

(a) What is your understanding of the term Cultural Context in relation to any one of the texts in your comparative course? Support your view by reference to at least one key moment from your chosen text. (30)

My understanding of the term cultural context is that it encompasses the 'world of the text'.

By understanding the world of the **text** - the role that money, women and power **play** in the text we can deepen our understanding of the text and the forces that drive its plot and characters. In my answer I will be discussing Casablanca directed by Michael **Curtis**

The opening scene of film is a key moment which brilliantly introduces many aspects of the cultural context of the film. The revolving globe illustrates the Nazi domination of Europe, the footage of real refugees underlines the Nazis brutality and crushing of resistance. The voice-over contrasts the desperation of 'imprisoned Europe' in contrast to the 'hope and freedom of America'. The narrator elaborates on the refugees need for money to escape to the new world. The English couple who are pick-pocketed represent all the refugees who are robbed of their money. The police whistle, blaring sirens and rounding up of the 'usual suspects' introduces the collaborationist French government obeying the might of the Nazis, the gunning down of the resistance fighter under the poster of Petain emphasises the brutality used to put down resistance to power. The pickpocket informs the English couple that amongst those arrested will be 'of course a beautiful young woman for Captain Renault', indicating the abuse of power and the role of women as possessions.

If we look first at the role that **money** plays in Casablanca we can see that it is a very powerful force. Money is central to Casablanca. In both texts those without money are trapped and controlled with little hope of escape. Casablanca is literally awash with references to money; the opening voice-over tells us that those who can purchase an exit visa can escape, those who cannot must 'wait and wait and wait'. Ugarte tells Rick that he

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:02

Comment [1]: Address the question directly

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:03

Comment [2]: Identify the aspects of Cultural Context you will be discussing

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:02

Comment [3]: Identify the text and author/director.

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 16:28

Comment [4]: Identify the Key moment you will be discussing and explain how it illustrates the point you will discuss

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:03

Comment [5]: Address your first aspect of Cultural Context

will sell the visas for 'more money than even I have dreamed of', then ironically pays for them with his life, just as the murdered German couriers have. Huge sums of money are offered for the exit visas, underlining the desperation of Lazlo and Ilsa to escape. This desperation is emphasised by the setting of much of the film in a casino. The desperate refugees are literally gambling with their lives.

People can be bought and sold in Casablanca. As Ferrari puts it human beings are Casablanca's 'leading commodity'. Everyone seems to have a price in Casablanca, Rick has a 'price on his head', and so must flee Paris, Ferrari offers to buy Sam, Renault offers Rick a large bribe for Lazlo's capture, they both bet on whether Lazlo will escape or not. As General Strasser tells Ilsa - 'In Casablanca life is cheap'. Some characters are even driven to selling themselves - the young Bulgarian woman is willing to sell herself to Renault to gain freedom for herself and her husband.

In a way she epitomises the role of women in Casablanca; a commodity to be bought and sold, a toy to be passed around between men. Although Rick acts from good motives in saving her from Renault's clutches, Renault himself regards her as a possession or pleasure that Rick has denied him - 'why do you interfere in my little romances?' Yvonne is another example of the low status of women in the film. Rejected and discarded by Rick, Renault describes her like a commodity - 'How extravagant of you to be throwing away women, they may become scarce one day', before commenting that he might pick her up on the rebound. She later accompanies a German officer to the café, only to be insulted by a patriotic French officer. Yvonne has little or no identity of her own, a trophy to be won or fought over. She only succeeds in asserting her own individuality with the singing of the Marseillaise.

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:04

Comment [6]: Use quotes to back up your points but keep them short and integrate them with your answer.

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:05

Comment [7]: The young Bulgarian woman can act as a link between the paragraph about money and that of the role of women.

Although Ilsa plays a more prominent role in the film she too seems to be a trophy to be fought over by men. The love triangle between Ilsa, Lazlo and Rick is central to the film yet Ilsa plays a somewhat passive role in it. Torn between two powerful men she 'cannot decide' and needs Rick to 'do the thinking for her'. In the end she mutely accepts his decision that she should get on the plane with Lazlo. Even when Ilsa attempts to take action, threatening Rick with a gun, she is easily over powered by his stronger personality. Ilsa constantly tells both men that she is 'afraid' and that they must be 'careful', her timidity and passivity serve to enhance their virility and masculinity. Like the other women in the film she is defined largely by her appearance - she is described as 'the most beautiful woman in Casablanca', the screenplay tells us that she is so beautiful that 'people turn and stare'. The camera certainly loves her, accentuating her beauty with soft lighting and focus and long, lingering close ups. Ilsa is there to be beautiful, to gaze admiringly at men as they make speeches and take action. The overall depiction of women in Casablanca is that they are passive, beautiful trophies.

Perhaps the most important aspect of cultural context in Casablanca is the use and abuse of power. Casablanca portrays a highly hierarchical society, with power concentrated in the hands of the few. Power nominally lies in the hands of Captain Renault who constantly abuses it, extorting money or sex from desperate refugees, winning at rigged roulette, drinking for free after-hours. Although he is charming, there is a dark side, Ugarte's 'attempt to resist arrest or suicide' betrays Renault's ruthless abuse of power. Despite Renault's claims to the contrary - 'In Casablanca I am master of my own fate', real power lies with the Nazis in the guise of General Strasser. He is clear on the Nazi plans for total domination 'from Russia to the Sahara'. Anyone who challenges this authority is ruthlessly suppressed, be they a resistance fighter gunned down in the street or Victor Lazlo. Lazlo is the symbol of resistance to authority and as such must be destroyed.

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:05

Comment [8]: Try to link the two paragraphs

Dara Hogan 15/8/17 19:24

Comment [9]: You can make reference to how the director portrays her.

Dara Hogan 21/3/14 12:08

Comment [10]: Discuss power and it's abuse

As can be seen

Dara Hogan 15/8/17 19:31

Comment [11]: Write your own concluding paragraph sumamrising the main points covered and referring back to the question.