

2013 Q2 Comparative – Theme or Issue |

Sample Essay

“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 of your texts that you have studied as part of your comparative course.

I agree that the issue of social class is important in shaping our understanding of the cultural context, especially in my first text ‘King Lear’, written by William Shakespeare. In my opinion, I find the issue of social class to be the downfall of several of the characters in the play. The attitudes displayed by each of these characters, revealed in key moments throughout, illustrate the impossibility of social change and acceptance, due to deep seated social norms.

In ‘King Lear’, Shakespeare portrays a society who’s emphasis on social class results in a strict hierarchy, mostly fuelled by the unceasing desire to improve one’s status. It is this desire that ultimately leads to the collapse of Lear’s monarchy. In Act I, scene (i), we are introduced to the main characters and are immediately made aware of just how pretentious and entitled Lear’s family is. Lear decides it is time to divide his kingdom between his three daughters; Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He asked them who “*doth love us most,*” in his desire to make them grovel for their inheritance. However, Cordelia refuses to partake in Lear’s show of vanity and replies with “*I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less.*” Lear doesn’t take this too well, as it is clear that Cordelia is the favourite daughter. His temper overpowers him and he subsequently banishes Cordelia from the kingdom, her birth right and childhood home. Like the majority of royals, Lear was born into the family, always destined to be king. In my opinion, this is why Lear finds it so difficult to take criticism from others and lashes out at those that oppose him. He also has an enormous ego and his pride will not allow him to be humiliated in front of others. As a result of knowing this, I can better understand why social class and superiority means so much to him.

Another prime example of the importance of social class in 'King Lear', is Gloucester and his two sons Edmund and Edgar. While Edgar and Edmund are brothers, Edmund is the result of Gloucester's affair, and illegitimate child. Gloucester shares this personal information with Kent in the first scene. Throughout the play, Edmund continuously attempts to assert his place in society, by framing his brother and openly courting both Goneril and Regan. His actions greatly affect the outcome of the play, as he convinces his father that Edgar has committed serious crimes, forcing Edgar to flee in fear for his life. It is clear that Edmund always felt less than his brother, he was a bastard child. The reader can almost feel his pain as Gloucester talks about Edmund's birth in a derogatory manner, as if Gloucester was completely innocent in the situation and must bear the burden of the child. Society does not regard Edmund and Edgar as equals and neither does Gloucester. Despite his evil tendencies, I can almost understand Edmund's motives. He was never given a fair chance, always having to prove himself while his brother was just automatically accepted. This knowledge does affect and ultimately shape my understanding on the text.

In conclusion, the issue of social class is important in shaping our understanding of a text such as 'King Lear.' The world of this play is based around social class and status, as the characters battle to improve their standing in society. Perhaps, Lear cannot help the way in which he acts, as he has never known any different. If Gloucester had treated his sons as equally rather than treating Edmund as inferior to Edgar, Edmund may not have grown to hate and destroy those around him. Social class is central, whether the characters realised it or not.

(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.

As with 'King Lear', the issue of social class is equally as important in shaping my understanding of the cultural context in the other two texts that I have studied as part of my comparative course. Both 'A Winter's Bone', directed by Debra Granik, and 'Room', written by Emma Donoghue, explore family values and expectations but I find them to be more focused on social exclusion amid the world of the characters.

Firstly, 'Room' by Emma Donoghue. The story is told from five year old Jack's perspective, which I believe to be a skill in itself. His 'Ma' was kidnapped by Old Nick at nineteen and has spent the last seven years in captivity. Jack was born in the twelve by twelve shed, with no knowledge of the outside world other than the cartoons he watches on their small TV. Up until his fifth birthday, he is completely oblivious to it all. We only begin to fully grasp exactly how socially excluded Ma and Jack are as the story develops. They rely on their captor, Old Nick, for food, water, electricity and running water. They are treated as third class citizens, worse than animals. When Jack accidentally sets off his remote control car on one of Old Nick's nightly visits, they are left without electricity and heat for several days as punishment. This, however, is a turning point for Ma, who hatches a risky plan to escape. Similar to Ree, Ma seizes power and takes charge of both her and Jack's fate, albeit with worse consequences should their plan be foiled. By hiding in a rolled up rug and playing dead, Jack manages to escape and lead the police to Room. Due to their extended isolation, Ma and Jack struggle in the outside world as they attempt to find their place in society. Jack begins suffering from panic attacks, he doesn't understand how to interact with others or basic social etiquette. His attachment to Ma develops into separation anxiety, which is made even worse when Ma attempts to take her own life. She cannot readjust after the years of torture and abuse, prompting her suicidal attempt. Although, unlike 'King Lear', it is not an issue of social class, but rather an issue of social integration and the views of society around Ma and Jack after years of exclusion. I can understand how this would affect the characters and therefore shapes my understanding of the text.

'A Winter's Bone' also focuses on social exclusion and follows how the main character, Ree, struggles to overcome the violent attributes of social society in her small village. Largely fuelled by the manufacture and distribution of meth, the community runs wild, led by the murderous Thump Milton. As with both 'King Lear' and 'Room', this text explores family values. Ree is forced to care for two younger siblings, a mentally incapacitated mother and an often absent meth manufacturer father. At only seventeen, she must take charge when her father goes missing a week before he is due to appear in court, made worse by the fact that the family home and land has been put up as his collateral. In order to save their home and her family, Ree must find her father. Drug abuse and violence hinder her mission significantly, as it quickly becomes apparent that nobody is prepared to talk. Thump Milton, kingpin and meth extraordinaire, refuses to talk to her until Ree publicly challenges him directly. Unfortunately for Ree, her insolence leads to a violent physical attack, leaving her bruised and broken. Eventually, the Miltons' cave and bring Ree to Jessop's body, floating in the swamp. Suspiciously, they knew exactly where he was located and it comes to light that Jessop has snitched to local law enforcement. Perhaps he was trying to make amends, but the sheriff's office held no power or influence compared to the Miltons'. The community has practically disowned the family, leaving them as social outcasts. Jessop may have paid with his life, arguably for the greater good, but ultimately it was Lee and her family who suffered the most.

In conclusion, I believe that the issue of social class is important in shaping our understanding of the cultural context. However, in both 'Room' and 'A Winter's Bone', the cultural context is more focused on social exclusion and deep seated social norms such as the "snitches get stitches" or whistle blower mentality. While social exclusion is key throughout both texts, 'Room' proves to be a more in depth view at just how difficult it is to integrate into society. It also shows how a lack of social inclusion, even at such a young age, will undoubtedly hinder Jack for the rest of his life. 'King Lear' demonstrates that, even those born with a metaphorical silver spoon in their mouth, can still fall victim to social stratification and they can lose everything in the blink of an eye.