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Group 1: English

Compare and contrast examples

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The series of examples below, using *The Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare and *'Master Harold'...and the boys* by Athol Fugard, will demonstrate the significance of the tips in the article on pp. 2–5 of the magazine. Imagine that these examples were developed in response to an exam question from 2008 on setting reflecting on the underlying ideas in a play.

The examples are presented in the format of a planning chart that you could sketch for yourself during the exam. A chart such as this will keep you focused on the comparison/contrast aspect of the task, rather than letting you slide off into treating each work separately. The arrows on the charts illustrate that you begin in the centre with the main concept on which you will focus, and then you work outward, assessing the role of that concept in each play. The bottom row of the chart ensures that you return to the question as it was asked and sum up the comparison/contrast between the two plays.

Example 1

Relationship to meaning?	How the element is used in work 1	Central comparison or contrast	How the element is used in work 2	Relationship to meaning?
Fugard uses the fact that Hally exits into the storm at the end of the play to help viewers understand that he will be less safe out there, alone and grappling with the values of his society, than he was in the tea shop. This contributes to Fugard's point that we need to trust our personal experience with individuals as a truer guide to what is right and wrong than social standards are.	The rain is a symbol in <i>'Master Harold'...and the boys</i> which symbolises the political storm of racism which exists outside the tea shop.	Both plays use symbolism.	The bear in the stage direction 'exit pursued by a bear' is a symbol in <i>The Winter's Tale</i> — it signifies nature and what is natural.	The fact that the bear eats Antigonus just after he abandons the baby in Bohemia represents Shakespeare's idea that following the unreasonable orders of a tyrant is unnatural, and that we need to search our own consciences to determine what is ethical and what action constitutes right action.
How the examples answer the questions				
Both Fugard and Shakespeare use symbolism in their plays. Fugard uses it to demonstrate the danger of accepting societal norms while Shakespeare uses symbolism to demonstrate what is natural, rather than what is artificial or manmade.				

Assessment of example 1

This comparison results in a weak argument. The comparison itself, the fact that both plays use symbolism, is fairly superficial. The comparison does highlight a literary technique, so it is better than a comparison based on a simple fact (such as, say, both plays feature a relationship between a father and his son), but the fact that two writers use symbolism can be applied to any genre, not just drama. More problematic is the fact that the comparison stops at the mere fact that the two playwrights used symbols. The example here does not reveal any interesting comparison between the two symbols. In

essence, a student producing an example like this treats the two plays separately, rather than in a way which results in a meaningful revelation about how the two plays might be seen to answer the question. Most problematic is the fact that when the student tried to explain how the use of the particular literary strategy related to meaning, she neglected to make an overt connection to the exam question. The question is about the relationship between setting and ideas, and although the two examples do relate to setting (if we can consider a bear to be part of the setting and not a character — an arguable assumption!), the response still does not rise to the level of answering the question as asked (see tip 4), because it does not overtly link the setting to ideas.

There is the beginning of an answer through an implied connection between setting and ideas, which you can see in the 'Relationship to meaning' columns, because the student has mentioned a connection between setting and right and wrong. However, the student has failed to develop that idea fully in the bottom row. In fact, in that bottom row, where the student sums up the significance of the playwright's use of setting, he or she fails to make any connection between the two plays. The argument ends with the student having pointed out a comparison/contrast on the far end of the continuum: nothing in common. That choice suggests weak understanding on the part of the student.

Notice, however, that the student missed an opportunity here to use the same examples to make a much more insightful point: it would be possible to make an argument that both the rain in *'Master Harold'...and the boys* and the bear in *The Winter's Tale* are natural forces, and that in both cases the playwrights used those natural forces as symbols to show that nature arbitrates against immoral actions (a clear statement of the role of setting in depicting ideas) and that in both plays the author makes the point that individuals must decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Hally is depicted as becoming one with the storm at the end of *'Master Harold'...and the boys*, suggesting that he is part of the dark forces of the play, while the bear represents nature destroying a person who aligned himself with the dark forces of *The Winter's Tale*, so in both cases, the playwrights used particular images of nature to make a comment about morality. If a student used that approach, then he or she would be working in the middle of the continuum, showing how two playwrights used different aspects of setting ultimately to reveal the same idea.

Example 2

Relationship to meaning?	How the element is used in work 1	Central comparison or contrast	How the element is used in work 2	Relationship to meaning?
Hally's exit into the rain leaves the conflict unresolved — the plot of the play, in other words, is unfinished. The audience is left to decide for themselves what they think will happen 'tomorrow' and whether Hally will find the inner fortitude to do right by the man who has cared for him all his life, or whether he will succumb to the pressures of that storm. Fugard's point is that ending bigotry is a personal action — we can't just blame society.	The rain functions as a supernatural function of setting in <i>'Master Harold' ...and the boys</i> , because the fact that it rains continually and hard means that Hally, Sam and Willy are isolated from the outside world. They are safe from intrusion by anyone who might disapprove of their friendly, casual relationship.	Both plays use setting for supernatural function — the setting helps to define the action.	The ocean in Sicilia serves as a supernatural function of setting in <i>The Winter's Tale</i> because the fact that Sicilia is divided from Bohemia by an ocean means that Perdita's life in Bohemia is isolated from the influence of the tragedy in Sicilia, and she was safe from the kind of formality and pressure that would come from living in a country (and household) with a tyrant king.	Perdita and Florizel flee Bohemia across the barrier of the ocean to escape Polixenes' tyranny (ironically the second time Perdita has fled a tyrannic king across the sea). Shakespeare uses the barrier of the ocean to demonstrate his point that having the courage to stand up for one's own desires and for the love of another person results in reward and happiness. He uses the setting to help create his point that we must not give in to tyranny.
<p>How the examples answer the questions</p> <p>Both authors use the supernatural function of setting as a means of revealing an important idea, although they do so to somewhat different effect. Fugard isolates his three characters inside a safe place which Hally, in his selfishness and ignorance, destroys. The storm outside ends up as a barrier to Hally's internal sense of good. Shakespeare, on the other hand, isolates Perdita and Florizel in Sicilia from which they, like Hally, choose to flee, but in their case, taking on the dangers of the ocean ultimately leads to their salvation (as well as the salvation of many other characters). Both playwrights use setting to create barriers and dangers the characters must face, but where Fugard uses the storm to represent great danger for Hally with no promise of salvation, Shakespeare uses the sea as a means of escape to freedom.</p>				

Assessment of example 2

This comparison results in a much stronger argument than example 1 provided. Although this example still relies on a literary technique that appears in all literature (and so does not reveal any special understanding on the student's part of the nature of drama as a genre), it nevertheless reveals a sophisticated understanding on the part of the student. Two features of this example make it significantly more sophisticated than example 1:

- The student has refined the connecting concept so that it is much more specific than the one in example 1. 'Symbolism' is a broad term, and, as we saw in example 1, reliance on something broad means that the resulting discussion of elements of the two plays can easily end up unrelated to each other. Focusing on supernatural function of setting means that the student has discovered something precise that is the same in both plays. Focus on this level of detail means that the student has a more detailed and sophisticated knowledge of both literary technique and of the particular plays, which means that he or she is much more likely to be able to reveal something interesting.
- The student has chosen as examples of the central connecting technique something from each play that has the same effect. In this case, the feature of setting chosen from each play has the effect of isolating characters from outside dangers. That fact illustrates a strong comparison which reveals detailed, specific knowledge of the two plays.

The analysis connects the examples directly to the question that was asked, as seen in the bottom row of the chart. Finally, you can see how this example illustrates tip 3, because the contrast is embedded in the discussion of the comparison: in one play, rain was the contributing factor and in the other it was an ocean. In one play, the physical element is something transient (a storm), while in the

other play, the physical element is something permanent and quite difficult to traverse. These contrasts, however, are less significant than the main comparison, which is expressed in the shared belief about morality expressed by both playwrights.

If, in your essay, you develop a strong literary example, such as this one, which applies generally to literature rather than specifically to drama (or whatever genre you are writing about), then you can strengthen your essay by making sure that you balance that discussion with an analysis of a feature that is specifically characteristic to that genre. You need not avoid addressing elements of a text that might apply in multiple genres, but for the highest marks you want additionally to demonstrate that you appreciate the features of the particular genre under discussion. Example 3 below provides an example of what that might look like for drama. Assume the same question that was being explored in examples 1 and 2.

Example 3

Relationship to meaning?	How the element is used in work 1	Central comparison or contrast	How the element is used in work 2	Relationship to meaning?
The effect of the tightly constricted time and place in <i>Master Harold...and the boys</i> is twofold: the short time frame demonstrates how quickly a whole lifetime of experience and relationships can alter dramatically, and the restricted place with its inherent isolation from other characters demonstrates the idea that we have only ourselves to blame for the actions we take and the decisions we make.	Fugard restricts the time of the play to 90 minutes and that time matches exactly the time that passes in the lives of the characters. All the action also takes place inside the tea shop.	Fugard, in <i>Master Harold...</i> adheres rigidly to Aristotle's unities. In <i>The Winter's Tale</i> , Shakespeare violates them aggressively.	Far from sticking to a 24-hour time frame, Shakespeare develops the action of <i>The Winter's Tale</i> over the course of more than 16 years. There is even a character called Time who comes out in Act 3 and makes a great show of announcing to the audience that 16 years are passing. The action is not confined to a single setting—or even to a single continent. Sicilia and Bohemia are strongly contrasting settings.	Shakespeare breaks Aristotle's unities in order to make the point that sometimes redemption requires us to navigate long distances in both time and space. Leontes' sins cannot be redressed until 16 years have passed nor until his daughter has traversed the ocean twice.
How the examples answer the questions				
Time and place are important elements of setting, and both Fugard and Shakespeare use them in their respective plays in order to reveal important ideas about living a moral life. Fugard adheres to Aristotle's unities in order to emphasise the means by which one's life can suddenly descend from the relatively moral (demonstrated by Hally's mainly fair treatment of Sam and Willie) to the immoral (Hally's rejection, even if only temporary, of his friendship and respect for Sam in favour of standing up for his own bigoted, selfish father), while Shakespeare does the exact opposite — breaking the unities dramatically — in order to demonstrate the opposite idea: once one has allowed oneself to descend into evil, the return to morality is a long, slow, painful process. The long journeys across the twin barriers of the ocean and the long years reflect the long emotional, psychological journey from sin to redemption.				

Assessment of example 3

This example focuses on a literary element that is specific to drama: Aristotle's unities. The main basis for this analysis is a contrast, where the main basis for the analysis in the first two examples was comparison. In this case, there is a central comparison — both playwrights constructed plays which highlight Aristotle's Unities — but from there, the main points are contrasts: one playwright adhered strictly to the unities (quite unusual in the modern era) and one broke them in a way that seems quite deliberate because of the extremity of the violation and the deliberate highlighting of the manipulation of time and place in the text. One playwright used adherence to the unities to reveal the idea that a character's weakness, arising from his desperate need for his father's approval, causes his own downfall, while the other used the breaking of the unities to reveal the idea that a failed parent can redeem himself through a long, painful process of repentance. Central to those contrasts, however are two more similarities: both playwrights were dealing with questions of parent-child relationships, and

both playwrights were dealing with the need for personal courage to overcome societal, or external, pressure to behave in immoral ways.

This example demonstrates detailed knowledge of text and a sophisticated understanding of the symbolic function of setting and of Aristotle's unities, and it provides examples that directly answer the test question as it was asked, since the two unities considered here are time and place, integral elements of setting.

For more on Aristotle's unities see

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/drama/classical%20drama/unities.html>

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