Comparing literary works

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

Comparing literary works (Paper 2)

- explain what Paper 2 asks and which works you may use;
- use tools for analysing drama, such as the **tragic hero**, **hamartia** and **dramatic irony**;
- follow the tragic arc in *Macbeth* and *Oedipus Rex*;

Comparing literary works (Paper 2) (2)

- explain how the **context** of a work shapes its meaning;
- plan and write a point-by-point **comparative essay**.

Tools for analysing drama

- A play is written to be performed, so the audience learns everything from what characters say and do on stage.
- Tragedy, the form of both *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth*, has its own tools, which Aristotle first described in his *Poetics*.
- Use them to explain how each play builds pity and fear, not only to name what happens.

Structure: the tragic arc

- A five-part model (often called Freytag's pyramid) helps you track how a tragedy builds and falls.
- In *Oedipus Rex* the structure is different: the main events (the killing of Laius, the marriage to Jocasta) happened years before the play starts.
- The play is an **investigation** 调查: Oedipus searches for the truth, and every step towards it is a step towards his own ruin.

Context: time and space

- Sophocles wrote for a festival audience in Athens who already knew the story of Oedipus.
- They watched not to learn *what* happens, but *how*; this makes every line full of **dramatic irony**.
- Greek audiences also believed that the gods' oracles must come true.
- Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* around 1606, soon after James VI of Scotland became King James I of England.

Two works, one question

- **Question:** *"Discuss how two works you have studied present the conflict between fate and free will."*
- **Thesis:** Both plays use a prophecy to test human freedom, but Sophocles shows a man whose free choices lead him into a fate he cannot escape, while Shakespeare shows a man whose fate is only a suggestion, so that his ruin is his own responsibility.

Structuring the essay

- Write **point by point**: each body paragraph compares both works on one idea (the prophecy; the hero's choices; the ending).
- Use linking words: *similarly*, *whereas*, *in contrast*, *both*.
- **Worked paragraph.**
- > Both playwrights let the audience see more than the hero, but they use > this knowledge in opposite ways.

The criteria

- **Preparing:** for each work, learn 10 to 15 short quotations or precise moments, grouped by idea (power, fate, guilt, family, gender).
- For a work in translation, refer to moments and techniques rather than exact wording, and name the translation you studied.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Language A: Literature guide* (first assessment 2021).
- Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (about 429 BC), translated by R. Fagles (1984).
- W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (about 1606), Arden Shakespeare third series, ed. S. Clark and P. Mason (2015).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, on **hamartia** and **catharsis**.
- J. Shapiro, *1606: Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (2015), on James I and *Macbeth*.

Common errors

- Writing about one work and then the other, with the comparison only at the end.
- 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 background facts instead of showing how it shapes the meaning.
- Quoting exact wording from a work in translation as if it were the author's own words; name the translation and focus on moments and techniques.
- Comparing only similarities; differences often make the strongest points.

Key terms

- **Tragic hero**: a character of high status whose fall is caused partly by a flaw or error.
- **Hamartia**: the **tragic hero**'s flaw or error of judgement.
- **Dramatic irony**: when the audience knows something a character does not.

Key terms (2)

- **Soliloquy**: a speech in which a character, alone on stage, speaks their thoughts aloud.
- **Catharsis**: the release of pity and fear that the audience feels at the end of a tragedy.
- **Context of production**: the time, place and conditions in which a work was written.

Check yourself

- 1.
- How long is Paper 2, how many questions do you answer, and what is it worth at SL and HL? 2.
- What is Oedipus's **hamartia**, and what is Macbeth's? 3.
- Give one example of **dramatic irony** in *Oedipus Rex*. 4.