

Paper 2 – Example Drama Question
Standard Level
November 2005

Question 1b):

'It is often said that protagonists in plays are flawed in some way.' To what degree and with what effect are the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonists significant to two or three plays you have studied?

It is often the case that the audience's interest in the protagonist of a play is derived as much from his weaknesses as his heroic qualities. The works 'Death of a Salesman' and 'A Doll's House' exemplify this fact. Willy Loman suffers from a tragic lack of self knowledge and is trapped by his materialism, while Nora is presented as a meekly submissive housewife with no identity of her own. Significantly, it is the inability of these characters to recognise and address these flaws that determines their eventual fate. Hence the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonists are of central importance to the development of both plays.

In 'Death of a Salesman', Willy is a character who suffers many faults. The most fundamental of these is his lack of self-realisation. A man who 'never knew who he was', he is determined to insulate himself from reality and refuses to face facts. Instead, due to his hubris, he inhabits a half-imagined world in which he relives memories of Biff's sporting success at Ebbett's Field, and of his successful brother Ben who is represented by a haunting and wistful musical motif. In truth, Willy is a failure as a salesman and breadwinner, and his son a 'lazy bum' unable to earn a dollar an hour. Biff's remark 'We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house' is thus an apt one. Miller conveys this idea of self-deception through extensive use of flashback and the device of the invisible 'fourth wall.' These elements serve to blur the boundaries between past and present, truth and fantasy and dream and consciousness in the mind of the audience. The towering apartment buildings on the set also create a feeling of claustrophobia, giving events an almost phantasmagoric quality. In this way, the playwright reveals the hallucinatory nature of Willy's experiences. In addition to this, Willy also suffers from a crippling materialism, as represented by the motifs of the refrigerators and cars. The fact that these are always breaking down conveys the shallow nature of such an outlook on life. Thus, Miller presents his protagonist as a deeply flawed man.

In 'A Doll's House', Ibsen's central character also suffers from significant weaknesses. At the outset of the play, Nora is portrayed as a vacuous 'doll-wife' and Torvald Helmer's 'most treasured possession.' She is happy to hear her husband's patronising terms of endearment 'songbird' and 'spendthrift', as long as they bring her monetary reward. The Helmers' marriage is a meaningless infantilised one, as shown by Nora's comment. 'I can't get anywhere without your help,' which reveals an almost cringing subservience. The triviality of Nora's existence is represented by the symbol of the macaroons. Like Willy, she lacks self knowledge and has no identity other than the role society has proscribed to her. She is the image of a pampered bourgeois housewife, as represented by the motifs of stockings, cigars and candles which represent decadence. Moreover, she appears almost utterly naive regarding the world outside her 'doll's house,' as her clumsy attempt to commit and conceal her forgery demonstrates. This aspect of Nora's character is emphasised through the contrast with her foil, Mrs. Linde, a widow who has learned the difficult lessons of life and poverty.' She also reveals a lack of sensitivity and understanding of emotions through her idle flirting with Dr. Roak, whom she needlessly wounds by comparing him to 'a servant.' It is thus clear that, like Willy, Nora is a character with serious weaknesses.

These flaws of the protagonist play vital roles in the two works. Crucially, they provide the sense of inner conflict and struggle that is an essential part of engaging drama. Significantly, it is the character's ability to recognise their own weaknesses that determines their ultimate fates. For Willy, his self deception persists to the very end. Blinded by a false epiphany, he commits suicide in the belief that Biff 'is going to be magnificent,' with a 20,000 dollar life insurance payout behind him. In reducing his own life to a figure of money, he has allowed his destructive

Comment [KH1]: Clear reference to the question which the student has put into their own words

Comment [KH2]: Quick, concise summary of the flaws of the relevant characters

Comment [KH3]: Slightly heavy handed perhaps but a clear link back to the question

Comment [KH4]: Clear topic sentence that links back to this questions

Comment [KH5]: Excellent ability to pick out the most important feature

Comment [KH6]: Beautifully concise style, effortlessly appropriate use of vocabulary, real sense of engagement with the text

Comment [KH7]: Smooth inclusion of quotations throughout

Comment [KH8]: This idea needs to be developed in more depth – when exactly is it used? How does it work?

Comment [KH9]: Good consideration of setting to indicate an awareness that this is a play that would have been performed

Comment [KH10]: Lovely concise ability to sum up points quickly and crisply

Comment [KH11]: Clear link back to the question

Comment [KH12]: Clear comparisons aided by structure and occasional linking phrases

Comment [KH13]: Again, beautifully concise language without no sense of pretension

Comment [KH14]: Good sense of personal involvement and appreciation of the reader's response

Comment [KH15]: Again, an idea that could have been developed in more depth

Comment [KH16]: Sophisticated feature

Comment [KH17]: Good consideration of the two parts of the question – the first part 'to what degree are they flawed' has been answered and so the candidate now moves on to answer the second part 'what effect' do these flaws have?

Comment [KH18]: Lovely language

materialism to triumph. Moreover, since both he and his son are ‘a dime a dozen,’ his sacrifice has been in vain, a false step towards an unreachable goal. As such, Willy’s inability to prevail in his internal struggle underlines one of Miller’s central themes, the great importance of self knowledge. His flaws are used as a vehicle to explore this idea.

Comment [KH19]: Lovely concise summary of this key idea

Nora, however, is able successfully to realise her own weaknesses. Indeed the threat of Kronstadt’s incriminating letter propels her along a path to greater fulfilment. By the play’s conclusion she recognised that her husband is a ‘complete stranger’ with whom she has ‘never exchanged a serious word over a serious subject.’ She is determined to create an independent identity for herself, ‘first and foremost as a human being.’ Moreover, she is able to achieve emancipation from the restraints of her ‘sacred duties’ as a member of the bourgeoisie, and decides to ‘satisfy [herself] which is right, society or [her].’ Thus, Nora is no longer a naive doll, but rather a strong willed and decisive woman, qualities that are clearly conveyed by the emphatic slamming door at the play’s conclusion. The gradual decay of the once lush Christmas tree also symbolises the collapse of the pretensions of Nora’s former life. Hence, Ibsen employs the protagonist’s triumph over her flaws to provide insights into the conflict between the ideals of society and the individual’s need for authentic fulfilment. It is thus clear that the conflict between the central character’s strengths and weakness is of central important to both works.

Comment [KH20]: Again – good use of structure and simple connective phrases to draw comparisons

Comment [KH21]: A sensible choice of texts has enabled the candidate to draw a nice contrast here between Nora and Willy Loman

Comment [KH22]: Clear, quick comment on the role of certain symbols in the play

In conclusion, both Nora and Willy are flawed characters. Their faults provide a fundamental sense of conflict and internal struggle that underpins each play. Significantly it is their ability to comprehend the reality of their weaknesses that determines their destiny. Hence, although the two playwrights employ the struggle of their protagonist to explore different themes, they both ultimately warn against the great dangers of self-deception and of leading a fraudulent existence.

Comment [KH23]: Although this is essentially a summing up conclusion, the concision and eloquence in the final sentence in addition to the fact that the main thrust of the essay is summed up in terms that have not previously been used makes this a powerful conclusion to the essay

Marks Awarded

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| Knowledge and Understanding | 5 | Clear this candidate has an excellent understanding of the two texts. There is ample and effortless use of quotation to support the points made and a real sense of personal engagement |
| Response to the Question | 5 | Excellent focus on the question throughout. The two parts of the question are dealt with equally and there is a clear balance between the time spent on both texts. Great ability to identify the elements of the texts most pertinent to this question and dwell solely on these |
| Appreciation of Literary Features | 3 | Although literary features are considered successfully at points there are a number of occasions when the candidate states a feature – e.g. the fourth wall or the macaroons – but does not adequately explore how this has been used by the playwright to create an effect on the audience |
| Organisation | 5 | Clear comparative structure throughout with ideas developed in depth. Lovely smooth use of quotations |
| Language | 5 | Beautiful control of language. A lovely sense of sophistication created with an effortlessness that bespeaks true eloquence. At no point is there any sense that the language is forced or trying too hard. |
| | 23 | Level 7 |