

Paper 2 – Example Drama Question

Standard Level

May 2003

Question 2b)

Compare the presentation and functions of the openings in two or three plays that you have studied.

The openings of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* are both vital in establishing the initial impressions in both plays. Each introduction provides knowledge of the setting and time frame as well as the mood, this being the expected purpose of an overture. But more so, the differing presentations of both openings also provide suggestions of themes and underlying messages.

Comment [Kev1]: There is a focus on the question, but these ideas are very general and need to be more specific in order to effectively introduce the ideas that are to follow.

Williams begins his play by including intricate detail to set the scene with a poetic tone, describing the blue sky with a kind of lyricism gracefully attenuating the atmosphere of decay. Despite the old, deteriorating and fading image of the scene, there is an appealing factor which is intended to attract the audience. The richness of the indulgences of bananas and coffee along with the blue piano which expresses the spirit of life which goes on there illustrates the colourful vitality of the slums of New Orleans. Williams accentuates this impression of the vibrant nature of Elysian Fields as multiple characters are immediately introduced after the opening stage directions with colloquial dialogue to reflect the complex and busy nature of reality, such as include a negro woman, a sailor, and a vendor all of whom are not central to the plot but create a sense of bustling activity.

Comment [Kev2]: Some good quotations

Comment [Kev3]: Clear link to the effect on the audience

Comment [Kev4]: Good development of this point

Comment [Kev5]: Good use of multiple references to the text

This contrasts markedly with the opening of *The Crucible* where the narrow window and the use of asyndeton, a chest, a chair, and a small table illustrate the bareness of the room and create a solemn tone in order to reflect tension and fear that permeates the house as Betty, the daughter of Reverend Parris, is allegedly ill under the influence of witchcraft. This tension and fear not only creates a captivating start to the play but effectively parallels the mood in America during time of the Red Scare when Miller was writing. This sense of tension is emphasised by the narrowness of the window which may represent the repression and lack of freedom present both in Salem and Miller's America. Similarly, the air of clean spareness and raw and unmellowed wood suggest the Puritanical and unforgiving nature of both the world of the play and the world of the playwright.

Comment [Kev6]: Clear contrast between the two texts, although the opening sentence here is a little long

Comment [Kev7]: Nice exploration of multiple effects

Comment [Kev8]: Some good tentative language as the point is developed

Following the opening stage directions of *The Crucible*, there is an extended narrative from an unidentified speaker where Parris is described as cutting a villainous path and as being man about whom there is very little good to be said. Miller goes on to make his critical attitude to Parris and the theocracy developed in Salem even more clear in the rest of this overture in a voice that is almost explicitly his. However in contrast Williams begins to characterise main roles such as Stanley, Stella and eventually Blanche but does this more subtly as Stella, is portrayed as laughing breathlessly when Stanley throws the meat at her, suggesting that she does not come from this poor area but finds its roughness exhilarating. Stella provides a clear contrast to Blanche, with her incongruous appearance, who also clearly does not belong here but seems uncomfortable and confused rather than excited.

Comment [Kev9]: Some clear contrast and evaluation here, in this case that Williams' opening is the more subtle of the two.

Miller's characterisation of Reverend Parris may be more obvious in comparison to Williams' subtler characterisation in *A Streetcar Named Desire* due to the differing messages of the two plays. Miller's play criticises the Communist Witch Hunts of the 1950s and *The Crucible* is an allegory for the events of the time. Vengeful accusations were made against one another in society as individuals hid behind the fear of Communism, just as they did in Salem, hiding behind the fear of witchcraft and Satan. For Miller's criticism to be heard, it was essential that his message was clearly and obviously conveyed in *The Crucible*. This is

Comment [Kev10]: Continued exploration of the comparisons between the two plays with a plausible account of the differences that links back to the overall impact on the audience

demonstrated as he writes in the opening, %t was ð [an] opportunity for everyoneð to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims+ and %long-held hatreds of neighbours could now be openly expressed, and vengeance taken+.

Conversely, Williams seems to be generally criticising human nature in % Streetcar Named Desire+. There is a need for subtlety to truly depict the complexity of human nature. Initially, audience members may favour the vitality and spontaneity of the growing middle class in the same way in which Stella is attracted to the liveliness of a life with Stanley. However, as the play progresses it becomes clear that living this kind of passionate life comes at the cost of exposure to excessive aggression and violence. This is captured by the metaphor used to describe Blanche, %er uncertain mannerð [and] white clothes, that suggests a moth+. Her attraction to this light that is warmth and passion is self-destructive.

Comment [Kev11]: A clear contrast and comparison, nice development of this idea and good overall structure

Additionally, one of the most prominent themes is the idea of illusion overriding the gritty reality that is life. Often times, both Blanche and Stella fall in this trap, being absorbed in pleasurable fantasies. Similarly, the opening traps the audience in this same way: the fantasy that lies here is the idea of the slums of New Orleans being this vibrant and liberating world, full of %breathless laughter+ and spontaneity, contrasting to the restrictions and pretence which exists in aristocratic society. However, Blanche's subsequent rape reveals the brutal nature of Stanley's world which is the impression that we are left with at the very end of the play as his fingers sneak into Stella's blouse as Blanche is led off to an asylum.

Comment [Kev12]: Nice further development of this point

Comment [Kev13]: This is quite a nice idea

Both openings appear to have the same function, in that, they establish setting and time frame, as well as introduce characters and themes. However, in order to effectively convey underlying messages and their criticisms of society, both openings have been presented quite differently. Miller clearly states the parallelism between the Salem Witch Hunts and McCarthyism in the 1950s, while Williams poetically and subtly describes the opening act in order to confine the audience in a seemingly attractive pretence, but ultimately presenting the imperfections of human nature.

Comment [Kev14]: Clear summary of the main points ideas