

## Comparative | Sample answer: Theme or Issue

### **‘There are many reasons why the exploration of the same theme or issue can be more entertaining in some texts than in others’ (2017)**

A theme, in regard to literature, is a central concept intertwined throughout the text and meticulously revealed through plot events, character development and symbolism. From my study of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s masterpiece ‘The Great Gatsby’, Arthur Miller’s poignant play ‘All My Sons’, and Tom Hooper’s authentic film adaptation of ‘Les Miserables’, I found the theme of gender to be greatly prevalent in all three texts. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller and Tom Hooper simultaneously manage to accurately convey a plethora of realistic ideals, thoughts and challenges, be it polarising or paralleling, through an assortment of key scenes.

The initial disparity between the three texts is their portrayal of masculinity. In ‘The Great Gatsby’, we are presented with a surplus of hyper-masculine characters. Tom Buchanan, upon our initial introduction, is described by the narrator as having “two shining arrogant eyes” which “established dominance over his face”. His assertive nature manifests itself into a pivotal moment in Myrtle Wilson’s apartment when he breaks his mistress’ “nose with his open hand”, similar to how one might punish a dog after she yells “Daisy, Daisy, Daisy”. This is similar to the way Joe Keller is physically described upon the opening stage directions as “a man of stolid mind and build” and later by his family as an “elephant” and a “bull”. I believe that Keller typifies Miller’s portrayal of the American Family, and his role is at once the backbone and the bane of the play. In sharp contrast to the other two texts, ‘Les Miserables’ presents us with the character of Jean Valjean, a man who, in my opinion, seems to possess all the physical attributes associated with masculinity. Due to the ambiguity that Tom Hooper pierces surrounding gender roles however, he is no archetypal character. The pivotal scene in which the Bishop gives him “precious silver” in order to “become an honest man”, has a transformative effect on him, later using his immense strength to selflessly rescue a man trapped under a transportation cart.

Relationships are sparsely depicted throughout all three texts. In ‘The Great Gatsby’, love is completely absent, however there is an over-abundance of lust. I believe that this is merely the

result of a consumption-driven society. Tom Buchanan asserts his “supercilious manner” over his plethora of inamoratas. He prohibits Daisy’s dalliance with Gatsby while hypocritically minimising his own string of infidelities, claiming that he merely “goes off on a spree” every once in a while. This relationship dynamic is manifested in a pivotal scene when Tom places his hand over Daisy with an unromantic plate of “cold fried chicken between them”. While there is no room for such infidelity in the insular world of ‘All My Sons’, I believe that the lack of love is paralleled. The central relationship of Kate and Joe Keller is one based entirely upon secrecy and suppression. This relationship practically disintegrates when Kate mentions that her husband “hasn’t been laid up in fifteen years” and thus revealing the murderous truth behind his moral facade. Unlike the aforementioned texts, it seems that the only authentic depiction of love is that of Cosette and Marius in ‘Les Miserables’, and is evidently depicted in their duet of “A Heart Full of Love” which, as they serenade each other, fundamentally speaks for itself.

The obscure light in which women are portrayed seems universal in all three texts. In ‘The Great Gatsby’, all three prominent female characters seem to violate a societal taboo. Jordan is a cheater, Myrtle is promiscuous and Daisy is materialistic, evident in a pivotal scene when Gatsby realises that her voice is “full of money”. Similar to Fitzgerald’s tendency of writing female characters who fall into a single archetype, ‘Les Miserables’ has similarly fallen victim to this phenomenon in the character of Eponine, whose sole purpose seems to revolve around pining desperately for Marius. This can be seen in her rendition of “On My Own” in which she states “without him the world around me changes” whereas in his perspective, his world “will go on turning”. Contrastingly, while Miller is often criticised for his one-dimensional portrayal of women, it seems he has achieved the opposite in the role of Kate Keller, who, in my opinion, fundamentally dictates the flow of the play. In an attempt to prevent the marriage of Anne and Chris she declares “your brother is alive, darling, because if he’s dead, your father killed him”, thus, preventing all the other characters to move forward and accept the events of the past.

The objectification of women is a concept woven throughout all three texts. In ‘The Great Gatsby’, it becomes increasingly evident that Gatsby himself views Daisy as an object or someone “excitingly desirable”. In my opinion, she is merely an extension of the American dream, or something from his past that was always out of reach. This becomes evident in the key moment when he reveals that the fact that Daisy was desired by a plethora of men “increased her value in his eyes”. This is mirrored in ‘All My Sons’ through the character of Annie, whom, upon arrival, is termed “the beautiful girl” or the “wonderful thing”. Jim even goes as far as to state that

“the block could use a pretty girl” especially since “in the neighbourhood there is not a damned thing to look at”. Rather than having a sense of bodily autonomy, she is either deemed “Larry’s girl” or that of Chris. However, the most explicit depiction of objectification is through Fantine, who is forced to, by way of survival to sell her “pretty hair” her “tooth” and eventually herself in the rendition of lovely ladies, thus becoming a mere commodity, as she admits that she feels as though she’s “already dead”. The barbaric “customers who only come at night” are virile depictions of 18th century sailors, they “smell” women as though they’re a subhuman species.

Studying the theme of gender in the three texts proved incredibly interesting, as it displayed the different roles expected from and given to the various characters portrayed, providing more context to the societies presented and also highlighting inequalities and injustices with regard to the theme. I found exploring this issue intriguing and entertaining in all three texts equally, as they dealt with gender in both similar and different ways, allowing me to further ponder gender equality in past and modern societies, and leads to a contemplation of how to better our own actions on this front.