure how easy escape from this place will be. The newsreel telling us of the murder of the couriers tells us that people will go to almost any lengths to escape. Very dramatic introduction of theme.</p>	<p>Key Moment is introduction</p> <p>Like <i>Casablanca</i>, war is the backdrop to this introduction. Unlike <i>Casablanca</i>, <i>Babylon</i>, like <i>Sive</i>, introduces idea of escape on a smaller scale. Here we are immediately drawn into the fate of one individual. First person narrative draws us in and places us firmly on Alec’s side. Unlike <i>Sive</i> and <i>Casablanca</i>, where the outcome is still to be decided, we know from the outset that Alec has not succeeded in escaping. He has a short time left to live. Still, we are interested in finding out how he came to be in such a dreadful situation and read with interest as he tells of his childhood etc.</p>
<p>As the texts progress, key moments show us that escape for one character can mean failure to escape or another.</p>		<p>f</p>
<p>Key Moment is Thomasheen’s visit and proposed match.</p> <p>As we have seen first-hand Mena’s dislike of <i>Sive</i> and her desire for money, we wonder if <i>Sive</i> will succeed in escaping this dreadful fate. Mena is caught up in the notion of escaping her own poverty and the burden of supporting a mother-in-law she detests as well as the burden of supporting and educating a niece she bitterly resents. This key moment shows us that characters are willing to sacrifice <i>Sive</i> in order to effect their own escape.</p>	<p>Key Moment is arrival of <i>Ilsa</i> and Rick’s memories of his time with her.</p> <p>Now, as in <i>Sive</i> and <i>Babylon</i>, we are becoming concerned with the fate of individuals, which heightens our interest in the theme. The love triangle is intriguing because, unlike in <i>Sive</i>, the characters who are seeking to escape are all admirable. Laszlo is a good man with a worthy goal, and Rick admires him. Laszlo loves <i>Ilsa</i>, but so does Rick etc. Seems obvious that, as in <i>Sive</i>, escape for some characters will mean that others cannot. Difference is that we like all characters. (Read notes on key sequences to see ways in which director uses lighting, camera angles and music to show characters in admirable light.)</p>	<p>Key Moment is <i>Alicia</i>’s discovery of friendship between Alec and Jerry.</p> <p>As in <i>Sive</i> and <i>Casablanca</i>, Alec is trapped in a place which brings him little joy. Situation not life-threatening, as in <i>Casablanca</i>, nor as obviously unpleasant as poverty-stricken Glavin household, but Alec is miserable nonetheless. Secret friendship with Jerry allows him to escape his stifling and unhappy home life. However, as in <i>Sive</i> and <i>Casablanca</i>, antagonistic forces conspire to prevent his escaping his lot. <i>Alicia Moore</i>, like Mena, is a formidable individual and orders Alec to stop seeing Jerry. Like <i>Sive</i>, Alec lacks the power to stand up for himself. <i>Alicia</i> announces that she is taking him to Europe, thus effectively ensuring that he is under her control. <i>Alicia</i> is determined to escape her own unhappiness and dissatisfaction with her marriage by making Alec her companion. Again, her escaping her situation is at the</p>

		expense of Alec's being able to escape his. Like Mena, Alicia doesn't care. In <i>Sive</i> and <i>Babylon</i> , we are firmly on the side of an individual character and have little sympathy with those who are willing to sacrifice them in order to escape their own misery.
Key Moments show us that determined antagonistic forces can greatly hinder a character's chance of escape		
<p>Key Moment is Mena and Sive's conversation in the kitchen.</p> <p>At the end of their conversation, Sive is more isolated than ever. She is watched constantly etc. We feel little hope for her at this stage.</p>	<p>Key Moment is the Battle of the Anthems scene.</p> <p>We see just how desperate the people in Rick's bar are to escape the oppression of the Nazis. When Laszlo leads them in a stirring rendition of the French national anthem in a successful attempt to drown out the German soldiers' song, we see that even Yvonne – who had been fraternising with the Germans up to that point – sings along with him, tears in her eyes. However, Laszlo's open defiance of the German's angers Strasser, who now drops all pretence and tells Ilsa that Laszlo now has no chance of escaping to America. Like Sive, the net is tightening around Laszlo. If Laszlo doesn't go with Strasser to France, he faces being put in a concentration camp or being executed. Situation is more desperate than in Sive, but we have more hope for Laszlo in that he has already escaped from a camp and is still strong enough to stand up to Strasser, unlike Sive who is easily dominated and bullied by Mena.</p>	<p>Key Moment is Alec's conversation with Alicia the night before he joins up</p> <p>Alec has, to a certain extent, escaped his mother's control at this stage in that he now spends time helping his father run the estate. This brings him some measure of happiness, but it angers Alicia. She decides he must join the army in order to make her look good etc. He refuses, but - like Sive – he is nowhere near strong enough to stand up for himself. Like Mena, Alicia uses cruel tactics to force Alec to follow the path she has laid out for him. His joining up, of course, simply places him in a worse position in that he is under the control of Major G.</p>
Key Moments show us how glimmer of hope		
<p>Key Moment is delivery of Liam's letter</p> <p>We have a sudden hope that Sive may escape her fate after all. The plan is a good one and seems likely to work.</p>	<p>Key Moment is Rick's standing up to Renault in the bar and pulling a gun on him.</p> <p>At this stage, however, we still don't know which of the characters will escape. Rick has taken Ilsa's pleading to heart and has made the decision for all of them, but we don't know what that is.</p>	<p>Key Moment is Ale and Jerry's managing to go for a ride on the horses</p> <p>Although the war is ever-present, there is a brief moment of escape from the horrifying reality when Jerry spots a fox and they chase it as if they were hunting back in Wicklow again. Alec brings up the dream of the stud farm again and begins to tell Bennett about it. However, unlike the other texts, we know that this dream of escape will never be realised, and that this small moment of happiness is doomed to end, as indeed it does with the appearance of the 'small irate major'.</p>

<p>Key Moments show us that strength of will is a forces can greatly hinder a character's chance of escape</p>		
<p>Key Moment is the destruction of Liam's letter</p> <p>Mike is too weak to stand up to Thomasheen, and as a result our last hope for Sive vanishes with the burning of the letter.</p>	<p>Key Moment is airport scene</p> <p>Unlike Mike, Rick is more than capable of standing up for others. He ensures that Laszlo and Ilsa escape to America, and sacrifices his own happiness in order to do so.</p>	<p>Key Moment is Jerry's going AWOL</p> <p>Like Mike, Alec is too weak to successfully stand up to those who oppose him. He tries to get Major G. to show leniency when Jerry is arrested, but fails. Instead of helping Jerry to escape his fate, Alec is ordered to lead the firing squad.</p>
<p>Key Moments show us author's view of theme</p>		
<p>Key Moment is Liam Scuab bringing Sive's body home.</p> <p>Sive has been driven to such despair that she has taken the only way out she sees. She does escape the match, but at a tragically high cost. The message is a bleak one. Good people cannot necessarily escape desperate situations etc.</p> <p>Symbolism: Pats Bocoock sweeping all the ware from the table and its smashing on the ground is like the shattering of all our hopes for Sive.</p> <p>Symbolism: Liam carrying Sive's dead body over the threshold and back into the house from which she longed to escape. He should have been carrying her over the threshold of a different house as his bride, had their elopement succeeded.</p> <p>Final message is that being good, morally upright or deserving does not mean that a character will escape their fate if stronger forces conspire against them.</p>	<p>Key Moment is Strasser arriving</p> <p>Rick remains strong to the end, and acts decisively to ensure that Laszlo and Ilsa escape. He too escapes, and the message is quite positive at the end. Indeed, Renault is won over to Rick's side and the two walk off together, planning their next move.</p> <p>Final message is that being good and morally upright <u>does</u> mean a character can escape their fate and aid others in escaping too. Rick may not have Ilsa, but he is on the side of right and does leave in the company of Renault at the end.</p>	<p>Key Moment is final meeting between Alec and Jerry</p> <p>Alec decides to shoot Jerry himself, thus sparing him the agonising wait until his execution. He does succeed in escaping to a certain extent in that he defies Major G. but, like Sive, his escape is a tragic one. There is none of the positivity we see in <i>Casablanca</i>.</p> <p>Final message is that being good, morally upright or deserving does not mean that a character will escape their fate if stronger forces conspire against them.</p>

Past Questions on 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

What does the theme teach us?

What insights do we gain from studying the text?

What did you find interesting about your chosen theme?

The questions above are very similar and can all be answered using the same subheadings and points. You must refer directly to the specific question on the day, of course.

- A person's desire to escape can be jeopardised and, in some cases, thwarted if another, stronger-willed person is intent on preventing them from doing so in order to serve their own ends.
- In seeking to escape the past, people can become caught up in a vicious cycle unless they face up to the truth, deal with it and move on with their own lives.
- A person who feels isolated and alone has little chance of escaping their fate. Sometimes people need the support and encouragement of others to effect their escape and achieve their desired outcome.
- When a person believes that the world in which they live is overwhelmingly hostile and offers them no avenue of escape, they may be driven to complete despair and see death as the only way they can escape their fate.

Past Questions and Marking Schemes – Cultural Context

MARKING SCHEME: GENERAL

In all answers to questions in this section, candidates may compare and/or contrast, i.e. address similarities and/or differences in both the content and style of their chosen texts

In shaping their responses to the questions set on the Comparative Study, it is expected that candidates will be involved in some/all of the following kinds of activities: -

- Description/analysis of the text/s in the light of the modes for comparison
- Making general observations about texts in relation to each other
- Making connections between similar aspects of texts
- Recognising differences between texts
- Showing that similarities/differences need to be qualified
- Demonstrating awareness of themselves as readers, their reactions/responses/involvement.

Expect a wide variety of approaches both in the patterns of discussion and the manner of illustration.

In all answers in this section, candidates may refer to one/more key moment/s from the text/s. The purpose of this is to allow the candidates to ground their responses in specific moments without feeling that they must range over the entire text/s. However, do not expect that all the illustrative reference in an answer will come from the key moment/s. Candidates may offer appropriate illustrative reference from any part of the text/s.

2013

1. “In any cultural context, deeply embedded values and attitudes can be difficult to change.”

Compare the extent to which the above statement is valid in relation to your understanding of the cultural context of at least two texts on your comparative course. (70)

Expect candidates to compare the extent to which deeply embedded values and attitudes can be difficult to change in relation to their understanding of at least two texts on their comparative course.

Allow that “deeply embedded” may be dealt with explicitly or implicitly.

Code C VC +/- for comparisons of values/attitudes that are/are not difficult to change

Possible points for comparison:

- deep-seated norms/mindsets that were unshakeable/flexible
 - attitudes to class, money, race, gender, etc. endure/evolve
 - family expectations, religious beliefs promote/modify social mores
 - behaviour of powerful elites maintained through restrictive/repressive regimes
 - attitudes revealed in key moments can illustrate the possibility/impossibility of social change
- Etc.

2. “The issue of social class is important in shaping our understanding of the cultural context of a text.”

(a) Discuss the importance of social class in shaping your understanding of the cultural context of one text that you have studied as part of your comparative course. (30)

Expect candidates to focus on the importance of social class in shaping their understanding of the cultural context of one text. The term “shaping” may be understood to mean “informing”, “influencing”, etc. Allow that “important” may be dealt with explicitly or implicitly.

Code CU for social class shaping understanding of cultural context

Possible areas of discussion:

- structure of society/social interaction exposes how status is established/maintained
- class roles empower/disempower and can create resistance/resignation
- attitudes to money, marriage, education, race, etc. influenced by class
- key moments can illustrate how important/unimportant class can be in a society Etc.

(b) Compare the importance of social class in shaping your understanding of the cultural context of two other texts that you have studied as part of your comparative course. (40)

Mark ex 40 by reference to the criteria for assessment..

Expect candidates to deal in a comparative manner with the importance of social class in shaping their understanding of the cultural context of two other texts.

Candidates are not required to make comparative links with the text discussed in part (a). However, they may choose to refer in an explicit or implicit way to the points made in their answer to part (a).

Code C CU for comparisons of social class shaping understanding of cultural context

2011

1. “A reader can feel uncomfortable with the values and attitudes presented in texts.”

Compare the extent to which the values and attitudes that you encountered, in at least two texts on your comparative course, made you feel uncomfortable.

(70)

Allow for a broad interpretation of “feel uncomfortable” but expect candidates to deal in a comparative manner with their response to the values and attitudes they encountered in at least two texts.

Code CU for each comparison of values/attitudes that make/do not make the candidate feel uncomfortable.

Areas from which comparisons might be drawn:

- values/attitudes/mindsets that were alien, archaic, familiar, disturbing, pleasing, complex, etc.
- uneasy/uncomfortable/positive/negative response to how characters’ behaviour reinforces/undermines society’s values
- values/attitudes transmitted by religion/family/class can shock, sadden, surprise,

reassure, etc.

- attitudes to money, gender roles, class, race, make reader feel uncomfortable/at ease
 - belief systems/perspectives that challenged/reinforced familiar norms and attitudes
- Etc.

2. “The roles and status allocated to males or females can be central to understanding the cultural context of a text.”

(a) Show how this statement might apply to one text on your comparative course. In your answer you may refer to the roles and status allocated to either males or females, or both. (30)

Allow a liberal interpretation of “central” but expect candidates to focus on the roles and status allocated to males or females, or both, and the extent to which these aspects influenced their understanding of the cultural context of one text.

Note that the terms “roles” and “status” do not have to be dealt with separately.

Code RU for how roles/status allocated to males/females influenced understanding of cultural context.

Possible points of discussion:

- attitudes to men/women/children can illustrate their status/worth
- world of a text revealed by distribution of power/authority in society
- roles of men and women illuminate the value placed on work, family
- social interaction exposes how position and status are shaped
- roles and status restrict/liberate individuals in a constricting/nurturing world Etc.

(b) Compare how the roles and status allocated to males or females, or both, aided your understanding of the cultural context in two other texts on your comparative course. (40)

Expect candidates to deal in a comparative manner with how the roles and status allocated to males or females, or both, aided their understanding of cultural context of two other texts.

Candidates are not required to make comparative links with the text discussed in part (a).

However, they may choose to refer in an explicit or implicit way to the points made in their answer to part (a). Code C RU for comparisons of how roles/status allocated to males or females, or both, aid understanding of cultural context.

2009

1. “The main characters in texts are often in conflict with the world or culture they inhabit.”

In the light of the above statement, compare how the main characters interact with the cultural contexts of the texts you have studied for your comparative course. (70)

Expect candidates to deal in a comparative manner with how one or more of the main characters in each of the texts you have studied interact with their cultural contexts.

Code C for each focused/developed comparison.

Possible areas of discussion:

- different cultures affect the experience of characters
- some characters resist/rebel against their world
- other characters accept/support/promote society’s values
- social forces restrict/liberate individuals Etc.

2. “Understanding the cultural context of a text allows you to see how values and attitudes are shaped.”

(a) Show how this statement applies to one of the texts on your comparative course. (30)

Expect candidates to demonstrate a clear understanding of cultural context and how its values and attitudes are shaped in one text.

The term ‘shaped’ may be understood to mean ‘constructed’, ‘expressed’, ‘moulded’, etc.

Possible points:

- authors/directors show how values/attitudes/mindsets are created
- characters’ behaviour reinforces/undermines society’s values
- powerful forces amplify cultural agendas
- values/attitudes transmitted by religion, family, class
- narrative features/language/images illustrate social norms Etc.

2. (b) Compare the way in which values and attitudes are shaped in two other texts on your comparative course. Support the comparisons you make by reference to the texts. (40)

Expect candidates to deal in a comparative manner with how values and attitudes are shaped in two other texts.

Candidates are free to make comparisons independent of their answers to part (a).

However, they may choose to refer, in an implicit or explicit way, to the points made in part (a).

Code C for each focused/developed comparison

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