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# INTERNATIONAL AS AND A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE (9675)

## Exemplar responses

For teaching from September 2017 onwards

For AS exams May/June 2018 onwards

For A-level exams May/June 2019 onwards

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This guide includes some exemplar material which provides responses to some of the specimen questions. It is intended to provide some examples of the kind of responses that might be submitted with some exemplification of the mark scheme connected to that response. It is not possible at present to provide exemplar responses for every question in the specimen papers, but it provides a snapshot of the kind of material we can make available to schools. Each series, the intention is to provide further exemplary responses as they become available.

The guide also includes an exemplification of a piece of coursework for the non examination assessment route. This shows the style and format of what might be presented as well as a outlining a standard with a suggested commentary and mark for the work. Further exemplary material will be provided by autumn 2016, alongside a set of standardising material for teachers to use in schools.

# ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES (AOs)

**AO1:** Demonstrate understanding of the ways in which readers find meanings in texts, showing an understanding of genre, the significance of contexts, and the ways in which different interpretations can be found.

**AO2:** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts with close attention to authorial methods

**AO3:** Express informed, personal and argued responses to literary texts, using appropriate concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate writing

All three AOs are weighted equally in all questions across both AS and A-level.

# UNIT 1 ASPECTS OF DRAMATIC TRAGEDY: EXEMPLAR STUDENT RESPONSE AND COMMENTARY

Below you will find two exemplar student responses to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on each response.

## King Lear

Explore the significance of the aspects of dramatic tragedy in the following passage in relation to the play as a whole.

You should consider the following in your answer:

- the presentation of Lear and Kent
- Shakespeare's use of dialogue
- the dramatic setting
- other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy.

[25 marks]

### Sample Band 3 student response:

The setting for this extract is Gloucester's castle and it begins with Kent in the stocks. The setting is an important context. The castle suggests an old world - ancient Britain. Lear, the Fool and a gentleman come in. Lear has just left Goneril's castle in anger and has gone to Regan's. She has deliberately left home and gone to Gloucester's castle where Lear has now come. Kent has been stocked by Regan and Cornwall because he quarrelled with Goneril's servant, Oswald.

The passage begins with Lear speaking to the Gentleman showing he does not understand why Regan is not at home. This is ironic as the audience knows exactly why she is not there. Lear then sees Kent in the stocks and seems to think it is a joke - 'Makest thou this shame thy pastime'. The Fool continues with the lightheartedness by suggesting that Kent wears 'cruel garters' because he was over lusty at the legs. Lear then becomes very serious and asks who has put Kent in the stocks as it is an insult to him - whoever did it has 'thy place mistook'. When Kent says it is Cornwall and Regan, Lear will not believe it. There is a quick fire exchange of 'No' 'Yes' 'No, I say' to show Lear's disbelief and his growing anger. His anger gets stronger as he swears 'By Jupiter'. His anger is also shown by the questions that he asks and by his repetition.

Lear then explains his reasons for his anger, saying that Cornwall and Regan would not have set Kent in the stocks because it would be 'worse than murder' to show such disrespect to him. This is an important social context and tells us what was considered normal in the 17th century. He calls their actions a 'violent outrage'. It seems that he then calms down a little as he asks Kent to explain quickly why this has happened. Kent answers clearly at some length, always showing respect to Lear - 'My Lord', 'your highness'. This is another social context showing the different positions of master and servant and the expected way that servants should speak to kings. This is again ironic as Lear is no longer king. Kent retells the story of when he took Lear's letters to Regan's house and Oswald came with letters from Goneril. Kent says that after Regan read the letters they decided to leave their home and 'commanded' him to follow in a cold way. He says that when he arrived at Gloucester's castle he saw Oswald and because Oswald had been rude to Lear, he drew his sword against him. Oswald screamed and Regan and Cornwall punished Kent by stocking him. The Fool

offers a final comment on this - 'Winter's not gone yet if the wild geese fly that way'. He suggests that more bad things will follow.

This section is tragic because Lear is clearly being abused by his daughters and he is getting isolated even though the Fool is still with him. He is also isolated on the heath when he goes mad. Other tragic aspects are Lear's anger which is his tragic flaw and the fact that he has not accepted he is no longer king. He gave away his land and power at the start of the play, but he still expects everyone to still treat him like a king. Although he is not as angry here as he was with Cordelia when he banished her and with Goneril when he cursed her and wished her to have monsters as children, he still does not seem to be able to think clearly about what will happen if his anger gets out of control. He doesn't think that Regan will be as terrible to him as Goneril even though the Fool had warned him that she would be. This is another flaw of Lear's - he is blind to reality. He thinks things will happen as he imagines them. When Regan later arrives she is every bit as bad as Goneril and she locks the doors of Gloucester's castle against Lear, locking him out in the storm. This is all part of Lear's tragic fall. He was a king who was strong and had power and now he has no power and he clearly does not understand what is going on. This will probably make audiences sad because Lear is an old man. When Kent gives his long speech it would be interesting to watch Lear's reactions on stage. Nothing Kent says will make him feel better and it is clear his anger will be growing. Some audiences might think that he needs to learn how to control his anger and not everyone will feel sympathetic towards him.

Although Regan and Cornwall are not present in this scene, their actions are. They have put Kent in the stocks and have done this to deliberately upset Lear and to show him that they now have power. They are clearly the play's tragic villains. Putting Kent in the stocks is very disrespectful. Regan is more disrespectful later to Gloucester when she plucks the hairs from his beard and she and Cornwall are worse villains when they gouge out Gloucester's eyes. We have already seen that Goneril is a villain when she told Lear that he could not have a hundred knights living at her house. Even though he had made this a condition of giving her the land she changes the terms. Regan also does this after the events in this extract. She even asks why Lear needs one knight.

Overall this is an interesting part of the play as it prepares the audience for the tragic events that are to come. At this stage in the play, if we were watching it, we would want to know how Regan will speak to Lear when they meet and whether Lear will still be angry.

### Examiner commentary:

This is a straightforward response which relies heavily on description of the passage. The student provides a commentary on the passage; there is not much further analysis. The student is aware of the assessment objectives and makes a conscious effort to include them in a relevant way, though the ideas are not developed and are not very insightful.

**AO1** There is some relevant contextual awareness but again the ideas are not developed. The candidate has a sense of the social and political contexts that are operating in the passage, for example the master–servant dynamic, but more could be done with this. The same is true of the context of setting, identified as ancient Britain. There is some attempt to link these contexts with the generic context of tragedy.

In the second part of the answer, the candidate relevantly comments on the significance of the extract to the wider tragic genre. This is the strongest part of the answer. Some tragic aspects are identified – Lear's isolation, his tragic flaws, his tragic fall and Regan as tragic villain – and there is some valid discussion of the ideas with relevant general connection to the whole play.

The candidate engages with significance in a straightforward way and is able to write about some meanings. There is also an attempt to show that audiences might respond to Lear in different ways, but these ideas are not clearly developed or explained.

**AO2** There is an understanding that *King Lear* is a play and that audiences are part of the theatrical experience. There is some sense of how Shakespeare has structured the play to shape meanings but ideas are not developed. There is a little comment on dialogue and other aspects of dramatic language but given that the candidate has the passage at hand, opportunities to explore the significance of methods are not taken.

**AO3** The essay has some organization; the candidate structures ideas by 'going through' the passage in the first half of the answer and then makes comments on aspects of tragedy. Expression is clear and there is some use and straightforward understanding of critical concepts such as irony and tragic flaw. The writing is accurate though not sophisticated. The material offered is generally relevant.

This response is consistent with the Band 3 descriptors; straightforward and relevant.

**Sample Band 5 student response:**

If Kent is seen as being dramatically central to Lear's tragic fall, then this passage is very significant. Kent is visually present through the whole scene wearing 'cruel garters', an image that is especially repugnant to Lear and disturbing to the audience as a sign that the world has turned upside down. It is important to note though that Kent's being stocked carries rather different significances for Lear and for the audience. For Lear it is a sign that he personally has been disrespected ('tis worse than murder/ To do upon respect such violent outrage), a sign that he no longer has credibility or power. Kent – or more accurately Lear's disguised servant Caius – is Lear's representative and any snub to Kent is a snub to Lear. For the audience though there is further significance. What we see visually is a truth teller in shackles, a nobleman – an earl- treated with no greater dignity than a common thief. This is the world of the new order represented by Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund. Justice has lost meaning – just as it will later in the trial of Gloucester in which he is blinded (Out vile jelly! Where is thy lustre now) and in the mock trial on the heath when Lear positions the mad Poor Tom (also a nobleman in disguise) as the 'robed man of justice'. The world is indeed topsy turvy.

The setting for this scene is itself interesting in terms of its significance to the tragedy. The stocks are set 'before Gloucester's castle' so power and punishment are foregrounded. In this scene Lear realises all too painfully that he no longer has any power and it could be argued that this painful realisation is his punishment for the banishment of Cordelia.

Before Lear sees Kent, he is only vaguely troubled. He thinks it is just 'strange' that the messenger that he sent to Regan after his argument with Goneril has not been returned to him. However, as the truth begins to enter his mind, as his pride suffers, his anger grows and his tragic fall quickens: 'They durst not do't;/ They could not, would not do'it'; the repetition and heavy use of modal verbs draw attention to Lear's confusion, passion and need to believe that an ordered world still exists. Although Lear's final words in the extract suggest he regains some composure and restraint (he instructs Kent to explain how he might have deserved to be stocked perhaps showing that he hopes a rational explanation might exist), the audience can sense that Lear knows that his world and values are fracturing.

And Kent is of course the catalyst for the acceleration of Lear's tragic decline. His first words in the passage, 'Hail to thee, noble master' remind the audience and Lear of the respect and loyalty that Lear once commanded as a king. Indeed contextual factors of what kings and princes in Shakespeare's time could expect in terms of tradition and decorum are central to the discussion between Lear, Kent and the fool. A master could expect that his servant would have what might be called diplomatic immunity. Hence Lear's incredulity that Kent has been stocked. Lear asks Kent first why he makes his 'shame' a 'pastime' as if Kent has deliberately stocked himself as a joke. When Lear realises that Kent has been set in the stocks by Regan and Cornwall, the social expectations on which he depends for his sanity are shaken. His refusal to believe it is dramatised by his monosyllabic language and the mirrored staccato replies of Kent:

LEAR    No.  
 KENT    Yes.  
 LEAR    No, I say.  
 KENT    I say yea.

The tension rises here and is only calmed, albeit temporarily, when Kent gives his frank and measured account of what led to his 'shame'. His speech is interesting in that the first sixteen lines are all one sentence, building through a succession of clauses, the story of the parts played by

Goneril, Oswald, Regan and Cornwall in his present position, why Lear's 'son and daughter' found the 'trespass worth/The shame which here it suffers'. Although Kent speaks at some length here the audience's attention is surely on Lear, watching the reaction of the old man confronted with the starkness of truth. Seeing Lear becoming increasingly agitated might be particularly painful to some modern audiences who are perhaps more aware of the onslaught of dementia than they were in previous times. Lear's mental instability is certainly exacerbated by his confrontation with truth. In this sense, Kent has the tragic role as truth teller. He campaigns for truth at key points in the play, trying to help Lear to 'see better', for example when Cordelia is banished and he refuses to be silent - Reserve thy state;/And, in thy best consideration, check/ This hideous rashness.

In this extract it is also important to consider how Shakespeare uses the fool in the tragedy. While Kent tells the truth bluntly, the fool tells his truth with cryptic words and jokes. Both in a sense assume the role of the all licensed fool. Here the fool senses Lear's growing anger and disbelief at seeing Kent in the stocks and perhaps picking up on Lear's asking if Kent considers this shame his pastime, the fool tries to lighten the atmosphere by laughing and suggesting that Kent has been gartered for being 'over-lusty at legs'. But even jokes in this play have tragic implications. The sexual innuendoes and animal imagery connect to Gloucester, who was over lusty at the legs and punished for it by his blinding, and human behaviour is so degraded in this play that men and women are frequently and unfavourably compared to animals to emphasise their unnaturalness. The fool's jokes and humour far from being at a tangent to the tragic content point it up. The final words of this extract are those of the fool who says that 'Winter's not gone yet if the wild geese fly that way', suggesting ominously that further troubles are inevitable, a key aspect of tragedy.

The focus on Kent and the fool in this extract could suggest that they are tragic figures in their own right. Both remain loyal even though the great wheel is running down hill and for both their fate is determined. It is possible to admire their loyalty and love for Lear, but it is also possible to question their sense. If the focus is more on Kent as an emblem then what we see is the contempt the new orders have for loyalty and their lack of reverence for the old. Kent remains in the stocks throughout this passage, representing the key tragic aspect of the chaining of truth. His presence in the stocks is a visual representation of Lear's fallen greatness. Lear's fortunes have been reversed and he is at the bottom of fortune's wheel.

### Examiner commentary

This is a very assured response and shows the student's excellent knowledge of the play. There is a perceptive argument here where the student sees the extract in terms of the wider play and wider tragic genre. The writing is busy with ideas and the student seems to enjoy formulating ideas and finding connections. There is a lot of thinking going on here.

**AO1** There is much perceptive understanding of contextual issues and these are built into the argument in a seamless way. The candidate is particularly strong in discussing social and political contexts. Sensible comments are also made about contexts of production and reception. All contexts are connected to the generic context of tragedy.

The candidate perceptively explores different aspects of tragedy, thereby connecting with the wider tragic genre. Some good work is done here on Lear's tragic fall, his tragic flaws, his growing anagnorisis and especially the dramatic role of Kent as a catalyst for tragedy.

The candidate engages with significance in a perceptive way and is able to write about a number of different meanings. The candidate is not afraid to offer a personal take on the tragic impact of the extract; the voice here is confident and assured.

**AO2** There is a perceptive understanding of Shakespeare's dramatic methods and the candidate is always aware of the stage implications. There is very good discussion of structure (as in the comments on Lear's words at the beginning of the scene) and some language features, and these are always relevant and linked to the task and the tragic genre. The candidate also shows with some confidence how meanings arise from the language choices made by Shakespeare (eg Lear's final speech in this extract).

**AO3** The argument is very well shaped and tightly focused on the task. This is a sophisticated response which shows originality. Ideas are very well sequenced and the expression is mature and at times impressive.

**This response is consistent with the Band 5 descriptors: perceptive and assured.**



# UNIT 3 CRIME AND MYSTERY: EXEMPLAR STUDENT RESPONSE AND COMMENTARY

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a question in the sample assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Oliver Twist

'In Oliver Twist Dickens presents criminals as products of their society'.

To what extent do you agree with this view? Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed exploration of Dickens' authorial methods.

[25 marks]

### Sample Band 2 student response:

Criminals in Oliver Twist are characters who do things that are illegal like for example Sikes because he kills Nancy and Fagin because he gets boys to steal for him. However, these characters are not products of society in the way Nancy and the boys are. Nancy is a prostitute and a criminal, forced into crime because she is poor and she is also a victim of Sikes' brutality.

Firstly, Nancy is definately a product of her society. Nancy is one of the underclass and was a child of the streets. She then became a prostetute and part of a criminal gang. She is a product of the larger society and the smaller society of the criminal world as she is encouraged to make money for Sikes and for the gang she works for. Prostetution was immoral if not illegal when the book was written. Nancy is part of the criminal gang which lives by robbery. However, Nancy is a mainly a victim of society or her criminal society because Bill kills her in a terrible and bloody way because she tries to save Oliver and become a better person. She is the only developed female criminal and she is clearly a victim of the men in Fagin's gang and a product of two uncaring societies. There does not seem to be anyone who can help her which makes her a victim.

Oliver would be a good example to use to support the quotation. He is a criminal in a way because he is in Fagin's gang and he is with the gang when they break into a house.

He is a product of society because society does not take proper care of orphans. Because he is abused by society he runs away and ends up in Fagin's gang. But he is really an innocent character. He is pushed through a window to help because he is small. Because he is forced to help he can be seen as a victim. He could also be a victim when he is at the workhouse and when he is an apprentice to

the coffin makers because he is badly treated and because he does not get enough food. He is a victim especially as he hates the work he has to do. This is why he runs away and is lured into Fagin's den. It could be said that Oliver is really a victim of society rather than a product because of the way he is treated by authority. He committs the terrible offence by the workhouse standards of asking for more food in the workhouse and is punished for it. However at the end of the novel Dickens rewards him for his goodness by giving him a good home with Mr Brownlow.

Bill Sikes and Fagin are the worst criminals as they are cruel and horrible. Sikes is a murderer. He attacks Nancy when he is in a temper and in his rage he kills her. He is also violent to his dog. Dickens makes Sikes speak in an aggressive way to show how truly nasty he is. If a boy were to 'peach' on him he says 'I'll grind his skull'. It is hard to see that he is a product of his society as he just seems to be evil and chooses to live the life he does. He clearly does not want to work honestly in the way that society expects.

Fagin is a gang leader and he makes children work for him stealing – especially pick-pocketing and he takes all the profits. Today his crimes would also include child abuse. He is physically and mentally cruel to the boys. He doesn't care for them and his only worry is that if they are caught they might tell the police about him. He does not seem to be a product of society as he seems to be in control of his own society of the gang. At the end of the novel both Sikes and Fagin are punished for their crimes. Sikes is chased by a crowd as he tries to escape and he falls and hangs himself. Fagin is put in prison and then hanged. This is a typical ending when the bad people get punished.

Overall, there are lots of criminals in the novel and sometimes they are products of society, but Oliver is really a victim of an uncaring society but I feel most sorry for Nancy.

### Examiner commentary

There are some points about criminals and their potentially being products of society here and the candidate focuses on the question in a fairly simple way. There is some attempt to argue that criminals are more victims or beneficiaries of society than products. However, most of the writing is of a generalised nature. There are few specific details and only one quotation. The candidate does not use the open book to support ideas.

**AO1** There is a simple understanding of criminal, moral and social contexts. There is also some limited sense of the nature of society when the novel was written and how readers might respond from a modern contextual position.

In engaging with 'criminals' and the causes of criminality the candidate is connecting with elements of the wider genre. This is done only; there is little direct comment on genre features implicitly.

The candidate is able to construct some argument for and against the proposition, and some general points are offered within the debate. A simple personal view is offered at the end.

**AO2** There is a little awareness that Dickens has constructed the text to shape meanings and there is a simple and generalized grasp of authorial methods. The candidate makes some structural points about the ending of the novel in relation to the task and there is a comment on Sikes' language.

**AO3** There is some evidence of ordering the ideas at a simple level: separate paragraphs are used for the discussion of different characters. The writing is clear and generally accurate, but there is only a generalised use of critical concepts.

**This response matches the Band 2 descriptors.**

### Sample Band 3 student response:

In some ways the criminals in the novel could be seen as products of society especially the likes of Nancy who is murdered and Fagin who is hanged. On the other hand, some people might argue that they are not products because they choose this life for themselves and many of them do really terrible things

like Sikes who kills Nancy and Fagin who uses the boys. In this essay, I am going to look at both points of view.

Firstly, it could be argued that Nancy is a victim, and therefore a product of her society, as like a lot of individuals who live at the bottom rung of society, the only way in which she is able to survive is by turning to criminal or immoral activity - in her case prostitution and involvement with more hardened criminals such as Sikes and Fagin. However, even though she is a criminal, Dickens presents her in a sympathetic way. It seems that she genuinely loves Sikes and when he is ill, she nurses him showing a caring and motherly side to her character despite the way he treats her. Nancy is the one who confesses that she took Oliver away from Mr Brownlow and the truth about Monks so that the truth about his parentage and real character can be revealed. Therefore it seems that Nancy is essentially a moral character whose social circumstances have forced her into the criminal world. She does not seem to be actively making a choice to be a criminal. Society does not offer her any alternative way to live. Also, her murder makes her seem like a victim. Dickens portrays this in a really violent way as we are told she was 'nearly blinded with blood'. Sikes' attack on Nancy, which is partly caused by the way she has interfered with his plans, seems savage and terrible and therefore despite the fact she is a criminal, we see her as a product of the world she lives in and we sympathise with her.

Likewise, some people might see the boys who work for Fagin as victims of society even though they are criminals. The alternative life is one where they are starved and beaten as we see at the beginning of the novel through Dickens' presentation of Mrs Mann's baby farm and the suffering of Dick and also how society treats people in the workhouse. This is a life that even the moral Oliver cannot stand and tries to escape from. Society does not care for such impoverished and orphaned children. Their only way of surviving is therefore to steal in order to have enough food to live. Therefore the boys are products of their cruel 19th century world. Oliver is persuaded to go with Fagin at first because he offers him a bed and shelter something that society has failed to provide him with despite the fact today we would consider this a really basic thing. In fact, the life the boys have with Fagin, who is even described as a 'pleasant old gentleman' is seen as a great improvement on the conditions in the workhouse as he gives them clothes and food and does look after them in a way. He could almost be seen as an alternative mentor and father figure taking the place of a society that has failed them. He provides an alternative society though it could be said that the boys become products of that and they seem happier in that world. In films, for example, the Artful Dodger is often presented as a humorous and fun loving character who the reader really likes. Moreover, these boys are really harshly punished by society. In today's society, if you are a young boy under the age of 16 and commit some kind of crime you get sent to a detention centre or looked after in some way, but these boys are punished severely and even sent to the 'gallows' for simply stealing a handkerchief or pocket watch and no one seems to care. This makes them victims of society as well as products because they are forced into this life, punished too harshly and no one cares about them.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see characters like Bill Sikes as products or victims of society. He seems like a savage psychopath who is willing to stoop to any level for self gain. You could argue that he chooses the life of a criminal because he is greedy and even enjoys the violence of the criminal life. He has no moral conscience and even abandons Oliver, our innocent main character, after the attempted burglary leaving him to potentially face arrest and death despite the fact he is only a child. Moreover, when Sikes dies at his own hands we feel no sympathy for him. His treatment of others, the way he is a violent threat and his murder of Nancy all make it difficult to see this criminal as a product or victim at all.

Finally, it could be argued that Fagin is not a victim or product of society either. He has ample money that he keeps hidden and so he could choose another life. However, like a lot of the criminals in the book he chooses a life of crime rather than working hard like the Sowerberrys and Dickens is condemning people like him. Moreover, Dickens presents him as really unpleasant because of the way he treats the boys.

For example, he doesn't care about the fact that Oliver has been arrested or the fact he might of found a better life with Mr Brownlow, he is only worried about the fact he might of 'peached'. He even seems to be prepared to kill Oliver to stop him informing on them. This is really threatening and conveys the fact that he is happy to hurt the boys who work for him if it serves himself.

Overall, whilst some of the criminals are products of society and I do think that Dickens might be criticising justice and the fact it doesn't work and isn't very fair and blames society for lots of bad things happening, he doesn't present all criminals as products of society. A lot of the criminals are villains and so I don't agree with the statement.

### **Examiner commentary**

This is a straightforward response and the candidate makes relevant points in a clear way.

**AO1** There is some engagement with social and legal contexts and there is valid discussion of how society treats children. There is also an awareness of how a modern society would treat young criminals as opposed to the Victorian system. However, there is a lack of specific detail from the text.

There is straight forward understanding of the crime writing genre with relevant comments about what makes individuals become criminal and there are some specific examples of criminal activity. The candidate also focuses on the nature of victims of crime although the ideas lack development and detailed textual reference.

A relevant debate is offered here although the latter section is less developed than the first. However, the response remains focused on the task and there are straight forward points made both for and against the statement although the final argument is not really clinched. The candidate is able to offer some range of general reference in support of the argument.

**AO2** The candidate has some sense of the author's shaping of meanings but there is more on Dickens' intentions than the methods themselves. A little is said about how Dickens presents characters, especially in relation to Nancy, but the ideas are often not detailed. There is a little discussion of how Dickens structures his novel in relation to whether or not his characters are products of their society. There is some use of textual support in the paragraph on Nancy.

**AO3** The response is structured and ideas are sensibly ordered; the argument is generally relevant, but uneven. The candidate uses terminology in an appropriate way. The writing is clearly expressed and mainly accurate although there are some awkward phrases and there is some imprecision.

**This response is consistent with the Band 3 descriptors.**

# UNIT 4B LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

## NEA: EXEMPLAR STUDENT RESPONSE AND COMMENTARY

The non-exam assessment requires students to write about one poetry text and one prose text in separate responses. The number of poems that constitute a full text should be equivalent to those seen in units 2 and 3, and must be by a single author.

The exemplar student's response below is based on a study of Ben Jonson's *The Forest*, a collection of fifteen poems, including *Why I Write not of Love* and *Song to Celia*.

Please note that this is a response to a task with slightly different requirements. It demonstrates the style and format we would encourage from an A-level submission and outlines the standard with the examiner commentary that follows. Further exemplary materials will be provided in autumn 2016 alongside a set of standardising material.

### Exemplar task:

'In the country house poem Jonson's voice is constrained to abject flattery of his patron.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

### Student response to task:

In 'To Penshurst', Ben Jonson pays tribute to the country house of the same name and in particular the hospitality and generosity of its owner Robert Sidney, Jonson's patron. The panegyric nature of this poem is clear from its title, which puts the reader in mind of a toast or dedication, but what is also apparent is that there is more to the poem than mere sycophancy. What Jonson presents is less a fawning tribute, and more an impassioned defence of his patron: Robert C. Evans contends that 'the poem's purpose [is] comparative and argumentative'. Ultimately, it is Jonson's self-advancement that is to the fore: he praises and defends Sidney both to earn favour and to prove his worth to him but is critical where he feels it is in his interests to be so and at times simply to maintain his artistic integrity. All the while, he conceals his true purpose using a smokescreen of self-deprecation. Thus Jonson's argument reflects his conflicted position; a Marxist critic would see him both defending the elite and the status quo from the threat of the 'nouveau riche' and through more subtle criticisms and satire – promoting the cause of the peasantry with whom he could empathise. Nevertheless it is this defence of Penshurst from the 'nouveau riche' that features most explicitly at the beginning of the poem.

Jonson states that Penshurst is not 'built to envious show', with the obvious implication being that other estates are. The meaning of 'envious' is ambiguous: it could insinuate that these houses elicit envy, or, alternatively, that they betray the envy their owners feel towards other estates. The latter interpretation allows Jonson to assert Penshurst's moral superiority; envy is after all one of the seven deadly sins. It could be argued that by claiming the moral high-ground, Jonson unconsciously betrays the weakness of the position he argues from; he does so precisely because it is the only option open to him. Though he does flatter Penshurst, Jonson takes great pains to list all the things it lacks, such as 'marble...a row/ Of polished pillars...a roof of gold...or stair, or courts'. By highlighting Penshurst's apparent deficiencies, he draws unwanted attention to the monetary troubles that were a source of great concern to the Sidney family; it seems a tacit admission of Penshurst's material inferiority. However, Jonson makes obvious his disdain for such things, as he suggests that any superiority they afford their

estates is purely superficial: it is difficult to imagine, for instance, that a 'roof of gold' has any practical uses beyond vulgar ostentation. Thus, whilst Jonson may subtly play on the patron's insecurities, and in doing so reassert his independence from his patron, he nonetheless defends Penshurst by turning these perceived shortcomings into virtues.

Jonson lauds the fact that Penshurst – built in 1341 – is 'an ancient pile' to be 'reverenced', emphasising the superior age of the building, and affirming the Sidney family's great status and lineage. As 'reverence' is a word most often used within the context of religious veneration, he seems to assert that Penshurst's inhabitants regard the 'pile' – the physical structure itself – with the same mixture of respect and awe they would God. Jonson therefore appears to be trumpeting the unquestioning (submissiveness of Penshurst's inhabitants just as much as he praises the house itself. This is just one way in which Jonson portrays Penshurst's rigidly hierarchical environment as a positive quality; its inhabitants know and accept their place within his structure. Jonson endorses the idea that the status quo is inherently worthy of preservation – regarding Penshurst as superior purely because it is 'ancient' – and abhors the notion that anybody outside of this elite should be 'ambitious' enough to seek to join or surpass it. Thus, it could be argued that he is perpetuating this 'bourgeois' elite.

Penshurst is made to sound idyllic through the apparent ease of the lifestyle Jonson describes. It would seem that no effort is required on the part of Penshurst's inhabitants: when they fish for food, 'Fat ages carps /...run into [their] net[s]', and 'Bright eels...leap on land/ Before the fisher, or into his hand.' Not only does Jonson make the submissiveness of these animals clear, but his language depicts them actively seeking to assist Penshurst's human residents. The carps 'run' into the net, suggesting haste and enthusiasm, whilst the 'painted partridge' is 'willing to be killed', depicting it as having a notion of a greater good to which it must contribute. However, whilst this makes Penshurst sound idyllic enough to create the reverential tone expected of Jonson, these ostensibly flattering remarks nonetheless carry veiled criticisms. His description of the eels 'leap[ing] Into [the fisher's] hand', for instance, is purposely hyperbolic and implies that no effort is required on the fisher's part for the completion of this process. Thus Jonson is satirising the idea that country life is simple and undemanding, an idea that fails to give credit to those that must toil to sustain the lifestyle enjoyed by the Sidney family.

Jonson pursues this line of criticism in more explicitly satirical terms at other points in the poem, whilst never failing to uphold the facade of flattery. The presence of this satirical undercurrent is most obvious when Jonson shifts to crediting the nebulous and even non-existent for creating this pastoral idyll. Though he appears simply to be following the Classical tradition of poets such as Horace and Martial – from whom the country house poem derives – in depicting the total compliance of the natural order, he does in fact manipulate it for his own satirical ends. Jonson writes that the 'copse...named of Gamage...never fails to serve...seasoned deer', his language giving the 'copse' an agency it cannot possess, when in fact it is those who hunted the deer whose contribution merits acknowledgement. In contrast with Jonson's staunch defence of Penshurst's 'ruling elite' earlier on, here an alternative critical reading would see him siding with its peasantry, criticising those who are wont to efface labour from the rural landscape. Perhaps Jonson, who himself worked to create a product for the Sidney family in the form of his poetry, could empathise with their plight, and so sought to highlight the effort he had expended in defence of his patron.

Further evidence of Jonson's subtle criticisms of Penshurst lies in his use of rhyming couplets. Where the couplets are closed, as they mostly are, they lend the poem a neat and ordered air, reflecting the harmonious society that is Jonson's Penshurst. However, Jonson's couplets also imply that this harmony is only superficial: his placement of open couplets draws attention to the incongruities in the narrative

voice. Jonson's speaker describes how, at the feast, 'some that think they make/ The better cheeses bring them', the enjambment created by the open couplet standing out as breaking the metre. These lines contain one obvious peculiarity: the reader wonders why it is the peasants who bring food to the Sidney family when they already have a surfeit. In another open couplet, the speaker wonders what these contributions can 'Add to thy free provisions, far above/ The need of such?' The answer hinted at superficially is that they are tokens of gratitude, through which the peasants 'express their love'. However, Jonson's choice of language indicates that he appreciates the inherent condescension of such a view: they 'think' that they make the 'better cheeses', though they may not. By suggesting a discrepancy between belief and reality, Jonson betrays that even in this supposed pastoral idyll, the peasantry are merely well-intentioned incompetents. Thus Jonson accomplishes the dual feat of subtly criticising the aforementioned practice and satirising the unflattering archetype of the peasant, all whilst appearing to laud the 'liberal board' and 'hospitality' of the Sidney family.

Whilst this could be seen as promoting the interests of the peasantry, highlighting the way in which they are simultaneously exploited and derided by the ruling classes; Jonson's intent may again be of a far more personal nature. Jonson can identify with the peasants, and is himself presenting a gift to his patron in the form of this poem. He may feel his gift is underappreciated, and so is gently nudging Sidney into rewarding him more handsomely. His ending comment, 'Now, Penshurst, they that will proportion thee/ With other edifices...' can be seen in a similar light. The 'Now' he refers to is the present in which the reader has been won over by his compelling defence of Penshurst, and so it stresses the poem's own importance in altering false perceptions. In this way it places pressure on Sidney to appreciate Jonson's efforts on his behalf. As throughout the poem, any aspects of abject flattery, or indeed social critique, are mere by-products of this driving purpose of self-advancement.

Word Count: 1482 words

## Bibliography

R. C. Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage* (1989)

## Examiner commentary

**AO1** From the opening paragraph, the candidate engages fully with the debate set up in the task. There is some sustained reference to contexts of reception, as shown in the candidate's exploration of the relationship between Jonson and his patron. One of the strengths of the piece is the perceptive analysis of the different possible interpretations of that emerge from a close reading of the poem. The candidate offers an extended and impressive evaluation of the complex position of the poet in relation to Robert Sidney.

**AO2** There is some sophisticated treatment of genre here, and the implications of the form that Jonson uses. The candidate teases out some possible meanings of selected words and phrases from the poem (such as 'envious' and 'reverenced'). There is full and clear understanding of structural features of the poem. This is a very 'literary' response. The candidate offers a sustained engagement with the ways that meanings are shaped by the methods Jonson uses.

**AO3** The argument is coherent and well developed, with effective use of discourse markers throughout. Expression is fluent and confident; critical terminology is appropriately used, for instance in references to what the candidate sees as the nature of the poem. Ideas are debated in depth. The essay continues to have focus, relevance and direction. It comes to a firm and assured conclusion.

**This is confident and independent writing; it represents achievement at the top of Band 5.**





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