

Paper 2 – Example General Question
Higher Level
November 2005

Question 5a):

“Some works of literature are universal and timeless; others seem specific to one place and/or time.” In what ways do two or three works in your study explore this range of possibilities?

Gore Vidal once said ‘a talent for drama is not a talent for writing, but it is an ability to articulate human relationships.’ In this way all dramatic works can be said to be universal and timeless, in that the thread common to all humanity is our involvement in and fascination with such relationships. The shared experience which is witnessing drama in performance lends itself to an appreciation of this fact. However, by nature, dramatic works must also be specific to a place and or a time. Two playwrights that have explored the range of possibilities of specificity and universality are Ariel Dorfman and Athol Fugard in their plays ‘Death and the Maiden and ‘Sizwe Bansi is Dead.’ While both plays demonstrate an obviously specific setting and situation, further examination of the ideas and meaning behind them both uncovers a universal message for humanity.

Comment [KH1]: Although it is not necessary to know quotations like this one from Vidal, the way that it is used in this instance does make for an impressive start to the essay

Comment [KH2]: Confident vocabulary

Comment [KH3]: Clear focus on the question

Comment [KH4]: Smooth inclusion of quotations

Dorfman’s stage directions indicate that the setting of ‘Death and the Maiden’ is ‘probably Chile.’ The central conflict revolves around three characters, Paulina, Gerardo and Roberto. Over the course of the play we come to learn of Paulina’s experience under the dictatorial regime of the time when she was subject to brutal rape and torture at the hands of a doctor who enjoyed performing such acts to the sound of the Schubert Quartet ‘Death and the Maiden.’ Fifteen years later her idealistic lawyer husband Gerardo has been named to the ‘truth and reconciliation’ commission that will investigate the acts that ended in ‘death or presumption of death.’ Paulina’s world is irrevocably altered when her husband brings to their marital home the man Paulina believes was her torturer all those years ago. The arrival of Roberto forces Paulina to confront the lingering effects of her incarceration. She choose the path of retribution seeking validation of her years of agony and process to try Roberto while holding him against his will. The three characters can be likened to a microcosm of Chilean Society; Paulina representing the disenfranchised victims, Roberto the perpetrators of injustices, and Gerardo those who would leave the past behind and look to the future: ‘Well die from so much past, so much pain and resentment.’

Comment [KH5]: Although this is nicely and concisely done there is an element of simply recapitulating the story here which it would be best to avoid

Comment [KH6]: Beautiful vocabulary

Comment [KH7]: Nice subtle point

Sizwe Bansi is Dead considers a similarly specific and limited group of characters dealing with the effects of systematic repression by the ruling government. From Styles’ opening monologue, audience members gain awareness of the challenges of daily life for a black man under Apartheid. Apartheid was racism made law: a system which dictated down to the very last detail how black people were to live, work and die. Their ‘Dompas’ or dumb-passes as they became known, became the method through which such control was enforced. We meet the protagonist, Sizwe, as her enters Styles photographic studio. He is tense and ill-at-ease, we initially come to know him as Robert Zwelanzima of 58 Mapija Street. However, as Styles takes the ‘movie’ picture of Robert / Sizwe, and the camera flash illuminates him with a single spot, Robert / Sizwe begins to narrate a letter to his wife, Nowetu, and the picaresque journey that preceded this moment is revealed to the audience. Sizwe Bansi has come to Port Elizabeth from Ciskei Bautustan seeking work; however with his pass-book not in order he has been ordered back home. Sent to Buntu, a man reknowned for helping people, so much so that it is claimed that ‘if he was white they’d call him a liberal,’ Sizwe’s plight seems impossible until the discovery of the body and pass-book of Robert Zwelanzima and temporary alleviation of his problem becomes a reality. The temporary nature of his solution is painfully clear to the tragically wise Sizwe as he talks to Bunta ‘Stay out of trouble? Impossible Bunt. Durskin is trouble.’

Comment [KH8]: Great opening sentence that focus on the question ‘specific’ but also makes a clear comparison between the two texts being studied

Comment [KH9]: Better focus on the effect on the audience here

Comment [KH10]: Confident grasp of complex literary features

Comment [KH11]: Again, perhaps a little too much story-telling, although this does have some relevance given the question

Despite these highly specific situations, settings and characters, both playwrights have intentionally broadened the scope of each works’ application. Dorfman’s stage directions state that although the country is probably Chile it could be any country that has ‘given itself a democratic government after a long period of dictatorship.’ Death and the Maiden arose as part of Dorfman’s attempt to put

Comment [KH12]: There is nonetheless a clear focus on the question

into words the entire struggle of a nation, the 'conflicts that were hidden just below the surface of a nation.'

Fugard's play gains universality through the allegorical connotations of the character names. In Xhosa, 'Sizwe Bansi' can be roughly translated to mean 'the people are strong' and 'Buntu' to mean 'humankind.' These ideas are mirrored in Fugard's portrayal of his characters as simple people, dreaming only of living a life of dignity. The immense pleasure of small victories is expressed by Styles when describing his studio. 'Do you know what it is? To stand straight in a place of your own? To be your own!'

Comment [KH13]: Good focus on the question and good consideration of how the two playwrights have achieved the same ends, universality, using different methods

Comment [KH14]: Some good comments on universality – but there should be more of this sort of thing

Another area of universality that the plays share is their direct involvement of their audience – both contain elements that break down the '4th wall.' In Sizwe Bansi is Dead, Styles creates rapport with the audience when he leans forward conspiratorially to ensure no-one could be 'eaves-dropping on the intimacy of their conversation.' Later, Sizwe provocatively interrogates audience members. Having torn off his clothes, he turns away from Buntu and cries 'What is wrong with this world good people? Who cares for who in this world?'

Comment [KH15]: Good attempt to consider a variety of ways in which the plays are universal

Dorfman's method of audience involvement comes with the transition between scenes one and two of the third and final act. As a giant mirror descends and Mozart's quartet is heard. 'Selected slowly moving spots flicker over the audience,' picking out two or three people at a time, moving up and down rows. The mirror forces audience members to undergo literal reflection, with the aim of encouraging the metaphorical form also. Dorfman subtly encourages audience members to consider themselves and their actions in the light of the message of his play.

Comment [KH16]: Lovely control of sentence and vocabulary

Neither Dorfman nor Fugard present neatly packaged conclusions for audience members to passively receive. Rather, both employ the Brechtian technique of alienation whereby each playwright presents the familiar world in an unfamiliar way. In doing so, they provide a vehicle through which audience members may form new judgements about themselves and the world in which they live, judgements upon which they will hopefully act outside the theatre.

Comment [KH17]: Good awareness of the complexity of the two plays and a willingness to avoid reducing them to simple formulae

Comment [KH18]: Good grasp of this quite subtle feature

The ultimate universality of these two plays is derived from their subject matter – they illustrate the depths to which humans can sink in their treatment of fellow human-beings. This is a theme that has recurred throughout almost every place and time. Thus, despite being highly specific in nature, Death and the Maiden and Sizwe Bansi is Dead transcend their respective settings through their impacts on theatre-goers. Both plays invite understanding, even compassion, and encourage the constructive process of critical appraisal of both self and society.

Comment [KH19]: Better analysis here and, in general towards the end of the essay

Comment [KH20]: Clear focus on the question throughout but the conclusion is nicely tied back to the question here

Marks Awarded:

Knowledge and Understanding	5	Clearly an excellent knowledge of both texts. Good grasp of the fundamental message as well as specific details
Response to the Question	4	Although there is focus on the issues of specificity and universality there is too much story-telling and not enough focus on the effect on the audience to receive full marks
Appreciation of Literary Features	3	Some good analysis of a variety of complex features although, again, the effect on the audience could be more clear
Presentation	5	The structure works very well. The candidate alternates clearly between the two texts and has made good use of connective phrases to link his paragraphs back to the question and make clear links between the two texts
Language	5	Lovely, controlled, concise language. At no point does it seem as if the candidate is trying too hard
	22	Level 7