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How to use

The Pearson English VCE Comparing guides have been written to the new Victorian Certificate of Education English and English as an Additional Language Study Design for 2016–2020 and cover Units 2–4 Area of Study 1 Reading and comparing texts.

The Comparing guides are divided into four sections:
1: Knowing: The Penelopiad
2: Knowing: Bombshells
3: Comparing: The Penelopiad and Bombshells
4: Writing the essay

Knowing the texts

These sections provide a deep insight into the texts, covering context and author, structural elements, textual elements and ideas, issues and themes. At the end of each section is a set of learning activities.

Comparing texts

This section outlines how to compare and contrast the two texts. The two texts are compared and contrasted in regards to themes, cultural context and genre. This section also provides practical tips and ideas on how to compare texts as well as practice topics.
Writing the essay
This section provides a step-by-step guide on how to plan and write a comparing essay. Four different essay styles have been included as well as an essay sample with annotations.

eBook and online resources
Online resources support the comparing of texts and include:
- essay templates
- graphic organiser templates
- worksheets.
Knowing: The Penelopiad
MARGARET ATWOOD

Written in 2005 by renowned Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, The Penelopiad draws on the Greek myth of Penelope to explore events from her point of view. The novella is one of a series of short texts by contemporary writers who have produced a fresh approach to ancient myths.
Knowing: The Penelopiad

CONTEXT AND AUTHOR

Historical context: Greek mythology

The Penelopiad features many ideas and myths of Ancient Greece as it retells some of its most infamous and interesting aspects, such as the tale of The Odyssey, Hades, Helen of Troy and the legend of Odysseus. However, in this text, Atwood takes a unique approach as she looks at these events from a rarely heard and often overlooked perspective: the wife of Odysseus – Penelope.

Author: Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood is a Booker-Prize winner who writes both prose and poetry. She has often used Greek mythology in her novels, short stories and poetry collections. Her style can be witty and vivid as she examines the painful process of life in exact, cutting detail. She has been known to make sarcastic and blunt social commentary on the roles of men and women and the search for identity. Many would call Atwood a feminist as her writing often explores the exploitation of women and the role of the men who surround them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References in the text</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Greek mythology       | • In Ancient Greece, stories about gods and goddesses, monsters and heroes were a means by which everyday and religious life could be explained to its citizens.  
                        • Explained the elements of the human condition: the nature of the world, its origins, the meaning of life and death.  
                        • Gave advice about daily rituals for the people of Ancient Greece. |
| Penelope               | • Daughter of Icarius, King of Sparta and Periboea  
                        • Married to the King of Ithaca, Odysseus  
                        • While her husband is absent for 20 years, Penelope faithfully and patiently looks after his kingdom. |
| Icarius                | • One of the two kings of Sparta  
                        • He declares that anyone who can beat him in a running race can marry his daughter, Penelope. |
| Periboea               | • Penelope’s mother  
                        • Is a nymph, a goddess of nature.  
                        • Hides her daughter when she is born as Icarius wanted a son. When Icarius finds the baby, he tries to drown her. Penelope is rescued by a family of ducks. |
| The Odyssey            | • An epic poem featuring the adventures of Odysseus and is written by Ancient Greek writer Homer.  
                        • Takes place after the Trojan War and is an account of Odysseus’ adventures during his 10-year journey home.  
                        • Recounts his battle with mythical creatures and the wrath of the gods. |
| The Trojan War         | • Lasts 10 years  
                        • Is a battle between the Greeks and the defenders of the city of Troy. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References in the text</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Hades                 | • God of the underworld and also the name of the place below the Earth for the final destination of the souls of the dead  
|                       | • Has various levels and rivers that Penelope refers to in her narrative.  
|                       | • Most humans would end up in Hades. Usually only the gods would go to Olympus, the home of the gods and goddesses.  |
| A shade               | • Spirits, ghosts or souls who are awaiting passage to the underworld of Hades  
|                       | • Shades wait on the shores of one of the underground rivers.  
|                       | • Penelope narrates her story as a shade. She has no physical body.  |
| Helen                 | • Wife of Menelaus, who is also a king of Sparta  
|                       | • Is abducted by Trojan prince Paris, the event that is said to spark the Trojan War.  |
| Odysseus              | • Considered to be one of the great heroes of Greek mythology  
|                       | • Known for his leadership, intelligence and strength  
|                       | • Credited with helping to win the Trojan War  |
| Telemachus            | • Only son of Odysseus and Penelope  |
| A Greek chorus        | • A traditional part of Greek theatre  
|                       | • Consists of a small group of male players who collectively observe and comment on the dramatic action by singing, dancing or recitation  
|                       | • In Greek tragedy, the chorus could act as a character as it could have a personality and become part of the action.  
|                       | • In *The Penelopiad* the voice of the 12 maids act as a Greek chorus.  |
| The Erinyes           | • The goddesses of justice and vengeance  
|                       | • Also known as the Furies or the Angry Ones  
|                       | • Punish their victims by driving them mad.  
|                       | • In *The Penelopiad*, the maids call on the Erinyes to exact vengeance.  |

Did you know?

Greek mythology is everywhere! Many cities, towns, company names, planets, constellations, medical terms and literary allusions can be linked back to the Greek myths. In fact Greek mythology is considered to be one of the three biggest influences on literature. Shakespeare and the Bible are the other two.
Homer, a Greek poet
Atwood’s prose draws heavily on the writings of Homer. Homer was the writer of Ancient Greek's most important literary works – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *The Penelopiad* makes mention of many of the events in *The Odyssey*, which is a 24-book epic poem about Penelope’s husband, Odysseus, and covers his adventures.

**STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS**

**Style**

*The Penelopiad* is a novella, which is written prose that is fictional. It is shorter than a novel but longer than a short story, hence the name ‘novella’. Novellas are able to stand on their own as a story even though their scope is not as wide as that of a novel or as limited as that of a short story.

A novella must have fully fleshed-out characters and a sustained plot. Its word limit can range in length. As a novella, *The Penelopiad* is a mixture of prose and poetry. Much of the story is told in hindsight so Penelope has the benefit of reflecting on the events and offering her point of view.

**The storyline**

Our story in *The Penelopiad* begins in Hades after Penelope’s death. The time of Ancient Greece has long passed; it is the Modern Era. As she has time to think and wait in Hades, Penelope has decided to tell her story to give her version of events. Most of her story is told in recount. Penelope’s narrative is interspersed with snippets from the maids’ point of view on how they are treated.

Penelope begins with her life in Sparta. The narrative starts with her childhood and her attempted murder by her father. As a 15-year-old, she remembers her father setting up a race to find her a husband and she thinks about her rather unpleasant interactions with her cousin Helen. Odysseus wins Penelope’s hand in marriage, and she moves to the island of Ithaca.

Penelope recalls how she has to manage without Odysseus’ support while he reluctantly goes to fight in the Trojan War. Finally, the war appears to be over, but still Odysseus does not return. Instead Penelope begins to hear tales of his adventures and escapades, which are recorded in the *The Odyssey*. She must raise her son and fight off various suitors who wish to take control of her and the vast properties of Odysseus.

When she refuses the suitors, rumoured to be more than 100, they set up camp. As a way to stall their interest, Penelope promises that she will remarry but only after she has woven her father-in-law’s shroud, which she cleverly unpicks at night. She tells her maids to keep the suitors entertained.
Comparing: The Penelopiad and Bombshells

There are different kinds of comparative questions and different ways to approach them. This section will help you to develop an understanding of how to use a range of strategies when planning your essays about The Penelopiad and Bombshells. Graphic organisers, such as Venn diagrams, scales and data charts, are especially useful tools in assisting you to explore the similarities and differences between the texts.

**TYPES OF QUESTIONS**

There are three types of question:
- the themes, issues and ideas
- the cultural context
- the genre and style.

Common words used in essay questions include:
- **Discuss**: Debate the arguments for and against the topic, backing up these ideas with selected evidence from the text. Provide a conclusion.
- **To what extent**: Assess the evidence in your text that would support an argument. Also look at alternative explanations.
- **Do you agree?**: An opinion is being sought as to the extent to which the statement or quotation is accurate. Evidence will be provided to support or contend the point of view.
- **Quotations**: Essay questions that use quotations are a way to delve into the issues embedded in a text. You should make reference to the quotation and the ideas that it raises.

**Theme questions**

Theme questions ask us to consider ideas common to the two texts. In this study guide, we have looked at the following themes for each text: the role of women, telling a story, patriarchal society and the marginalised. These thematic ideas can be broken down further to a broader scope of ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common themes</th>
<th>Could also look at:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The role of women</td>
<td>Stereotypes, archetypes, generations, competition, innocence, manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling a story</td>
<td>Having a voice, sharing internal issues, verbalising stress and grief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchal society</td>
<td>The dominance of men, double standards for the sexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marginalised</td>
<td>The innocent, the overlooked, the powerless, the forgotten, the poor, the peerless, the partnerless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes common in The Penelopiad and Bombshells
Cultural context questions
Cultural context questions ask us to consider the similarities and differences in the societies presented in each text. We may be asked to look at the attitudes of the authors, which is also referred to as view and values. So, for example, what might be different about Ancient Greece and contemporary middle-class society will be obvious, but surprisingly there are some things that are evident in both societies. We also need to consider the attitudes of each author to the roles of women and men, the role of storytelling and the powerless.

Genre questions
Genre questions consider the similarities or differences in each text type. Although we are comparing a novella to a play, each text still has settings, style, the use of characterisation and humour.

THE COMPARISON
How to compare
The following section shows you a number of ways to compare the two texts. A variety of methods has been used, such as tables that allow you to chart and track data and graphic organisers that let you see quickly the links and variations.

In a comparison essay, you must critically analyse any two texts, pointing out their similarities and/or differences. It could also be called a compare and contrast essay. Your tasks could be comparative only (looking only at similarities), contrasting only (pointing out the differences) or both comparative and contrasting.

Theme
Thematic essay questions are the most common type of topic. Theme essay questions on The Penelopiad and Bombshells would ask you to consider the ideas they have in common: the role of women, telling a story, patriarchal society, the marginalised or any variation of these ideas.

■ ROLE OF WOMEN
Both texts are written by women and narrated by women. There are over eight different female voices in each text and numerous female minor characters, so it is possible to make a number of comparisons:

The role of women is a central concern for both authors. They present the perspective of women at all stages of life, many of which are dominated by male points of view, actions or behaviours as well as the opinions of others.
### The authors, Margaret Atwood and Joanna Murray-Smith

- Both contemporary, experienced and published writers
- University educated
- Public and well-respected figures in their fields
- Have both dabbled previously with texts that explore issues concerning women.

### The main characters

- Penelope and the maids
- Meryl, Tiggy, Mary, Theresa, Winsome, Zoe

### The minor characters

- Helen, Anticlea, Eurycleia
- Winsome's widow friends
- Mary's rival, Angela McTerry
- Zoe's daughter, Deidre

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**DUTY:** Once the women in the texts have reached a certain age, or maturity, there is a sense that they must conform to expectations and fulfil their duty as women. This is what society expects of them.

For Penelope, reaching a certain age means she must marry. Despite her husband's long absence Penelope is expected to care for the family and maintain Odysseus' property. When it appears that Odysseus is not going to return, it is expected that she will re-marry.

- Meryl places unrealistic pressures on herself as a mother. The expectation from society to be the perfectly organised, happy and confident mother are beyond her capabilities while trying to cope with young children, mostly on her own.
- Theresa appears to have fallen into the trap of thinking that marriage will make her blissfully happy because being a wife is what society expects of her age group.

**INNOCENCE:** Both authors use childlike or innocent characters to convey the powerlessness of those at the bottom of the social pecking order. The voice of these female characters is angry and resentful.

The maids blame Penelope and Odysseus for their deaths rather than looking at how their own actions may have been at fault. They seek vengeance for their deaths.

- In her youthfulness, Mary O'Donnell blames Angela McTerry for what she anticipates will be her downfall, although she doesn't know for sure that Angela's performance will be better than her own.

**COMPETITIVENESS:** The age-old issue of women versus women is explored in both texts. Regardless of age or experience, it appears as if many women seek to undermine, discredit and compete with each other for little gain or purpose.

Rather than seeking advice or comfort from either her cousin Helen or mother-in-law, Anticlea, Penelope finds these women mostly unfriendly, unhelpful or downright difficult. Even the trusted nurse, Eurycleia, is inconsistent in her support of Penelope.

- In comparing herself to other mothers, Meryl finds herself lacking.
- Mary believes that beating Angela is one way of placing herself firmly at the top of the social ladder at school.
- Theresa is disparaging towards her bridesmaids despite their supporting role of her.
- Tiggy has lost her husband to a more exciting and alluring woman.

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The role of women in society
Comparing: The Penelopiad and Bombshells

Despite the passage of time, women can still be categorised into archetypal roles, which can be limiting and frustrating. Discuss.

Breaking stereotypes:
- Penelope has been known as the ‘good wife’, but Atwood shows her as a much more complex character.
- Winsome is meant to be the grieving widow, but she challenges society’s expectations in an unconventional way.

Women need men:
- Winsome, Meryl and Tiggy all seem to be struggling without men, but Theresa shows that it is not always the way to happiness.
- Penelope and Zoe seem to find a way to survive and cope on their own.

Assumptions about generations:
- Teenagers: Mary is typically self-centred, but the maids are more complex. Are they self-centred or are they just doing what they were told?

This mind map demonstrates how you could unpack a sample essay question on the theme of the role of women

Patriarchal society

Despite the lead roles in both texts being given to women, it appears that it is the male characters who have the power to dominate decision-making and are embodied as the strong and noble. The idea of a patriarchal society, one where men are in authority or have power over women, is not perceived to be as prevalent as it was once.

Each text has a variety of narrative points of view with a range of characters who are caught up in their own needs to share their side of the story or express their feelings. Each text is composed for a specific audience by an author who feels they have something to share via the written form or stage performance.

The characters and the people who they represent in real life are given a voice by each composer. Although their experience may appear somewhat negative, they are given power to have their stories heard.

Both texts consider the role that men play in the lives of women. To some extent, men appear to continue to dominate the lives of women despite nearly 3000 years of progress.

Happiness: A woman’s happiness and contentment appear to be thwarted by the way society places an emphasis on the importance of men.

Penelope’s life is dominated by a father who at first tries to get rid of her and smothers her. She faces the humiliation of finding a husband, only to be abandoned by him for countless years. During his absence, she is rarely free from the gossip that surrounds his escapades. Upon his return, he sneaks in and takes control of life on the island despite Penelope having managed it well for years. It is only in death that she has the freedom to express her point of view as she wishes.

- Tiggy and Winsome are both experiencing grief and anguish over the absence of male figures in their lives. Their snapshots show how they both need to rebuild their lives.
- Meryl is in a stressful environment because there is not a reliable and supportive husband to share the domestic load.
POWER: Many of the male characters depicted in each text appear to have a powerful influence on the lives of the women in these stories. This is because of the dominance of men in society and because the women have allowed themselves to love them.

Telemachus and Odysseus destroy the lives of the 12 maids with apparently little thought or hesitation. Although Penelope has waited and pined for her husband for many years, she must face the gossip and scorn as a result of his actions both while he is away and then upon his return.

| The impact of patriarchal societies on women |

| TELING A STORY |

There are many storytellers in our texts who either have a purpose in telling their story or who find some release in being able to share their life experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storytellers in The Penelopiad</th>
<th>Storytellers in Bombshells</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Atwood</td>
<td>Joanna Murray-Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>Meryl Louise Davenport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The maids</td>
<td>Tiggy Entwhistle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odysseus</td>
<td>Mary O’Donnell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer</td>
<td>Theresa McTerry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Winsome Webster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zoe Struthers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Penelopiad:
- First person point of view
- Use of prose and verse
- Two points of view
- Reflects on series of events that lead to climax
- A story that reflects a story
- Atwood uses the elements of a traditional myth to expose the role of women in Ancient Times and to find justice for Penelope’s actions.
- Odysseus is able to use his gifts as a storyteller to make people believe his tales.

Similarities
- Events told from women’s perspective, no male point of view
- The purpose of telling the story is to make sense of events and to work out a problem.
- All points are very one-sided; reader/audience must rely on integrity of storyteller.

Bombshells
- Use of monologues within scripted prose
- Presents six points of view
- Nearly all pieces are told at a time of crisis or at the climax of their story.

The similarities and differences in how each text tells a story

THE MARGINALISED

Both texts provide an opportunity to hear from those who are often less powerful than others or who don’t have a voice. In each text, the world is dominated by men, and so the marginalised are the women, the poor, the ones without a perceived status or those who are bound by the expectations of a society entrenched in certain beliefs.
Writing the essay

There are many ways to write compare and contrast essays. Selecting an essay framework for comparative writing can be challenging because essays need to be more than lists of ideas. Rather, they should aim to be thoughtful, in-depth analyses of the two texts, *The Penelopiad* and *Bombshells*. Compare and contrast essays encourage critical thinking, and the more complex comparative models provide more scope to demonstrate these skills.

**SHAPING INFORMATION AND PLANNING**

Once you have read or viewed your texts, deconstructed for meaning and prepared your notes, it is time to start to write essays. This section models how to:

- work through a topic
- brainstorm a topic
- develop a contention
- create an essay plan
- write different types of essays.

**High-scoring responses**

High-scoring responses should include the following:

- consistent engagement with the topic throughout
- a well-sustained contention, supported by strong arguments and excellent use of evidence
- complex but well-controlled sentences that use punctuation accurately and purposefully
- formal language or critical analysis used effectively
- accurate and specific details supported by judiciously used quotations and examples
- weaving of the two texts throughout the analysis
- complex links that recognise similarities and differences but also go further to establish subtle distinctions.

**Before you start**

**BRAINSTORMING THE TOPIC**

This diagram illustrates how to ask yourself the questions about the topic so that you can start to address the essay question. Consider what evidence would you use to support your ideas.

**Writer’s toolbox**

When you brainstorm, ask questions about the topic. A good way to do this is to make sure you answer or include the Who? What? Where? Why? When? Which? and How? of the topic.
Both authors break traditional linear narrative structures. Explore why they would have made these decisions.

Who is the author of each text and what was their agenda?

Why does Penelope have a modern voice?

Why do we also hear from the maids?

Why does Penelope tell her story from Hades?

Why does the written form change for the maids each time? How does each form serve a purpose?

Mind map: Brainstorm

**CREATING THE ESSAY PLAN**

Your essay plan helps to break down your ideas about the structural elements in each text and looks into the motives of each author.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main argument 1</th>
<th>Main argument 2</th>
<th>Main argument 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic statement</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Penelopiad</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bombshells</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writers of both texts have a political and social agenda.</td>
<td>Atwood wants to show a traditional story from a woman’s perspective.</td>
<td>Murray-Smith wants to make a social comment on the contemporary middle class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing the narrative structure allows for heightened reader/audience interest.</td>
<td>Penelope tells her story from Hades a long time after events have taken place. Readers are drawn into the story to find out what really happened.</td>
<td>The delivery of monologue powerfully raises the tension of each scene to a climactic point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking conventional literary devices adds impact to the storyline.</td>
<td>Giving Penelope a ‘voice’ is entertaining and provides a fresh perspective to a well-known story.</td>
<td>Having one actress deliver all monologues would heighten audience interest and attention in her skill of delivery and create great impact.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DEVELOPING A CONTENTION**

Paragraph/Argument 1 + Paragraph/Argument 2 + Paragraph/Argument 3 = The contention

Developing a contention