

NEA: Independent critical study: Texts across time – exemplar response

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, with an accompanying moderator commentary illustrating why the response has been placed within a particular band of the assessment criteria. This resource should be used in conjunction with the accompanying document 'Guidance on non-exam assessment – Independent critical study: Texts across time'.

Exemplar student response

Compare and contrast the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell and Henrik Ibsen present the relationships between Margaret Hale and John Thornton in *North and South* (1854–55) and Nora and Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House* (1879).

Examine the view that, in both texts, 'the personal is political'.

Both *North and South* (1854–55) and *A Doll's House* (1879) present women living in patriarchal eras. In comparing Gaskell's novel about a woman who saves her husband-to-be from bankruptcy and ruin and Ibsen's 'well-made play' about a woman who once saved her husband's life but abandons him after he betrays her, I will look at how various readers and audiences might interpret them and how far they can be seen as having a wider political relevance from a feminist point of view.

Both Gaskell's '*Condition of England*' novel and Ibsen's '*Woman Question*' melodrama are set against a contemporary backdrop of massive social change. One interesting similarity between the texts is the way that the heroines' relationships with their fathers affect their marriages – which is what might be expected in a patriarchal society. In *North and South* Gaskell presents this as very positive; Mr Hale admires John Thornton and tells Margaret how he 'absolutely lived upon water-porridge for years' to support his mother and sister after 'his father speculated wildly, failed, and then killed himself' (p129). At this early stage in the novel, however, while Margaret admits this 'really is fine', she still argues it is 'a pity such a nature should be tainted by his position as a Milton manufacturer' (p129). Much later, when she gives Thornton her late father's books as a peace offering, the gift symbolises that the female southerner now understands the male northerner and therefore I interpret Gaskell's positive link here as being both personal and political. Towards the end of *A Doll's House*,

however, Nora Helmer sees a negative link between her husband Torvald and her dead father when she has an epiphany about her past and present.

When Nora realises 'I was simply transferred from Papa's hands to yours ... You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life' (p66), it is a key moment in the play. Although Torvald accuses Nora of being like her father in having 'no religion, no morality, and no sense of duty' (p62) Nora turns this around and says that actually it is Torvald who resembles him. Stephanie Forward interprets this moment of anagnorisis from a feminist perspective, as the moment Nora finally 'comes to see herself as an object moulded by her father and then by her husband' (1) and I agree with this; I think Nora's realisation that she has lived in a home that 'has been nothing but a playroom', treated as a 'doll wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll child' is both personally and politically the most important moment in the play (p67). But while Nora seems to reach an awareness of the power of men at the climax of the drama, walking out of her home to the famous stage sound effect of the slamming door, previously she showed a rather stereotypical naïve innocence about this which is very similar to Margaret's behaviour when she fails to realise the implications of her behaviour during the riot in *North and South*.

To a modern audience, Nora's comments about Torvald seem more like a crush or hero worship; by the time she insists to Kristine Linde that Torvald will want 'to take all the responsibility, all the blame' (p46) if he finds out about Krogstad in the middle of Act Two, from what we've already seen of him, this already seems very unlikely. Yet I think Gaskell presents Margaret's behaviour as even more deluded in the riot scene; 'She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond ... Then he unfolded his arms, and held her encircled in one for an instant' (pp234-235). Such a public display of affection in the Victorian era would have risked Margaret's reputation, so she puts the safety of the man she loves over certain scandal. Gaskell presents this act as instinctive and spontaneous, led by subconscious desire; when Thornton honourably proposes afterwards, Margaret denies her love for him, claiming that 'It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same (p252).' But as she speaks, her body language reveals another story; 'In spite of herself — in defiance of her anger — the thick blushes came all over her face, and burnt into her very eyes' (p252). From a twenty-first century reader's point of view it looks like the narrator knows more than Margaret does, and Gaskell uses blushing to symbolise the heroine feeling forced to act like a perfect Victorian lady and deny her true feelings. This scene makes the personal context very political in terms of the wider context of the subjugation of women in the nineteenth century.

In contrast to Margaret, however, underneath her public praise of her husband's honesty, talent and bravery, Nora Helmer understands him very well after eight years of marriage and has secretly protected him from knowing she saved his life. 'How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is

now' (p12). In spite of her surface lack of status as a middle-class woman, however, throughout *A Doll's House* Ibsen shows Nora running rings around Torvald, even using his patriarchal attitude to flatter him into giving Kristina Linde a job by saying she took 'a long journey in order to see you ... she is frightfully anxious to work under some clever man, so as to perfect herself' (p17). Furthermore, in terms of structure, Ibsen allows the audience to see Nora partaking in low-level deception from the very beginning of the play, secretly buying macaroons when Torvald has specifically banned them. The stage directions describe her taking 'a packet ... from her pocket' and eating one or two while going 'cautiously to her husband's door' (p1). The fact Torvald has forbidden them as they will 'ruin [her] teeth' shows how the 'doll-wife' role she has in their marriage follows directly on from her life with her father, as Torvald also treats her like a child. Perhaps Ibsen was challenging married couples in his original audience to compare their own relationship to the Helmers', to start a wider debate about the role of women in society as a whole. The treatment of women as simply men's possessions is a dominant theme in *A Doll's House* and Ibsen dramatises Nora's increasing fears for the survival of her marriage if Torvald ever finds out the truth about her ability to manage perfectly well without him.

In *North and South*, I find it very interesting that the context of production itself can be seen as both personal and political from a feminist point of view. Gaskell herself wanted to call the novel Margaret Hale, to stress the importance of the heroine, but she was overruled by Charles Dickens, the editor of the weekly magazine *Household Words* in which it was first published from September 1854 to January 1855. Dickens argued that *North and South* 'encompasses more and emphasises the opposition between people who are forced by circumstances to meet face to face', potentially seeing it as a sequel to his own industrial novel *Hard Times*, which preceded it in the magazine (2). The episodic serial structure meant Gaskell had to include regular cliff-hangers like the mystery sub-plot of Margaret's brother Frederick, whose secret presence in Milton makes Thornton 'indulge[e] himself in the torture' of imagining Margaret with another man, and suffer 'savage, distrustful jealousy' (p351) until the union leader Nicholas Higgins tells him the truth. Gaskell's chosen form allows her to engineer a classic romantic 'happy ending', with Margaret taking control of her future. Because Thornton fears Henry Lennox is the 'right' man for Margaret even after the Frederick mistake is cleared up, Margaret has to negotiate her way through a patriarchal society by approaching the man she loves as if purely to strike a business deal, which then prompts him to propose a second time and bring about a classic romantic 'happy ending' entirely opposite to the climax of *A Doll's House*, in which Nora has to abandon her life as a wife and mother in order to be free.

Comparing the way these texts have been received from a feminist point of view, I think Gaskell faced criticism Ibsen never encountered. In 1934 Lord David Cecil claimed 'it would have been impossible for her ... to have found a subject less suited to her talents' than the industrial conflict in *North and South* (3). Unlike

Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, who Cecil calls 'ugly, dynamic, childless, independent ... eagles' within the 'placid dovecotes of Victorian womanhood', he stereotypes Gaskell as a ladylike domestic novelist; 'we only have to look at a portrait of [her], soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove' (4). To me Cecil's stance seems dated and sexist; to call Gaskell a 'dove' reflects his belief that she is the wrong kind of female writer to tackle a 'masculine' subject based more on her personality than the actual text. Ironically, however, as Patsy Stoneman points out, while Cecil criticises Gaskell for not being domestic enough, male Marxist critics who see *North and South* as only worthwhile because it's about industrialisation and class conflict tend to write off the love story as basic 'feminine incompetence' (5). Gaskell gets unfairly slated from both sides, in my view. Coming from a feminist standpoint, I see the love story here – as with *A Doll's House* – as just as important as the text's wider social issues and it is impossible to pick them apart. Although the political side of *North and South* has often been dismissed, with one critic patronisingly saying 'Gaskell's remedy for discontent ... is a good long talk, preferably round a tea-table' (6), I see Margaret and Thornton's marriage as relevant not just to the 'separate spheres' Victorian gender debate but also to the gulf between what Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli called 'The Two Nations'.

Moreover although Ibsen himself claimed that *A Doll's House* was a humanist as opposed to a feminist text (7), I would argue that as with *North and South*, the central relationship raises big questions about how Victorian society was structured. From the time the play was first performed, women have always seen it as dramatising their experience; the suffragette Louie Bennett declared that 'more than any other modern writer [Ibsen] has proved himself a prophet and an apostle of the cause of women; no other ... has shown more sympathetic comprehension of her nature and its latent powers' (8). In the end, what makes Nora so interesting is that she can be interpreted in many ways; as Ian Johnston notes, 'Nora is both triumphantly right and horribly wrong. She is free, brave, strong, and uncompromisingly herself and, at the same time, socially irresponsible, naïve, self-destructive, and destructive of others' (9). As Torvald cries, 'Before all else you are a wife and a mother' (p68); from a feminist point of view, Nora's personal rebellion against Torvald symbolises the oppression of all women within a patriarchal society.

In both texts, while the heroines act bravely to protect those they care about, they constantly make mistakes because they are working within a patriarchal context where rules are made by men, for men. In *North and South* Margaret refuses Thornton's Milton handshake because she is unaware of the Northern tradition; 'It was the frank familiar custom of the place; but Margaret was not prepared for it. She simply bowed her farewell; although the instant she saw the hand, half put out, quickly drawn back, she was sorry she had not been aware of the intention' (p127). This social error symbolises not just their personal differences but just how much of a fish out of water Margaret is in the North. The fact that a handshake can mean both a sign of peace and that a business deal has been settled shows how Margaret's rejection is not just of John

Thornton, but the whole culture of Milton. This crisis can be linked to Nora's complete misreading of Torvald's likely reaction to discovering her links to Nils Krogstad. When Krogstad tells her Torvald will back down and give him back his job at the bank, Nora argues 'That he will never do!' (p44) Krogstad knows better, though; 'He will; I know him; he dare not protest' and this line of dialogue, structured into three definite short sections, makes him much more convincing (p44). Nora's mistake about Torvald's character foreshadows the end of her marriage when she finds out the truth.

Ibsen stated in his Notes for the Modern Tragedy that 'a woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view' (10). For me the most important link between John Thornton and Torvald Helmer is the way they represent public aspects of a patriarchal culture: business and the law. Following on from this, while Nora follows all the rules for a conventional 'Angel in the House', under the stress of being blackmailed she is driven to contemplate suicide; this shows how slim a woman's chances of survival could be in a male-dominated world. Even Margaret's marriage to Thornton can be interpreted by a feminist reader as an unhappy ending; since the novel was published before the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, the only solution to Margaret's independence is to have her enter a legal contract that gives Thornton total control over her body, money and property. Finally I would like to argue that whereas Margaret saves Thornton from both lynching and bankruptcy and Nora willingly sacrifices everything 'to save [her] husband's life' (p23), their male counterparts struggle to compete with this bravery. Given Thornton's bankruptcy and Torvald's collapse, maybe it is not only women who struggle to survive in a patriarchal society where the personal is always political.

Bibliography and references

A) Primary texts

Elizabeth Gaskell *North and South*, Penguin, 1970

Henrik Ibsen *A Doll's House*, Dover 1992

B) Secondary sources: Books and articles

Stephanie Forward, 'A New World for Women?' in *English Review*, April 2009, pp25-27

Patsy Stoneman, 'Will the real Mrs Gaskell please stand up?' in *English Review*, February 1991, pp36-40

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_and_South_\(Gaskell_novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_and_South_(Gaskell_novel))

C) Secondary sources: Film and stage versions

Brian Percival (director) *North and South* (2004) BBC DVD

David Thacker (director) *A Doll's House* (1992) BBC DVD

Carrie Cracknell (director) *A Doll's House* (2013) Young Vic stage production

References

- 1 Stephanie Forward 'A New World for Women' p 26
- 2 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_and_South_\(Gaskell_novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_and_South_(Gaskell_novel))
- 3 Patsy Stoneman 'The Real Mrs Gaskell' p36
- 4 Patsy Stoneman 'The Real Mrs Gaskell' p36
- 5 Patsy Stoneman 'The Real Mrs Gaskell' p37
- 6 Patsy Stoneman 'The Real Mrs Gaskell' p40
- 7 Stephanie Forward 'A New World for Women' p25
- 8 Stephanie Forward 'A New World for Women' p25
- 9 Stephanie Forward 'A New World for Women' p27
- 10 Stephanie Forward 'A New World for Women' p25

Moderator commentary

Texts and task

The 'role of women' theme common to both chosen texts signals some contextual awareness around the opportunities for women in the nineteenth century. The comparison is framed around the key word present which explicitly invites the student to write about the different genres of her chosen texts and the authorial methods involved (A02). The inclusion of a clear viewpoint - that 'the personal is political' - implies an awareness of the need to debate and engage with multiple readings and interpretations. The directive 'examine the view' should be familiar to the student from the wording of several component 2 examination questions, so should be taken as a clear invitation to debate this given opinion. These texts and this task should lead the student into some promising areas of study.

Assessment objectives

As with all examined questions in components 1 and 2, component 3 assesses all assessment objectives.

A01: This is an assured, well written academic essay which uses sophisticated terminology at times but remains clear and cohesive. Appropriate discourse markers help create the sense of an overarching argument and the texts are systematically and equally treated. The student rightly avoids cramming references to both into every paragraph in order to develop her argument, yet

effective and original connections are clearly established as she moves fluently, consistently and relevantly between them. This is a confident and engaging essay which has a distinctive personal voice and never sacrifices clarity for a stylistic flourish.

A02: A notable strength of this essay is that in applying A02 to her chosen texts, the student does not work only on a lexical level. She shows perceptive awareness that certain texts lend themselves to illustrating specific ways in which meanings are shaped particularly well, and makes the most of having chosen two texts which offer contrasting forms: a well-made play and a serially-published novel. She discusses symbolism with regard to the 'blushing' in *North and South* and references are well chosen and interesting. Among other structural issues discussed with close attention is the interpolated story of Frederick Hale. The student focuses astutely upon aspects of Ibsen's dramaturgy, such as the structural foreshadowing of Nora's hiding the macaroons from Torvald and, of course, the final door slam, but she also looks closely at Krogstad's dialogue and Nora's speeches. This is assured and impressive work.

A03: This student chooses her contexts carefully, showing detailed knowledge and a perceptive understanding of the significance of contexts of production, reception, culture, society, history and genre. She threads these aspects through her essay with verve and confidence, assessing their impact thoughtfully; nothing here seems artificially 'bolted-on'. She looks at unusual and worthwhile issues such as Dickens's editorial interventions with regard to *North and South* and the extent to which Ibsen's denial of having taken a 'feminist' approach stands up to scrutiny, as well as more mainstream – but still very valuable – contextual matters such as the 'separate spheres' Victorian gender debate and the social issues encapsulated in Disraeli's idea of the 'Two Nations'.

A04: The student perceptively explores several connections between the texts around narrative, genre and critical reception as she selectively interweaves her chosen texts in an even-handed and well-balanced manner.

A05: The student confidently engages with the views of some named critics (Forward, Johnston, Stoneman and, very engagingly, Lord David Cecil) to push forward her own argument. It is this keen ability to perceptively engage with other ways of reading texts – from a Marxist, feminist, dominant and/or oppositional point of view – which perhaps most impresses here. This student shows an ambitious and conceptualised alertness to the idea of different possible readings over time with regard to each of her chosen texts, evaluates these interpretations in detail and with obvious relish, and uses them as a stepping-stone into the development of an interesting and persuasive personal overview.

Summary

Thus we have the following evidence with which to assess this student's performance:

- a clear introduction which successfully orientates the reader and explains the choice of texts
- an argument built around key words identified in task
- a coherent, consistent, conceptualised and comparative argument about two vivid and interesting female characters, the men they marry and the societies in which they live
- confident and fluent movement around both texts to support the argument, with well-selected connections not based on a simplistic chronological, descriptive or narrative approach
- apposite quotations embedded and adapted to the student's own syntax and required meaning
- a wide range of effective comparisons and contrasts built around the methods used by Gaskell and Ibsen, with explicit attention paid to the ways that meanings are shaped in each text
- a keen awareness of the possibility of reading texts in different ways and a willingness to engage in debate and venture strong personal opinions and counter-arguments (e.g. Margaret's marriage to Thornton being a potentially unhappy ending)
- close and perceptive engagement with an impressive range of critical views and theoretical perspectives
- a conclusion which effectively summarises and consolidates the student's overview of her chosen texts, expressed with a confident sense of personal engagement
- a deftly structured argument well within the permitted 2500 words
- a wholly appropriate reference and bibliography section which shows the student's genuine commitment to exploring a range of different interpretations of her chosen texts.

This essay demonstrates all the qualities typical of a strong Band 5 response.