

Using *King Lear* as a Comparative Text

Remember!

Discussion points in the 30-mark Part (a) sample answer can also provide the basis for developed comparisons in the 40-mark Part (b) and 70-mark single questions.

First Mode: The Cultural Context

Sample Part (a) 30-mark question answering only on *King Lear*

Q 'The opening scene (or scenes) of a text can reveal valuable insights into the impact that the cultural context of a narrative is likely to have on the outcome of the story.'

Discuss this view in relation to your study of one text on your comparative course.

Indicative Material

- ◆ Initial impact of social/political setting on characters and events.
- ◆ Dramatic/narrative features, language/imagery illustrate social norms and affect plot.
- ◆ Family relationships and expectations can influence the narrative outcome.
- ◆ Effect of attitudes to power, gender/marriage reveal cultural values/traditions.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Answer

The opening scene of *King Lear* takes place in the royal palace, where we are immediately introduced to a political world of rumour and intrigue. Gloucester and Kent gossip about Lear's plans for 'the division of the kingdom'. The importance of monarchy is evident from the start. It is also clear that the country is in a state of transition. The atmosphere in the court changes very quickly after Lear announces his love test to see which of his three daughters 'doth love us most'. Goneril and Regan shamelessly flatter their father while Cordelia remains silent – 'my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue'. It is obvious that Lear's

court is filled with hypocrisy. Almost all the compliments which Goneril and Regan pay their deluded father echo their materialistic motives – 'rich', 'rare', 'prize'. The fact that Lear is taken in by their false words indicates that he is already out of touch with reality. Power has ruined his judgement and he makes a disastrous mistake in handing over control of his kingdom to his two dishonest daughters.

This first scene shows us a country that is poorly governed and is almost certain to get worse. The two families we meet are deeply divided. Lear does not know his own children. In his egotistical rage, he banishes Cordelia – 'Here I disclaim all my paternal care'. Caught

up in his own foolish pride, he shames her in public – ‘thy truth, then, be thy dower’. Such thoughtless abuse of his power as a parent augurs badly for the future and we get a sense that he will eventually pay for his rashness. His reckless and impractical arrangement to hand over control of Britain to his ambitious daughters – ‘I do invest you jointly with my power’ – is a recipe for chaos.

Lear’s abdication has a destabilising effect on the society he rules. From the start, there are divisions and conflicts everywhere, both personal and public. Few characters display any signs of decency. Cordelia’s honesty and Kent’s loyalty only highlight the evil

atmosphere of the court, where thoughtless parents and self-interested children are about to create untold suffering. The play’s opening scene provides a powerful insight into an unstable and disturbing world. Shakespeare presents the audience with some of the worst examples of human conduct – a tyrannical king who has been corrupted by absolute power, resentful children who fully intend to ‘hit together’ and a royal court where the basic values of honour and respect have been replaced by disharmony and unnatural behaviour.

(c. 420 words)

Examiner’s Comment

- ◆ Clearly focused on how the play’s cultural context is established in the crucial opening.
- ◆ The answer is well organised and identifies three aspects of the social setting (family, power and honour) which set the uneasy scene and are likely to affect the play’s tragic outcome.
- ◆ Apt and accurate quotations are integrated effectively into the discussion and the expression is impressive throughout. A highly successful response.

Class/Homework Exercise

Using some of the points from the Indicative Material above, write your own response to the Part (a) question.

The Comparative Study Exam Advice

To structure your comparative essay answer on the **Cultural Context**, a useful exercise is to practise making an outline of the key points you intend to include. The following draft plan uses *King Lear* as one of the comparative texts.

The Cultural Context Sample Essay

70-mark question using *King Lear* as one of three comparative texts

Q 'The way in which social forces affect the freedom of central characters can broaden our understanding of the cultural context of a text.'

Compare the way in which the effect of social forces on the freedom of central characters broadened your understanding of the cultural context when studying three texts on your comparative course.

Indicative Material

- ◆ Individuals can be liberated/restricted by power, class, race, money, religion.
- ◆ Impact of family expectations, relationships, marriage and traditional gender roles.
- ◆ Readers' understanding of culture informed by characters and key events.
- ◆ Effect of law, violence and tensions between power and freedom.
- ◆ Freedom expressed through setting, narrative voice, language, symbolism, music, etc.

Sample Draft Plan

Introduction Opening of *King Lear* focuses on Cordelia, who is subject to various social, family and patriarchal pressures. Edmund's conflicted freedom is also introduced. Similar/different situations exist in **my other two texts** ...

Point 1 Cordelia and Edgar excluded, both victims of various social forces beyond their control. Lear's own independence increasingly threatened by Goneril and Regan. In contrast/similarly, **my second text** ...

Point 2 Ambition for power becomes an unstoppable force – Gloucester's freedom curtailed by the materialism and violence around him. Equally informative moments in **my third text** echo/do not echo ...

Point 3 As the play develops, central characters find wisdom/truth despite/because of their loss of freedom. There are some revealing similarities/contrasts in **my other texts** ...

Point 4 Instructive insights into social traits in Act 5 of the play when Cordelia and Lear are reunited. This is very like/unlike the ending **my second text** ...

Concluding Paragraph All three texts reveal much about the range and influence of cultural influences. Shakespeare's play explores a hostile world where personal freedom is always threatened. My knowledge of how society affects individuals was broadened by my **other two texts** ...

Sample Paragraph: Point 2

The play's sub-plot emphasises a social order that also oppresses the basic freedoms of individual characters. All three members of Gloucester's family are compromised. Edmund is disaffected because his right to inherit is limited by the laws of legitimacy. He soon rejects the laws of state and society by breaking the natural bond of love for his father: 'Wherefore should I/ Stand in the plague of custom'. His naive father is a victim of his opportunist son's evil and is kept unaware of the truth. Gloucester's suffering at the hands of Regan and Cornwall is evidence of the extreme viciousness of society in ancient Britain. The brutal treatment he suffers is almost unimaginable and even though we are used to on-screen violence in our modern

world, it was interesting to see that callous cruelty transcends time. All Gloucester's basic human rights are violated and he is deprived of his liberty, his home and his eyesight. The forces of fierce ambition eventually deprive Gloucester of life itself. Ironically, like Lear,

his moral integrity grows as a consequence of losing his freedom: 'I stumbled when I saw.' Gloucester now blind, realises his mistakes, especially about his son Edgar. Equally informative moments in my second text echo/ do not echo ...

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ A solid paragraph, using the play's sub-plot effectively to illustrate how particular social forces make an impact on Gloucester's family.
- ◆ The broad interpretation of freedom is commendable.
- ◆ Discussion points are well supported and the expression is impressive ('Gloucester's family are compromised. Edmund is disaffected', 'callous cruelty transcends time').
- ◆ Good use of both the personal and comparative approach. A perceptive, high-grade response.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – The Cultural Context

1. Choose one of the other points in the sample draft plan and write a paragraph of your own in response to the question above.
2. 'The cultural values and beliefs presented in texts can make a deep impression on a reader.' Compare the extent to which the values and beliefs you encountered in three texts on your comparative course made an impression on you. (70)

Remember!

Discussion points in the 30-mark Part (a) sample answer can also provide the basis for developed comparisons in the 40-mark Part (b) and 70-mark single questions. To write successful examination answers, it is essential to study the wording of questions closely. Marks can easily be lost if attention is not paid to each element of a question in the exam.

Second Mode: Theme or Issue

Sample Part (a) 30-mark question answering only on *King Lear*

Q 'In many texts, a theme or issue may not be resolved to the complete satisfaction of the reader.'

Discuss the extent to which a theme or issue is resolved to your satisfaction in one text on your comparative course. Support your answer by reference to the text. (30 marks)

Indicative Material

- ◆ Establishment/development of theme leads to a convincing/unconvincing conclusion.
- ◆ Plot/memorable events may/may not be credible and realistic.
- ◆ Other key moments highlight expectations of satisfactory/unsatisfactory conclusions.
- ◆ Characterisation, language, visual/aural effects can be fulfilling/unfulfilling.
- ◆ Impact of author's approach to denouement.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Answer

Shakespeare extensively explored the theme of nature in *King Lear*. I found his use of characterisation and language very rewarding in his examination of this theme. The playwright examined not only the destructive aspect ('this dreadful pudder') but also the benevolent side ('unpublished virtues of the earth') of nature. He gives us a convincing portrayal of how a ferocious breakdown in the natural bond between child and father can have terrible consequences for all, innocent and guilty alike. Lear, in a fit of anger, banishes his youngest daughter, Cordelia, for not agreeing with his wishes, branding her 'a wretch whom nature is ashamed/ Almost to acknowledge hers'.

In a similar fashion, Gloucester banishes his son, Edgar, not even giving him a chance to defend himself, 'unnatural, detested, brutish villain'. The 'bond of childhood' is savagely severed. But nature takes a terrible revenge for this breach of its natural laws. In a key moment on the heath, the two unnatural fathers wander in the storm – a symbol of chaos, particularly to an Elizabethan audience. Gloucester, deprived of his sight, learns to see

truth, 'I stumbled when I saw.' Lear, having lost his mind, begins to understand through 'Reason in madness'. But the unnatural ferocity of the storm mirrors the twisted behaviour of Lear's elder daughters.

I found the use of animal imagery particularly effective in illustrating their deviant behaviour: 'pelican daughters', 'Tigers, not daughters', 'unnatural hags'. They have adopted the negative laws of nature – survival of the fittest. Like wild animals, they turn on each other. Goneril even poisons her sister because she is afraid, now she is widowed, she will make Edmund her husband, 'I had rather lose the battle than that sister/ Should loosen him and me'. I thought Shakespeare's language very convincing in portraying this savage world where compassion has given way to complete individualism and its inevitable conclusion.

In contrast to this terrifying representation of the destructive power of nature, Shakespeare concludes his play, as nature would, with the calm after the storm. Cordelia is the principal symbol of all that is good about nature. She, like Kent and Edgar, represents the redemptive aspect of nature as it seeks to heal old wounds. Cordelia attains a Christ-like stature, and

she alone brings comfort to the maddened Lear through kind forgiveness, 'let this kiss/ Repair'. But I found the final scene where Lear is cradling the executed Cordelia in his arms uncomfortably true. The innocent are often

the victims of evil. Nature when aroused is indiscriminate in its fury. 'Our present business/ Is general woe'.

(c. 430 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ♦ A very good answer showing close engagement with the play.
- ♦ The focus on nature both as malign and benign is well sustained and supported with many useful – and accurate – quotations.
- ♦ Some impressive vocabulary and language use (clear, fluent and controlled throughout) use and personal response. Top-grade standard.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – The Cultural Context

Using some of the points from the Indicative Material above, write your own response to the Part (a) question.

The Theme or Issue Sample Essay

70-mark question using *King Lear* as one of the comparative texts

Q 'Studying a theme or issue enables a reader to form both personal and universal reflections on that theme or issue.'

Compare both the personal and universal reflections that you formed on a common theme or issue in the three texts you studied on your comparative course.

Indicative Material

- ◆ Plot, narrative voice, characters' behaviour provide thought-provoking insights.
- ◆ Key moments/scenes offer revealing considerations and perspectives.
- ◆ Impact of language (imagery, symbolism, visual and aural effects) shapes perceptions.
- ◆ Resolution of a theme enables a reader to draw personal/universal conclusions.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Draft Plan

The following draft plan uses *King Lear* as **one** of the comparative texts.

Introduction *King Lear* is a tragedy which explores many important and thought-provoking themes – some personal, but others with a universal significance. Among the play's central concerns are family relationships, power, self-knowledge, justice, truth and nature.

Point 1 In my Comparative Study, the **three texts** I studied allowed me to focus on the theme of the hero's journey to personal growth, the obstacles he encountered on his passage to self-knowledge and how successfully or badly he dealt with these challenges. In *King Lear*, central characters (Lear, Gloucester, Albany, Cordelia and even Edmund) achieved this mature understanding. My **other two texts** presented similar/ contrasting views ...

Point 2 Presentation of minor characters, Edgar and Albany, enabled reflection on changes character has to undergo to achieve insight. Edgar, tricked by Edmund, banished by Gloucester, has to learn to trust less and live in disguise. Albany has

to learn to defy and fight in order to reach his correct position. The changes minor characters underwent in my **second text** were similar/different ...

Point 3 Lear's growing awareness portrayed by dramatic language used on the heath. Vivid descriptions using visual and aural techniques impacted strongly on the reader shaping a perception of a man learning through agonising suffering. Such intense language use is/is not used in my **third text** ...

Point 4 Lear rectifies his misjudgement of banished daughter, Cordelia, on journey to self-knowledge. Recognises his flaw. Shakespeare's language provides a revealing depiction of this process. In my **third text** the central character does/does not reach this state of self-awareness ...

Point 5 Sub-plot uses the character of Gloucester as a parallel to Lear's recognition of his error. Gloucester realises he has wronged his son, Edgar. This reinforces the journey through suffering towards self-awareness Lear has undertaken. There is/or is not a similar sub-plot in my **third text** ...

Concluding Paragraph On reflection, I believe a true hero's journey to self-revelation must be undertaken with courage and stoicism. Despite all the obstacles, the character will achieve personal growth through suffering when he recognises his flaws and his links to wider humanity. Shakespeare does not provide an easy story in this exploration of the theme of self-growth. My **other two texts** ...

Sample Paragraph: Point 4

A suffering Lear, cruelly abandoned by his 'pelican' daughters, Goneril and Regan, to the mercy of the elements, sends up a heartfelt prayer, not on his own behalf, but on behalf of others who are enduring the same dreadful conditions. The relentless wind and rain is caught in the powerfully alliterative phrase, 'pelting of this pitiless storm' and its strong

verb conveys the brute force of nature. Lear is growing in awareness as he realises that there are people who have to continuously endure these dreadful conditions, 'homeless heads'. He vividly describes the tattered condition of these poor people, seeing them as if for the first time, 'looped and windowed raggedness'. Lear becomes like them, running 'unbonneted' on the heath. He also realises that the rich can get away with what the poor cannot, 'robes and furred gowns hide all', whereas 'Through tattered clothes small vices do appear.' I felt that not only Lear, but we, are growing in humanity as we look at life through the dramatic language and imagery of this rambling old man rushing around on the heath. Shakespeare is allowing us to see, like Lear, into the reality of life. In my **third text**, the central character does/does not reach this state of self-awareness...

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ Very good focus on the power of Shakespeare's language to convey the depth of Lear's development and empathy.
- ◆ Excellent use of apt and accurate quotations.
- ◆ The final point about 'growing in humanity' kept the discussion focused on the main question of personal and universal reflections. A well-written top grade standard.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – Theme or Issue

1. Choose one of the other points in the sample draft plan and write a paragraph of your own in response to the question above.
2. 'The presentation of a powerful theme or issue can add greatly to the impact of the story on a reader.'

With reference to three texts on your comparative course, compare the ways in which the presentation of a theme or issue in each text was presented and its impact on you.

Third Mode: General Vision and Viewpoint

Remember!

Discussion points in the 30-mark Part (a) sample answer can also provide the basis for developed comparisons in the 40-mark Part (b) and 70-mark single questions. To write successful examination answers, it is essential to study the wording of questions closely. Marks can easily be lost if attention is not paid to each facet of the questions.

Sample Part (a) 30-mark question answering only on *King Lear*

Q 'The extent to which a reader can relate a text to his or her experience of life helps to shape an understanding of the general vision and viewpoint of that text.'

Discuss this view in relation to your study of one text on your comparative course.
(30 marks)

Indicative Material

- ◆ Our response to the fate/experiences of characters influences viewpoint.
- ◆ Audiences can relate to key moments which reveal a particular vision of life.
- ◆ Characters and relationships that are destructive/nurturing shape our outlook.
- ◆ Setting, mood, atmosphere and social mores affect our overall perception.
- ◆ Vision shaped by our experience of narrative voice, language/imagery/mood.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Answer

In *King Lear*, I thought the fate of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia was extremely traumatic and I felt it was out of proportion to their faults. Lear had, in his foolish arrogance, insisted on his daughters publicly declaring their affection for him to gain land and power and to bolster his vanity, 'Which of you shall we say doth love us most?' Cordelia decides to 'Love, and be silent' and is subsequently banished. This unleashes a series of catastrophes not only for the central characters, but for society as a whole. The vision presented was bleak, 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.'

Lear loses his sanity and becomes a 'ruined piece of nature'. Although in the concluding scenes, he is reunited with his beloved Cordelia and is longing for the moment when 'We two

alone will sing like birds i' the cage', his and our hopes are cruelly dashed. Cordelia is executed, 'She's gone for ever'. Similarly, Gloucester, who banishes his loving son, is blinded in one of the most gruesome scenes in any drama, 'Pluck out his eyes'; 'let him smell/ His way to Dover'. Here I considered the vision of the play as bleak and pitiless, 'Man's life's as cheap as beast's.'

Yet Shakespeare presented another contrasting view. Through profound suffering, a character comes to a recognition and understanding of the truth about himself and his relation to others. Lear confronted by Poor Tom empathises with the poor, 'Is man no more than this?' – just 'poor naked wretches'. But this insight I felt came at a terrible price, the loss of his sanity. The blinded Gloucester also gains insight, 'I stumbled when I saw', in the midst of his suffering. This terrible anguish aids the

moral and spiritual development of these characters.

I found the relationships in the play not only dysfunctional but poisonous. Lear's ungrateful elder daughters abandoned the old man, 'unbonneted he runs'. But he also behaves terribly for a father, cursing Goneril with sterility, 'Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend/ To make this creature fruitful!' Even the relationship between lovers is nasty. Edmund cynically evaluates Goneril and Regan, 'Which of them shall I take?'

Shakespeare also uses animal imagery to present the play's dark vision, with references to 'wolfish visage' and 'monsters of the deep' contributing to this harsh world. I feel when I look at the modern world and the cruelty, violence and lack of justice, the inequality between the haves and have-nots, I can understand the view that 'When we are born, we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools.'

(c. 590 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ A strong answer which remains focused on the play's outlook.
- ◆ There is some good engagement with key moments in the drama.
- ◆ Illustrations work well and the use of numerous accurate quotes is impressive.
- ◆ The 'contrasting view' point adds depth to the answer. Expression is clear, varied and fluent throughout. Overall, a very successful response.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – General Vision and Viewpoint

Using some of the points from the indicative material, write your own response to the Part (a) question above.

General Vision and Viewpoint Sample Essay

70-mark question using *King Lear* as one of three comparative texts.

Q ‘Significant events in texts and the impact they have on readers often help to clarify the general vision and viewpoint of those texts.’

With reference to three texts on your comparative course, compare the ways in which at least one significant event in each text, and its impact on you, helped to clarify the general vision and viewpoint of these texts.

Indicative Material

- ◆ Impact of the opening/ending of a text influences understanding of outlook.
- ◆ Sense of optimism, pessimism, shock, joy, etc. experienced in response to key events.
- ◆ Characters’ experiences affect readers’ perspective on the vision/viewpoint of texts.
- ◆ Presentation of events, language/imagery, music, special effect can all shape vision.
- ◆ Effect of historical, cultural, political, social events clarifies the general outlook.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Draft Plan

The following draft plan uses *King Lear* as one of the comparative texts.

Introduction The **three texts** in my comparative course offer a diverse selection of viewpoints with varying degrees of optimism and pessimism. I have learnt from my comparative study that the vision and viewpoint is the general outlook on life presented by the playwright in the text. In particular, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* presented a dark, bleak view of the world, but ended on a note of optimism. My **other two texts** presented similar/contrasting views ...

Point 1 Optimistic/pessimistic outlooks shown by characters make an impact on the audience/reader. In *King Lear*, goodness shown through selfless love of two wronged children, Cordelia and Edgar. This shapes our view of the outlook in the play. Evil shown through self-serving corrupt children, Goneril, Regan and Edmund, who abandon their fathers, despite having benefited from them. Such

behaviour affects the reader in a negative fashion. In contrast/similarly, **my second text** ...

Point 2 Key scenes use of dramatic language to convey vision. Shakespeare’s powerful language used to convey the monarch’s character in Act 3, Scene 2 (heath scene). We are impressed by his strength of spirit. But Lear is volatile – reflecting Shakespeare’s mixed feelings about the world. An equally revealing scene in my **third text** shares/does not share ...

Point 3 The ‘Trial Scene’ (Act 3, Scene 6) marks a poignant stage in Lear’s insanity. Shakespeare’s own narrative voice, commenting cynically on human justice and the legal system depicts a truly immoral view of society. The various forms of madness – genuine, counterfeit and professional – symbolise a hopelessly chaotic world. This dramatic scene is very like/unlike my **other texts** ...

Point 4 Endings contribute to the viewpoint in a text and leave the reader with lasting impression of the text’s vision. Lear and Gloucester have learnt through

suffering. Both good wronged children have helped their parents in their hour of need. Shakespeare's dual vision is both optimistic and pessimistic. The ending of my **second text** is like or unlike...

Concluding Paragraph A play that has been dominated by pessimism, violence and corruption ends with healing, insight and hope. A new rule of law is established under Edgar and Albany, so the ending is redemptive. Good triumphs but at a terrible cost to both innocent and guilty. Overall, I found this life-affirming. My **other two texts** ...

Sample Paragraph: Point 2

In *King Lear* a highly significant event occurs in the raging storm scene. Throughout this heath scene, the king wallows in pitying himself as a 'poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man'. It's obvious that he is trying to cope with the changes that have transformed his life. Once he was an all-powerful ruler (the 'dragon'); and now he is a pathetic outcast. This fills me with dismay. The defiant old man who is filled with outrage, defying the natural elements to do their worst against him – 'Blow, winds,

and crack your cheeks!' I admire his strength as he challenges the raging storm. It's equally clear that he feels hard done by – 'So old and white'. I see him now as a victim of cruel circumstances and a merciless world. Faced with losing his mind, he tries to hold on to his dignity. The king's madness is mirrored by the violence of the natural world around him. However, his thoughts keep coming back to his 'two pernicious daughters' and their unkindness. This is why he believes he is 'more sinned against than sinning'. It's also depressing to witness someone in denial. Lear can see no fault in his own rash actions. I feel he himself has behaved not just foolishly but cruelly, particularly in relation to the banishment of Cordelia. In fact, he is a highly volatile man, capable of vicious hatred towards Goneril and Regan while showing great kindness to the Fool, asking him 'How dost, my boy? Art cold?' Yet the scene is also hopeful. This is the beginning of the real change in Lear, who is slowly becoming a better man. Shakespeare holds the audience between compassion and anger for Lear – which emphasises his twofold perspective of the world. An equally revealing scene in my **third text** shares ...

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ A well-supported paragraph which makes effective use of an important scene in the play.
- ◆ There is a clear personal response to the question, with pertinent discussion firmly focused on viewpoint throughout.
- ◆ Quotations are integrated effectively and expression is well controlled. A very high standard of answering.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – General Vision and Viewpoint

1. Choose one of the other points in the Sample Draft Plan and write a paragraph of your own in response to the question above.
2. 'The general vision and viewpoint in texts often presents us with an outlook that is optimistic or pessimistic, or a combination of optimism and pessimism.'
Identify and compare the general vision and viewpoint presented in three texts on your comparative course. (70)

Fourth Mode: Literary Genre

Sample Part (a) 30-mark question answering only on *King Lear*

Q 'The effective use of powerful imagery can help to create the atmosphere or mood in a text.'

Discuss how the effective use of powerful imagery helped to create the atmosphere or mood in one of the texts on your comparative course. (30 marks)

Indicative Material

- ◆ Visual, aural and verbal imagery can illustrate memorable moments in texts.
- ◆ Characters and relationships are sometimes revealed through particular images.
- ◆ Patterns of imagery can shape the overall mood/atmosphere of the narrative.
- ◆ Striking images often contribute to the dramatic power and realism of texts.
- ◆ Symbols/images make a text interesting, satisfying, saddening, shocking.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Answer

The opening scene of *King Lear* is one of fear and awkwardness. There is a definite atmosphere of foreboding events. The idea of a love test is itself a telling symbol of Lear's vanity and is evidence of the thoughtless old king's cruelty. Much of the tension is created due to the king's instability. The uneasy atmosphere becomes increasingly edgy as we begin to understand that Cordelia is as stubborn as her ageing father. Her quiet response that she has 'nothing' to say is the first of many times we hear that word. Lear's own anger is mixed with deep disappointment and his self-pitying comment that he hoped to set his rest 'On her kind nursery' suggests that he is in his second childhood, adding a sad quality to the scene.

Lear's language reveals his harsh, inhuman side. When Kent tries to calm him, his reaction is: 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath.' The startling image of a mythical creature spitting fire perfectly symbolises the fearsome mood in Lear's court. The Duke of France also wonders what 'thing so monstrous' is Cordelia's apparent 'offence'. Indeed,

Shakespeare uses animal imagery throughout the play – particularly when Lear is enraged and out of control.

After Goneril rejects Lear, he calls her a 'sea-monster' and a 'Detested kite'. His spiteful language increases the intensity of the atmosphere. Audiences are afraid to guess at what violence might happen next. In his anger and frustration, Lear resorts to disease imagery: 'Infect her beauty'. He describes his eldest daughter as 'A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle'.

The frantic atmosphere on the heath is also reflected in the powerful images – especially when Lear himself is roaring at the heavens. Shakespeare uses the storm imagery to suggest the king's madness. Lear himself even refers to the 'tempest' in his mind. It is a very strong symbol of suffering. Once again, his language – personifying the elements, 'crack your cheeks' – invites the audience into the wild state of chaos that he has helped to create.

By contrast, the end of the play is much calmer. Reunited with Cordelia, Lear's mind is filled with Christian images – and he speaks of 'sin', 'praying' and 'mercy'. Having regained his sanity,

he calls his daughter 'a soul in bliss'. In turn, she asks for his 'hands in benediction'. This tender mood in the emotive reconciliation scene is heightened by all these religious images.

Shakespeare has used a wide range of imagery in *King Lear*, creating contrasting atmospheres

which add to the audience's appreciation of the play. It is through such powerful language that we further our understanding of characters and their complex relationships – but of Lear himself most of all.

(c. 450 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ This is a very well-focused response which shows a close understanding of the play as a theatrical experience.
- ◆ The numerous quotations – all accurate and relevant – indicate genuine engagement with the text.
- ◆ Vocabulary and expression are highly impressive.
- ◆ An assured top-grade standard.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – The Literary Genre

Using some of the points from the indicative material above, write your own response to the Part (a) question.

Literary Genre Sample essay

70-mark Question using *King Lear* as one of three comparative texts

Q 'An engaging aspect of texts is that authors rarely tell their stories in exactly the same way.'

Compare the extent to which this statement applies to each of the three texts that you have studied on your comparative course.

Indicative Material

- ◆ Contrasting introductions and settings invite readers to enter the unique world of the text.
- ◆ Varying presentation of individual characters adds to our enjoyment/interest.
- ◆ Range of narrative perspectives and structures affects the reader's engagement.
- ◆ Distinctive plots and dialogue create degrees of emotional intensity.
- ◆ Specific imagery, symbolism, descriptive detail intensify/reduce appreciation.
- ◆ Music, camerawork, special effects all heighten/lessen the drama/tension.
- ◆ etc.

Sample Draft Plan

The following draft plan uses *King Lear* as one of the comparative texts.

Introduction The **three texts** on my comparative course have very different literary genres, but share some aspects. *King Lear* – a play in five acts – follows a conventional structure for Shakespearean tragedy. This is very different from my **other two texts** ...

Point 1 The play is set in pre-Christian Britain and in various locations – the castles of Lear and Gloucester, the heath, Dover. But there are some Christian themes in the play. Establishes a contrast between civilised retirement and chaos. However, in my **second text** ...

Point 2 The play is rich in telling imagery. Repeated references to 'nothing' and 'nature' create a sense of loss and suffering. Lear is haunted by Cordelia's words from the opening scene. In contrast, the author of my **third text** relies on dialogue to reveal character ...

Point 3 Shakespeare uses dramatic soliloquies and monologues to reveal the truth about

characters – particularly Edmund and Lear. A similar effect is achieved by the use of flashback in both of my **other texts** ...

Point 4 Significance of irony in the story – Lear's madness and Gloucester's blindness bring insights and understanding. The best example of irony in my **second text** is ...

Concluding Paragraph Dark ending of *King Lear* – dominated by torment and death. Evil has been defeated, but at an enormous cost. While the conclusions are realistic in my **other two texts**, they are not nearly as bleak ...

Sample Paragraph: Point 3

A prominent feature of Shakespeare's story-telling technique is his use of soliloquies. These monologues not only inform the audience about plot and character, they involve us in the story. When we first hear the truth from Gloucester's illegitimate son Edmund, we are brought into his confidence and have privileged information that his naive father and brother do not know. We see his anger and defiance: 'Now, gods, stand up for bastards!' Just as Lear has misjudged

his daughters, we learn that Gloucester is unaware of Edmund's villainy. The soliloquy makes it clear that Edmund will do anything to manipulate his family and achieve his ambitions: 'All with me's meet that I can fashion fit'. The playwright makes effective use of an equally powerful monologue in Act 2, Scene 4 when Lear challenges Goneril and Regan – 'O reason not the need! Our basest beggars/ Are in the poorest thing superfluous.'

His response that to limit individuals to only their needs reduces them to mere beasts shows keen insight on what distinguishes us as humans. The audience now sees the old king's developing character – something that is at the heart of the story. In time, Lear will find even greater wisdom in madness. A similar effect in advancing the plot is achieved through the use of flashback in both my other texts ...

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ A well-written paragraph which uses reference effectively to discuss an important feature of Shakespeare's dramatic technique.
- ◆ There is a firm focus on the question, with incisive discussion throughout.
- ◆ Quotations are also integrated successfully. Expression is impressive, assured, fluent and clearly controlled. A top-grade standard of answering.

Class/Homework Exercises on The Comparative Study – Literary Genre

1. Choose one of the other points in the sample draft plan and write a paragraph of your own in response to the question above.
2. 'Authors make use of a variety of techniques to create scenes of great emotional intensity in texts.' With reference to three texts on your comparative course, identify and compare the techniques used by authors to create scenes of great emotional intensity. (70)