

Poetry: Comparison and Contrast

Homer's *The Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song"

In 2000, the AP Literature and Composition Exam contained the following prompt:

The story of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens and their enchanting but deadly song appears in Greek epic poetry in Homer's *Odyssey*. Text A is an English translation of the episode is reprinted below. Text B, Margaret Atwood's poem, is a modern commentary on the classical story. Read both texts carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare the portrayals of the Sirens. Your analysis should include discussion of tone, point of view, and whatever poetic devices (diction, imagery, etc.) seem most important.

Activity One: Analyzing the Prompt

Prior to examining the paired texts, analyze the prompt for the following information:

Background (**B**): What information do you gain about the mythological Sirens? Summarize.

Abstract (**A**): What will you compare and contrast (even though the prompt asks you only to compare)?

Concrete (**C**): What poetic devices should you include in your analysis? (After reading the two passages, you may discover other devices that you will want to use in your analysis.)

Activity Two: Close Reading and Annotating Texts

Read the texts below, annotating for tone and point of view as well as other devices that create an effect and make meaning in each text.

Text A**From *The Odyssey***

. . . our trim ship was speeding toward
the Sirens' island, driven by the brisk wind.

. . .

Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax
down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands
5 and the wax soon grew soft, worked by my strength
and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon,
and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.
They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship –
erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast –
10 and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.
We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,
scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship
was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:
"Come closer, famous Odysseus – Achaea's pride and glory –
15 moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!
Never has a sailor passed our shores in his black craft
until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,
and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man."

. . .

20 So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air
and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.
I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free –
they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder.
Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once
to bind me faster with rope on chafing rope.
25 But once we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake,
once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call –
My steadfast crew was quick to removed the wax I'd used
to seal their ears and loosed the bonds that lashed me.

What is the tone of this passage from the epic poem? _____ yet _____

Use the chart below to justify your selection of tone:

Textual Evidence	Commentary

From what point of view is this section of the tale told? _____

What effect does this point of view have on the reader?

Why would the author feel this point of view was most effective for this passage?

What other literary devices are used by this author? What is the effect?

Device(s)	Effect on Meaning

Text B:**“Siren Song”
by Margaret Atwood**

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

5 the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.
10 Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?
I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
15 looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

20 I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

25 at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

What is the tone of this poem? _____ yet _____

Use the chart below to justify your selection of tone words:

Textual Evidence	Commentary

From what point of view is this section of the tale told? _____

What effect does this point of view have on the reader?

Why would the author feel this point of view was most effective for this passage?

What other literary devices are used by this author? What is the effect?

Device(s)	Effect on Meaning

Activity Three: Compare and Contrast

1. What is the common focus of the two texts?

2. Are the tones of the texts more **similar** or more **different**? Using the information above, explain your response.

3. Are the points of view of both texts more **similar** or more **different**? Explain.

4. What is Odysseus' view of the Sirens? How does he feel about them? Cite evidence to support your assertions.

Assertion	Evidence

5. What is the Siren's view of her victims? Cite evidence to support your assertions.

Assertion	Evidence

6. The **purpose** of a thematic statement is to clearly and concisely state the writer’s understanding of the meaning of the work as a whole.

In order to write a **thematic** statement you must have

- 1) a SUBJECT (an abstract thematic idea—Refer to “Abstract Words for Thematic Ideas”) and
- 2) your understanding of the *author’s attitude* on that subject

Take the SUBJECT (an abstract idea) explored in literature and make an assertion about what the authors try to convey to the reader about this subject through the texts.

Example: Thematic statement

- 1) SUBJECT (abstract idea that is common to both poems) Willpower
- 2) The writer’s understanding of the authors’ attitudes:
Both authors believe that man’s tendency is to succumb to elements of temptation even to man’s own detriment due to lack of willpower.

1. What is a thematic idea (SUBJECT) that is common to both poems? _____
2. Write a thematic statement that includes the SUBJECT that is common to both poems as well as your understanding of the attitudes of both authors on that subject.

Turn your combined thematic statement into a **thesis** for your compare and contrast essay.

In order to write a **thesis** statement you must have

- 1) a SUBJECT (the pieces of literature or some specific aspect of them) and
- 2) *your opinion* about that subject

Take the SUBJECT and make an assertion about it. (What do you believe to be true?) Because the statement is an opinion, it “begs” to be argued. In other words, you write your assertions about the literature and spend the rest of the essay defending and proving those assertions. It lets the reader of your essay know from the very beginning what your opinion is and what you intend to prove/show in the paper.

Example: Thesis statement

- 1) SUBJECT: *Odyssey* and “Siren Song” (novel/play/poem that will be the subject of your essay)
- 2) Writer’s opinion about that subject:
Both authors include the desperation of the Siren and her victims to illustrate man’s lack of willpower when faced with temptation.

Abstract Words for Thematic Ideas

To generate a thematic statement that reveals universal meaning, use the following abstract IDEA words. Ask yourself these kinds of questions:

What does the literature say about...?

What is the lesson being taught about...?

What does the author believe to be true about...?

The answer will be the basis for your thematic statement.

IDEAS:

Alienation
Ambition
Anger
Beauty
Betrayal
Chance
Chaos
Coming of Age
Courage
Crime
Curiosity
Custom or tradition
Death
Defeat
Despair
Dichotomy
Discontent
Disillusionment
Domination
Dreams
Duty
Education
Escape
Evil
Excellence
Exile
Exploration
Failure
Faith
Falsity
Family
Fear
Forgiveness
Freedom
Free Will
Friendship
Games
Government
Greed

CORRESPONDING IDEAS:

Loneliness	Solitude
Dreams	Corruption
Hatred	Revenge
Deformity	
Disloyalty	Unfaithfulness
Fate	Luck
Order	
Change	Innocence
Cowardice	
Violence	Helplessness
Discovery	
Ritual	
Grief	Afterlife
Extremes	
Appearance versus Reality	
Suppression	
Fantasies	
Responsibility	
Learning	
Literal and Figurative	
Good	The battle between the two
Discovery	Adventure/Journey
Success	
Loss of faith	
Pretense	Lies
Parenthood	Relationships
Will Power	
Enemies	
Contests	Competition

Guilt		
Happiness		
Heaven	Utopia	Dystopia
Home		
Honor		
Honesty		
Identity (search for)		
Influence	Force (coercion)	
Initiation		
Illusion	Appearance vs. Reality	
Innocence	Loss of innocence	
Individuality		
Insecurity		
Instinct		
Journey (Psychological or Physical)		
Law	Justice	
Loss		
Love	Obsession	Unrequited love
Loyalty		
Luck		
Materialism		
Memory		
Mob Psychology		
Nature	Man's relationship with	
Persistence	perseverance	
Passion vs. Reason	Balance	
Patriotism		
Perfection	the search for	
Poverty	Wealth	
Power	the search for/acquisition of/relinquishment of	
Prejudice	Equality	
Pride	Hubris	
Progress		
Prophecy		
Relationships		
Resistance	Rebellion	
Religion	Faith	
Revenge	Retribution	
Search	For truth	For identity
Social status	Class structures	
Society	Rules of	Effect on man
Supernatural	Magic	
Survival	Conflict	
Time	Eternity	
Trust		
Truth		
War	Violence	
Wisdom		
Women	Feminism	
Youth	Old Age	

Poetry and Comparison/Contrast Writing

When students are asked to compare and contrast two poems on the same subject, the tasks are doubled because they must examine each poem individually and then determine points of comparison and contrast. The comparison/contrast essay is one of the most challenging tasks to complete in forty minutes. In order to respond to this particular question, writers need to

- recognize the poetic techniques and devices used in each poem.
- analyze and interpret the essential meanings of each poem.
- analyze the relationships between the two poems, using appropriate textual references from each.
- organize the essay in a logical manner.
- use smooth transition between points of analysis for the two poems.
- maintain the thematic unity and coherence of the poems.

The comparison/contrast essay multiplies the task times two and requires that students show another dimension of organization and development in the essay.

<p style="text-align: center;">Block or Subject by Subject All A / All B</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Point by Point AB / AB / AB</p>
<p>Introductory paragraph with thesis:</p> <p>I. Assertion about Text A A. 1st supporting detail, example, or evidence B. 2nd supporting detail, example, or evidence C. 3rd supporting detail, example, or evidence</p> <p>II. Assertion about Text B A. 1st supporting detail, example, or evidence B. 2nd supporting detail, example, or evidence C. 3rd supporting detail, example, or evidence</p> <p>III. Concluding paragraph</p>	<p>Introductory paragraph with thesis:</p> <p>I. Assertion A. Point about Text A B. Point about Text B</p> <p>II. Assertion A. Point about Text A B. Point about Text B</p> <p>III. Assertion A. Point about Text A B. Point about Text B</p> <p>IV. Concluding paragraph</p>

1. **WHAT** similar **focus** can be found in both poems? **WHAT** is the “**particular situation**” of each writer/poem?

1 st Author/Poem	2 nd Author/Poem
Focus:	Focus:
Particular Situation:	Particular Situation:

2. The **HOW** part of the prompt asks you to look at “**poetic devices**” in each poem. Write a general statement concerning the poetic techniques used by each.

1 st Author/Poem	2 nd Author/Poem
Poetic Devices:	Poetic Devices:
General Statement:	General Statement:

3. **EFFECT** of the literary techniques is important in the essay whether it is asked specifically in the prompt or not. What is the effect of the devices (above) on the reader of each poem?

1 st Author/Poem	2 nd Author/Poem
Effect of Poetic Devices on Reader:	Effect of Poetic Devices on Reader:

4. **THEME** is always essential in the essay whether explicitly or implicitly stated. What is the universal theme? or the personal theme? or the moral theme? or the social theme?

1 st Author/Poem	2 nd Author/Poem
Thematic Statement:	Thematic Statement:

2000 AP English Literature and Composition Question 1

Scoring Guide for *Odyssey* and “Siren Song”

9-8 These essays are ordered by a persuasive interpretation that forms an effective basis for comparing the Sirens. They recognize variations in perspective and approach that differentiate Atwood’s contemporary treatment of the Sirens from Homer’s ancient version of the temptresses, and their analysis is insightful and provocative. Although the writers of these essays may offer a range of interpretations and/or choose different poetic elements for emphasis, these papers provide convincing readings of both poems and maintain consistent control over the elements of effective composition, including the language appropriate to the criticism of verse. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, they demonstrate the writers’ ability to read poetry perceptively and to write with clarity and sophistication.

7-6 These essays convey a sound grasp of both poems. However, they may prove less adept than the best essays at shaping a thesis to define the distinctions and/or similarities that make the juxtaposition of these two treatments of the Sirens a telling exercise. The interpretations may falter in some particulars, or they may be less thorough or precise in their discussions of how the poems portray the Sirens. Nonetheless, their dependence on paraphrase, if any, will be in the service of analysis. These essays demonstrate the writer’s ability to express ideas clearly, but they do not exhibit the same level of mastery, maturity, and/or control as the very best essays. These essays are likely to be briefer, less incisive, and less well-supported than the 9-8 papers.

5 These essays tend to over-simplify: they respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of the texts, yet they perhaps say little beyond the most readily grasped observations. They often rely on paraphrase, but nonetheless that contains some implicit analysis. Their discussion of how the portrayals of the Sirens compare may be vague, formulaic, or inadequately supported by references to the text. They may suffer from the cumulative force of many minor misinterpretations. Composition skills are at a level sufficient to convey the writer’s thoughts, and surface errors do not constitute a distraction. However, these papers are not as well-conceived, organized, or developed as upper-half papers.

4-3 These lower-half essays reveal an incomplete understanding of either or both texts and perhaps an insufficient understanding of the prescribed task as well: they may not succeed in forging a basis for the comparison of the portrayals of the Sirens. One poem may be discussed to the exclusion of the other; the poetic analysis may be partial, unconvincing, or irrelevant. The essays may rely essentially on paraphrase. Evidence from the texts may be meager or misconstrued. The writing demonstrates uncertain control over the elements of composition, often exhibiting recurrent stylistic flaws and/or inadequate development of ideas. Essays scored 3 may contain significant misreadings and/or unusually inept writing.

2-1 These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 4-3 range. They may seriously misread the texts, and frequently are unacceptable brief. They are poorly written on several counts and may contain many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Although some attempt may have been made to respond to the question, the writer’s assertions are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the texts. Essays scored 1 contain little coherent discussion of the texts.

0 A response with no more than a reference to the task.

-- A blank paper or completely off-topic response.

Student Samples for *Odyssey* and “Siren Song”

Student Sample B (Score 8)

Homer and Atwood present the complexity of the myth of the Sirens through different points of view, with different tones, and telling imagery. Homer tells the story of a man clever enough to hear the siren’s song and not lose his life, while Atwood is a siren, a predator, waiting to trick men on to her island.

The tones of the passages are quite different. In both works, however, trickery and cleverness is used. Odysseus escapes with his life, and the Siren wins, saying “Alas it is a boring song but it works every time.” The tone in Homer’s passage is strong, and powerful. “Now with a sharp sword . . . Helios’ burning rays . . . ship was racing past,” are phrases used to illustrate this tone. However, as Homer’s tone has masculine qualities, Atwood’s has feminine ones. Her tone is crafty, then pleading. “Come closer. . . help me! Only you, only you can” the Siren screams, pleading for attention. These two passages are like two halves of a whole. Odysseus is prey, trying frantically to escape death, while the Siren is a carnivorous predator, singing for her supper. The tempo of the two passages is also quite different. Homer’s is quicker, like a scurrying animal, while Atwood’s is deliberate. Atwood even uses punctuation to her advantage in the last three stanzas. The last line of each stanza is broken, forcing the reader’s eye to the next stanza without realizing the trickery. In the same way the Sirens lure men into their clutches. Homer splits his passage into three sections according to the crew’s state: at first they are sailing, then preparing and finally escaping.

The imagery both passages is also quite different and revealing. Homer’s words are masculine, powerful, and battle ready. He uses words like “sharp,” “strength,” “strong hands,” “churned,” “racing,” “sharp sword.” The imagery is that of a man who is not only sailing by the Sirens, but going to war with them. Homer describes the Sirens’ song as “ravishing,” “high,” “thrilling,” & “urgent.” Their voices make Odysseus’ heart throb and there almost is a sense of sensuality taken from this imagery. Atwood’s imagery is far from masculine and less sexual. The words “bird suit” and “squatting” almost give the image of a ridiculous situation. However, “feathery maniacs” and “fatal and valuable” give off a more serious image and tone. The imagery makes the reader identify and feel pity for this poor Siren, for she hates what she is. By the end of her pleading, the reader has been sucked in, like the men who “leap overboard in squadrons” mentioned in the first stanza. The poem begins seductively menacing, then becomes almost whiny and innocent, and finally ends with the same grave and clever (fatal) tone.

These two passages each sing the song of opposing sides, yet they have much in common. They both use trickery to escape or catch their kill, and they both are confident in their abilities except for the equal moments of weakness (Odysseus begging his men to untie him, Siren not “enjoy (ing) either. . . I don’t enjoy singing) in both passages. Yet the two songs are the natural songs of an animal and its hunter.

Student Sample II (Score 6)

Oh, the mythical siren's – the women with “honeyed” voices pouring from their lips. For centuries famous sirens have been celebrated and scorned. From Cleopatra to Mata Hari the siren has symbolized the wanton woman? Or is she really all that bad?

In the *Odyssey* by Homer the Sirens are described to have “ravishing voices” that cause the heroes “heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.” They sing thrilling songs of praise to lure the weak men in. Men must stop their ears with wax to be tied up to avoid these evil women. Harsh words such as sliced and lashed are used while describing the preparation for encounter. Using false promises the cunning evil females lure the world's bravest strongest heroes on to an island where they then kill them for fun. The men who hear the song are powerless and fly into a sexual frenzy begging to be released. But after the Sirens island is passed all is forgotten.

In *Siren Song* by Margaret Atwood the author casts a decidedly feminist spin on the subject. The sirens are not beautiful enchanters but rather oppressed women crying out for help. They are trying to be successful to break out of their demeaning “bird suits” and stop singing their boring song. Atwood implies the only way these women could have any power was by controlling men who really held all the power seducing & influencing powerful men was, until recently, the only way clever women could make an impact. The sirens are made to look & seem slightly ridiculous, pathetic creatures, singing empty songs. Rhythmic & soft words and diction make the poem almost like a never ending cycle.

In the *Odyssey* men are victims of the sirens. In *Siren Song* the Sirens are victims of the circumstances & the men are stupid because they jump off ships to the island even though they see “beached skulls.” The *Odyssey* is told from a man's point of view, while *Siren Song* is from the female sirens point of view. Women are something to oppress to fight & beat down in the *Odyssey*, just another Trojan army to defeat. Women are something to pity & save in *Siren Song*.

Student Sample HHH (Score 4)

These two poems written about the Sirens from the “Odyssey” can be interpreted in two very different ways, yet they hold such similarity. The tone, point of view and diction are three very important poetic devices to be examined when discussing the two different poems.

The tone of the first poem is cautious and even adventuresome. Odysseus knows what the luring sirens will do to him, so he is taking precautions by stopping his crew’s ears and asking them to bind him. Odysseus knows better than to let the Sirens take over him. In the second poem by Margaret Atwood, the tone is much more a warning, even a bit taunting.

The point of view of each poem is a very important device. In the first poem, the poem is from Odysseus’ point of view (first person). He speaks of his experience when passing the Sirens. He feels the danger, he is scared to be lured in. In the Siren Song, we also see a first person point of view, but instead this time the narrator is the siren. “Help me!”, (In 22), the Siren cries out as she is webbing her next victim.

There are very two different types of diction being used in these two poem, and that is what distinguishes them from one another. In the first poem, the writer used words like strength, ravishing, throbbing, and thrilling to create a more adventurous tone. On the other hand in the “Siren Song”, Atwood uses words such as irresistable, dead, maniacs, and fatal again to create a more taunting and even perhaps a more lugubrious tone.

Student Sample FFF (Score 2)

In the English translation of this episod, the Sirens are portrayed as seductive and mystical creatures”. . . sails on, a wiser man!” indicates that they feel like they are helping men, however they are just luring them in. The tone is a much positive one than Margaret Atwood’s poem. The poem portrays the Sirens in need of help the Sirens pretend to be in need of assistance and call out to any passing ships.

The point of view also changes varie. In the translation Odysseus is telling the story of how he heard the Sirens’ song and lived to tell about it. The portrayal is influenced by a man , who is the primary target of the Sirens. In the poem one of the sirens is speaking about how she feels about singing. Now it seems that the Sirens are the ones who need the help.

Writing Considerations

In a comparison/contrast essay, students must make some choices about organizing their analyses:

1. Will you combine both authors in one paragraph or will you discuss each author in separate paragraphs?
2. Do you address both abstract tasks (compare and contrast) in the introduction? Be sure to compare and contrast how each writer expresses his concern AND compare and contrast how each writer conveys his particular situation.
3. Are you comparing or contrasting relevant poetic techniques (the concrete task) and connecting them to meaning?
4. Does each of your paragraphs have a main point or purpose?
5. Do you refer to the text explicitly or implicitly, offering specific details to support your comments?
6. Do you use transitions effectively?
7. Is your conclusion a mere restatement of what you have already written, or do you offer something new and end with a clincher?

Extension Activity: Find a picture or artwork that illustrates this scene in the *Odyssey*. Write a paragraph that explains how the artist's vision of the Sirens is influenced by their descriptions in Book VII of the *Odyssey*.