A few weeks ago, the Language and Literature website published a strong essay response to question 5 in the May 2013 examination. Here, another response to question 5:

Context – ‘historical, cultural, or social – can have an influence on the way literary works are written or received. Discuss with reference to at least two of the works you have studied.

The previous student, did not do a great job of addressing language and style in an otherwise excellent essay. Here, this student, a classmate of the previous student, does better to include relevant reference to the literary aspects of the texts studied. The student chooses (again) Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar to illustrate her response, and she pairs this with Henrik Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House – apparently somewhat of a favourite text amongst Language and Literature students and their teachers. The result is very satisfactory; this is a robust and convincing essay.

Sample Essay

The novel, The Bell Jar, is a semi-autobiographical novel, written by Sylvia Plath, and set in 1950s America. The play, A Doll’s House, is written (originally in Norwegian) by Henrik Ibsen, and set in late 1800s Norway. Both texts explore the marginalization of women in the social contexts of the period and place in which they are set. And, both texts are strongly influenced by their social context, exploring gender inequality and attitudes of social conformism. Plath and Ibsen essentially explore the inferiority of women – their restricted and sacrificial social role – through the character development of their female protagonists, Esther Greenwood and Nora Helmer, respectively, who struggle in their search for an authentic, individual identity, rather than obediently succumb to a socially pleasing façade. Hence, it can be said that both Plath and Ibsen are challenging the gender inequality and conformist attitudes dominant in the societies in which these works are set by representing the struggle and suffering of the protagonists.

Both The Bell Jar and A Doll’s House explore the theme of the inferiority of women in society through either their restricted possibilities, or the sacrificial role patriarchal society expects them to take. In The Bell Jar, Plath makes it clear that part of the prevailing social expectation is that women should remain virgins until marriage. The article ‘In Defence of Chastity’, “gave all the reasons why women should not sleep with anybody apart from her husband and then only after they were married.” Esther Greenwood, the novel’s protagonist, recognizes the hypocrisy of this social convention after discovering that Buddy Willard, her college boyfriend, has had an affair and lost his virginity, yet still expecting Esther to retain her “purity” for him. Buddy Willard symbolizes a perfect male specimen in 1950s American society – he is intelligent, hardworking, athletic, and studying to become a doctor. In the androcentric society in which Esther lives, he is the type of man that Esther should want to remain a virgin for. However, recognizing the socially imposed sexual double-standard regarding sex and virginity – that is, women should remain virgins, but men should not – Esther feels that the article ‘In Defence of Chastity’ fails to consider “how a girl felt”. That Buddy Willard could live a life in which he could both lose his virginity, and at the same time be regarded as pure and perfect, makes no sense to Esther. As a result, Esther recognizing the injustice and ambiguity in this, goes all out to lose her virginity with men like Constantin, in order to relieve herself of this social pressure. Eventually, Esther loses her virginity with Irwin, a maths professor. This could be regarded as scandalous to readers first encountering the book in the 1960s, as it is behaviour that is contrary to the beliefs and norms of the period. Given this, it suggests that Plath’s novel can be read as an attempt to challenge the injustice of unequal gender expectations.

Similarly, in A Doll’s House, it is expected that men take on the dominant, authoritative role in marriage and that women take on a sacrificial, largely passive role. Ibsen portrays this through the sacrifices that all his female characters, representing different social classes (and therefore literary foils of a kind), make for themselves and their families. Mrs Linde is a working-class woman who gives up her true but poor love, Krogstad, in order to marry a man of wealth in order to support her sick mother and two brothers. Nurse, caretaker to Nora’s children, has had to give up her daughter in order to become Nora’s nanny and support herself. Nora, an upper-class woman in the
Norwegian social hierarchy, also reveals that she is willing to support herself in order to save Torvald’s honour. The women of Ibsen’s play exemplify Nora’s assertion later in Act III after Torvald states that “no men can be expected to sacrifice their honour, even for the person they love, while millions of women have.” Ibsen, it seems, may be challenging the injustice, apparent in Norwegian society of the period, that only women, not men, are expected to make sacrifices.

Furthermore, in The Bell Jar, inferiority and restriction of women is as women are expected to merely and solely take the role of wife and mother. Esther’s mother and Mrs Willard are female characters which Plath creates showing how society has internalized in these women the morals and beliefs that men and women have specific and different roles to play and that they must be followed. Mrs Willard strongly believes that “what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a women is is the place the arrow shoots off from.” When Esther tells Buddy that she does not intend to get married, Buddy responds as if this is impossible and that Esther is absurd. Buddy tells Esther, “you’re crazy…you’ll change your mind”, showing how society does indeed dictate that women’s key social role is to be a dutiful wife and a good mother, and anything else is considered ridiculous or inferior. Esther rejects this belief and disagrees with her mother who insists that she learn short hand as this would enable Esther to take on a secretarial job and find a wealthy man to marry. Esther’s mother states that “she would be in demand amongst all the up-and-coming young men”, just like the young women who stay at the ironically named Amazon Hotel. However, instead of epitomizing glamour and fortune, Esther finds these young women spoilt and, as she describes in her ‘skaz-like narrative voice, “bored as hell”. It can be suggested that, through Esther, Plath challenges the stipulated pathways that male society crafts for women.

A further main contextual theme that results from challenging the male-centric society, as Plath and Ibsen evidently do, is the idea of searching for an authentic, individual identity, rather than succumbing to a socially pleasing façade. Ibsen does this through the construction of his protagonist Nora. As Ibsen’s realist drama opens, the audience see Nora enter the stage, bringing home a Christmas tree, symbolically suggesting affluence and a socially constructed view of female domesticity. However, over the three Act play, Nora’s character develops, as she goes through a transformative, life-changing event that threatens her marriage and her relationship to her children, as she realises the importance of establishing her own self-identity. At the beginning of the play, the audience recognize Nora as an amalgamation of 19th century generalizations of women – she is only concerned with her husband’s needs and the material aspects of domesticity at home. However, as the play progresses and Krogstad threatens to expose Nora’s ‘crime’ and challenge the stability of her marriage to Torvald, Nora undergoes a change. Increasingly, she becomes unhappy playing the subservient role of Torvald’s ‘doll’ that he can control and play with, rather than an equal partner in marriage. Torvald claims that Nora’s “sacred duties lie in (her) home”, symbolically suggesting that a women’s domestic role is religiously prescribed, and that Nora is “first a wife and a mother”. However, Nora recognizes that she can no longer stay with Torvald and that she must embrace her independence and search for her own identity. She realizes that she needs to “learn about” society on her own in order to “satisfy (herself) which is right, society or her” even if this means rejecting society’s view of “sacred duties” and “mores”. Ibsen, in my view as a young female reader, is challenging society’s expectation of women. It is this that 19th century European theatre audiences would have found shocking.

Likewise, in The Bell Jar, Esther also searches for an authentic identity, refusing to accept the social conventions of 1950s America that stipulate how women should behave. During her summer internship as a guest writer on a ‘ladies’ magazine in Manhattan, Esther is expected to be having the time of her life and to be enthusiastic about her opportunity since many women would aspire to have her chance. However, through Esther’s narrative, Plath explores the tension between expectation and reality, showing how the expected charm and romance of New York life is opposed by Esther’s encounters with suspicious men like Lenny and the immense unhappiness and gloom she experiences. Early in Esther’s retrospective narrative, she says “I didn’t know what I was doing in New York” showing her sense of anomie and isolation in a society that makes no sense to her. Esther does not understand “why (she) couldn’t go all the way doing what (she) should do. This made (her) sad and tired,” and she also wonders “why (she) couldn’t go all the way doing what (she) couldn’t do. This made (her) even sadder and more tired.” It is apparent that Esther cannot conform to society’s expectations on how she should feel and behave despite her apparent success. This is emphasized by her refusal to accept traditional female roles as “the last thing (she) wanted was infinite security or to be the place an arrow shoots off from.” Esther “hated the idea of serving men” and “(she) wanted to dictate her own thrilling letters”, suggesting that Esther (and perhaps Plath) wants to author her own life’s narrative. In Esther, Plath has clearly created a female protagonist that is determined to shape her own individual identity. However, for Esther, this is not easy. The metaphor of the fig tree, and the choices on offer, suggests Esther’s indecision or inability to choose a future for herself. She eventually becomes depressed as a metaphorical bell jar descends on her, and she is “punished” through electroshock therapy for her failure to accept socially appropriate roles. In a similar way, when Nora slams the door at the conclusion of A Doll’s House, she is physically and symbolically ‘in the cold’ – punishment for her decision to seek a life for herself.

Plath and Ibsen write in different literary genres, and in different times and places. Esther and Ibsen, however, share very similar fates in refusing to be the women society expects them to be. Thus, whilst Esther and Nora are social constructs of particular societies, it can be argued that over time and space, the situation of women in male dominated cultures remains the same.

Teacher's Comments
Before you read the examiner's comments, assess the sample according to the assessment criteria for Paper 2. Compare your marks and comments to that of what the teacher writes (below). How were they different? How were they similar?

**Criterion A - Knowledge and understanding - 5 marks**

The essay demonstrates an understanding of the works and knowledge of the contexts in which they were written. The student shows how context affects interpretations of the texts.

5 out of 5 - Excellent. The student knows and understands the texts studied. In addressing the question (criterion B), she chooses germane examples to illustrate her response. The student has a good command of thematic concerns. Also, the student was introduced to the ideas of the sociologist Emile Durkheim and the social historian Michel Foucault as part of the teaching; it is a pleasure to see how these ideas inform her response in the examination.

**Criterion B - Response to the question - 5 marks**

A Paper 2 essay should focus on the question chosen. The implications of the exam question need to be explored in depth and the student's response must be relevant to it.

5 out of 5 - A clearly focused response. Most of the focus seems to be on ‘production’. The student also addresses ‘reception’. Despite the question, it is absolutely relevant to discuss both production and reception, where the focus is obviously on the former.

**Criterion C - Understanding of the use and effects of stylistic features - 5 marks**

In the Paper 2 exam, a connection needs to be made between the author's use of stylistic features and the effect of them on his or her audience. As Paper 2 questions invite students to explore how meaning is shaped by context, answers will have to explain why authors choose for a certain genre, narrative technique or style.

**Criterion D - Organization and development - 5 marks**

The essay must develop an answer to the question coherently and effectively. Topic sentences should guide the ideas of paragraphs. Illustrations should be integrated well and explanations should shed light on the subject matter.

5 out of 5 - Excellent organization. Arguably there is some repetition of ideas and cohesive devices can seem a little contrived. Nevertheless, this is a seamless argument and easy to follow.

**Criterion E - Language - 5 marks**

The language of the Paper 2 exam should be effective and accurate. The choice of vocabulary and use of grammar should be consistent and appropriate.

5 out of 5 - There are very few mistakes. This is an extremely accurate essay. Much of the language is sophisticated, and the register is very appropriate. The student received a final grade of 7 in the examination, having shown superb perseverance and resilience throughout her study. And she did it with a smile.