Comparing literary works

IB DP English A: Language and Literature Paper 2: the comparative essay

Comparing literary works (Paper 2)

- explain what Paper 2 asks and which works you may use;
- use the features of prose fiction, drama and poetry when comparing works;
- explain the **context of production** and the **context of reception**;

Comparing literary works (Paper 2) (2)

- compare *A Doll's House* and "The Story of an Hour" on one question;
- plan and write a point-by-point **comparative essay**.

Literary features to compare

- Each **literary form 文学体裁** has its own tools:
- All forms use **characterisation 人物塑造** (how a character is presented), **symbol 象征** (an object that stands for an idea), **structure 结构** (the order and shape of the work) and **irony 反讽** (a gap between what is said or expected and what is true).

Context: time and space

- The **context of production 创作语境** is when and where a work was written; the **context of reception 接受语境** is when and where it is read.
- In the world of the play, a wife could not borrow money without her husband's agreement, so Nora borrows money secretly, by forging her father's signature, to save her husband's life.
- A modern reader may see her as brave; many readers in 1879 saw her as a criminal and a bad mother.
- The same text can mean different things in different contexts.

Two works, one question

- **Question:** *"Discuss how two works you have studied present the limits placed on a character's freedom."*
- **Thesis:** Both works show marriage as a cage that a woman escapes only by breaking the rules of her time, but Ibsen lets Nora walk out, while Chopin, writing in a very short form, allows Louise freedom only inside her own mind and for one hour.

Structuring the essay

- *A point-by-point **structure** keeps the comparison in every paragraph*
- Write **point by point**: each body paragraph compares both works on one idea.
- Use linking words: *similarly*, *whereas*, *in contrast*, *both*, *while*.
- **Worked paragraph.**

The criteria

- **Preparing:** for each work you study, learn 10 to 15 short quotations, and group them by idea (power, identity, gender, family, freedom).
- Then any question will find you ready.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Language A: Language and Literature guide* (first assessment 2021).
- H. Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (1879), translated by M. Meyer (1965).
- K. Chopin, "The Story of an Hour", first published as "The Dream of an Hour", *Vogue* (6 December 1894).
- M. Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (1971), on the alternative German ending of 1880.

Common errors

- Writing about one work and then the other, with the comparison only in the conclusion.
- Retelling the plots instead of answering the question.
- Using a work you already used in the individual oral or the HL essay.

Common errors (2)

- Treating **context** as a list of facts instead of showing how it changes the meaning.
- Ignoring form: a play and a short story create effects in different ways.
- Quoting long passages; short, well-chosen quotations are better.

Key terms

- **Comparative essay**: an essay that discusses two works together, in answer to one question.
- **Context of production**: the time and place in which a work was written.
- **Context of reception**: the time and place in which a work is read or watched.

Key terms (2)

- **Symbol**: an object that stands for an idea.
- **Irony**: a gap between what is said or expected and what is true.
- **Stage directions**: the writer's instructions in a play about setting, movement and action.

Check yourself

- 1.
- How long is Paper 2, how many questions do you answer, and how many marks is it worth? 2.
- Why did many readers in 1879 judge Nora differently from many readers today? 3.
- What happened to the ending of *A Doll's House* in Germany? 4.