

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Average mark 6.3/Available marks 10

The following report, including its samples of student work, is designed to assist teachers and students and to offer some guidance about approaches to the study and preparation for the examination. Space does not permit sample work from all the set texts nor would it be appropriate. Student work is reproduced not to offer opportunities for plagiarism but for use in thoughtful class discussion of strategies and in the analysis and criticism of individual students' writing and approaches to the examination.

One of the perennial issues for students and teachers is the great freedom which the examination rubric offers: 'Use one or more of the passages selected as the basis for a discussion of ...' One of the challenges this freedom presents is the question of how to get started. Teachers and students who have appropriately consulted the past few years' Chief Assessor reports will have found some comments on this issue as well as samples of students work which present a variety of approaches to beginning an examination response. In 2000, for instance, one of the most successful responses begins quite directly: 'In passage one ...' In 2001, a student writing on *Antony and Cleopatra*, began the discussion with some comments on the end of the play (not a set passage) and then intelligently and appropriately related these opening comments to the set passages. Ways of getting started on a response are many but the most popular and comfortable for students seems to be a general comment on the text. Consider this opening paragraph of a response from this year on *Pride and Prejudice*:

Austen spares no-one in her novel – essentially a comedy – from her ironic eye. The society she depicts is a small one but it acts as a microcosm for a larger one; the landed and lower gentry, the clergy, the military, the titled are all there and Austen satirises the modes of thought and behaviour of all. It is a light and extremely witty piece – a romance perhaps, a story of maturation even, but foremost a comedy.

This is an example of a firm, sensible beginning to an examination response. It is open to the possibilities of interpretation (consider the final sentence of the paragraph), alert to questions of style and to the central concerns of the text without being blandly assertive or narrow in focus. Having framed the response in this way, the student is then able to quite naturally examine the selected passages – and to explore the subtle and complex workings of the novel through them.

One of the strengths of this beginning is that it leaves itself open to the kinds of responses and interpretations invited by the selected passages. Some students offer such narrow opening remarks that they close themselves off from the opportunities presented by the passages. Many, too, resort to inaccurate or vague generalisation and offer little sense of having arrived at any particular view of the text. Here, the student is quite precise – not saying, as many did, that the novel satirised 'upper-class' society, but pin-pointing levels within that society from the small and landed gentry through to the clergy, the military and the titled. Equally, whilst the student allows for various broad interpretations she/he is committed to the idea that the novel is essentially a comedy, something insisted upon both in the opening and closing sentences of the paragraph. It is a line of interpretation sustained throughout the response beginning with remarks about Austen's gentle mockery of Sir William Lucas through to comments about a sharper satirical mode being employed when dealing with the likes of Mr Collins and Lady Catherine De Bourgh.

Finally, this student makes the reader believe that she/he understands the context of the novel (without offering up a short history of the period). It is dismaying to find – in spite of the study design's references to the importance of context – that a large number of students write with so little understanding of social or historical context. Jane Austen did not write in the seventeenth century nor was she a Victorian novelist. Mark Twain did not write in the 1930s. Students should be wary of such gross historical inaccuracies.

As a counter-balance to the points of concern listed above, it is also important to say, that as in former years, a considerable number of students managed to demonstrate the examination criteria in excellent fashion. The following answer on Blake's poetry, quoted here almost in full, is remarkable for its inwardness with the verse and a probing thoughtfulness and grasp of the poems, not just those on the examination paper but of others set for study. This student is working at a very high level indeed and is able to conceptualise the poet's work from what is obviously a considerable experience of close reading.

Explaining the abuses of the "wise guardians" and the church is not what compels Blake in Holy Thursday – he is enchanted by the charity children and amazed that the guardians are, at least initially, unmoved by them. The children "flow" even though they walk "two & two" and have "innocent faces clean" (not clean, innocent faces). These deliberate ironies suggest that the regimentation of this day can do little to affect or enhance the natural vibrancy of the children. The use of "&" between each colour invites us to view each colour separately and both the sheer spectacle of the day and its contrived nature becomes apparent. The children's transformation into clean, colourful beings is a false novelty yet it is the excitement of these "flowers" which overshadows the guardians' superficial attempts to put on a show for the day.

The true beauty of these children lies in their innocence, their lack of complacency; it's as if they have looked forward to this day and have the capacity to simply enjoy what now surrounds them. Innocence is depicted by Blake as a time of naivety,

ignorance of the faults of adults and an acceptance of suffering in this life. Tom Dacre, in *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Innocence*, for example, is “happy and warm” after being told by an Angel in his dream that “If he be a good boy, he’d have God for his father and never want joy.”

Blake’s own awe at this Holy Thursday occasion is caught in the exclamatory tones of the second stanza. Both clothing and song are recurring symbols throughout his poetry; song as a revelation of one’s spiritual health and clothing often as an indication of the environment which adults have created around children. Unlike the “little black thing” crying “weep, weep” in the snow from *The Chimney Sweeper (Experience)*, here the children have a wonderful energy and spontaneity. The structure works through a series of oppositions: they are “seated” yet they “sit”, they are in “companies” yet they have a “radiancy all their own” and whilst like any crowd they are a “multitude” they are “lambs”.

The natural power of these children grows into what Blake likens to a storm, a potent phenomenon. The juxtaposition of the words “harmonious thunderings” shows not only their natural unity but also creates an ambiguousness between their upwards flowing energy and a communication from God in Heaven. Blake’s senses appear often to be assaulted in the manner they are here and as in *London* here there is a shift across the poem from largely visual to largely auditory sensations.

Blake does not appear to be intimidated by the power of the children but suggests that the “wise guardians” may well be in what is their first realisation of the purity before them and these children’s closeness to God. The guardians sit “below” the children physically and seemingly spiritually as well. As at the end of *The Chimney Sweeper (Innocence)* where Blake offers God’s admonition “And if all do their duty they need not fear harm”, here he does the same. The “then” and “lest” of the last line suggest he expects consequences if the notion of Christian Charity continues to be taken only in token. The moral in this children’s fable is inverted and is directed, not at children, but at adults.

A *Poison Tree* of all the poems in the collection stands out – it seems a singularly dark poem and is not framed by any moral voice. Nor does it seem, like *London* (a dark piece too, with its evocation of universal misery and despair) to come from Blake’s examination of the social and institutional ills of his time.

The poem explores the growth and consequence of anger (and all the perversity and furtiveness that go with it). The only positive, the only virtue suggested is in the opening reference to such a thing as friendship and openness of feeling “I was angry with my friend, / I told my wrath, my wrath did end.” The rest of the poem works like a litany of sins; the secretive and brooding malice of the speaker as he feeds his anger under the cloak of darkness “night and morning”, the perverse deceptiveness of the speaker as he uses light for his dark purposes “And I sunned it with smiles”, the speaker’s murderous glee “glad I see” and the suggestion that the foe is not guiltless – covetous of the speaker’s gleaming “apple bright” and furtive too, “stealing” into his garden.

What adds to the dark and disturbing nature of the poem is the suggestion (through the simple rhyming, the largely monosyllabic language, the excited rhetorical patterning and the self-absorbed use of “I...my”) is that the speaker is not an adult but a child. Even the thinking is simplistic and the logic equation-like; the foe has been identified and now the speaker won’t talk to him. It sets up the inevitability of what is to follow.

Nowhere else in *Songs of Experience* is the speaker so disturbed. The schoolboy has been corrupted by experience and his tones are peevish, but the poem offers up causes for him to be so. Similarly, the chimney sweeper laments lost innocence, lost joy – but has cause, it is to do with his parents who are “Gone up to Church to worship our God and his Priest & King, / Who make up a Heaven of our misery”. Here, however, the dark passion seems rootless. It simply exists.

The symbol of the Lamb is a recurring one in Blake’s poetry as a representation of the purest innocence created by God. In *Holy Thursday* it is used as a deliberate counter to the sacrificial lamb as it is the children who experience a kind of apotheosis. When used in comparison to the tiger it conveys the feeling that all life and all creatures are remarkable.

In *The Tyger* the incantatory tone and the reference to “distant deeps or skies” create a felt gulf of time and spirit between Blake and the Creation he speaks of. In the first stanza the strong stresses and the aggressive rhythms become chant-like – taking us back to a primeval time. The tiger has a “fearful symmetry”, the phrase suggesting both a deadly perfection and the beholder’s feelings of awe and dread. The contrast between the “dark forests of the night” and the fiery eyes of this creature create a startling image of the hypnotic intensity of its mind and soul.

Blake’s awe is soon turned towards the nature of the Creator himself and, as in *And did those feet..* he is humble in his attempts to depict the power God, picturing his “hand or eye”, an image which describes God as both craftsman and visionary. In the third stanza there is an incredible physicality in the “shoulder”, “twist”, “hammer”, “furnace” and “chain” and Blake wonders who could “frame” the tiger – who could construct and yet contain such a creature? In the fourth stanza

the pace of the poem comes to a climax and as it does so creator and created almost become one in Blake's mind in the question "What dread hand, and what dread feet?"

The reference to the "sinews" of the tiger's heart has connotations of brute muscularity and strength but the emphasised word "brain" suggests that Blake sees something else there – a sinister intellect. He is not rhetorical in his question "Did he smile his work to see?" and the substitution of the word "dare" for "could" in the last stanza reveals that he did think that this creature was designedly made. For most of the poem God is imagined as "fearful", the imagery focussing on his might, the language moving from "deadly terrors" to "dread" and "dare". But the presence of the "Lamb" is a reminder that God is essentially merciful ...

Whilst not every student might be able to manage this level of work, there is nevertheless no reason why any student should not be able to present at least a plausible reading of chosen texts. Too many students show evidence of having (by the time of the examination) only arrived at the stage of what amounts to the mere observation of details in texts and are unable to give a reading.

This year, in particular, some answers indicated that texts were to be seen as grab bags of devices, divorced from meaning. Responses to Sylvia Plath's poetry stood out in this regard. Comments on alliteration abounded – with no sense of how, on occasions, alliteration might contribute to meaning. Even some well-prepared answers were without contact with the tone, emotion and texture of the set text so that in the case of Plath, for instance, assessors were presented with wildly improbable readings. Of 'Wintering' one student wrote: 'The voice in the poem has left herself locked in the cellar waiting for winter to pass.' Some students who attempted a reading did so with extraneous and poorly grasped biographical detail. The jars of honey in 'Wintering' (which do have a significance in the poem, seeming to suggest ideas about just keeping going, living off your stores, your reserves and holding on) took on Freddie Kruger-like features. The ubiquitous Ted Hughes (last year seen as the black rook – Ted in tuxedo perched in a tree) was in the jars, Ted's eyes 'jealous like a cat's' looked out at Sylvia. Even more gruesome were the responses which claimed that six foetuses of Plath's six abortions were in the jars; not plausible, and indicative of a preparation which had not adequately sought to find authentic meaning in a text.

Learning to conceptualise, to explore the relationship between language and ideas, between language and meaning is critical in the Literature study. One of those aspects of language which students need to have a firm grasp of is metaphor – the concept of it and the way it may work in a particular text. A student who had grasped such a concept could not possibly have moved from the vague connection of 'midwife's extractor' (Plath characterising the centrifugal extraction of the honey) to such absurdities as jars full of foetuses. Understanding metaphor does not depend on dispensing with logic – quite the contrary. It is the ability to stand back a bit, think and analyse carefully and conceptualise what is being read which marks out the better students. This is true for all the genres and forms of literature set on the examination.

As a further illustration of the points raised above and to conclude, consider this student's opening paragraph on the first set passage of *A Fringe of Leaves*. Here is a fine example of a student reading detail closely and at the same time moving beyond this to place significance and meaning and give a plausible reading. It also, of course, strongly meets the major examination criteria.

In Ellen's confrontation with the drunk man we see the contrast between her life as a genteel lady and the danger lurking beyond her "speckless doll's house". The "crabbed bushes", "labyrinth of gorse" and "rambling" path create a disorder antithetical to the safety and indeed predictability of the "aligned houses" and "orderly streets". The courage and curiosity so implicit in Ellen's actions ("she wondered; she had abandoned; she stumbled farther") are used to characterise Ellen's desire to escape, albeit temporarily, the perceived comforts of sewing or enjoying a book by the fire. Indeed, this description works to remind us of her husband, Austin's, stolid dedication to Virgil, but also to highlight Ellen's culturally prescribed role in Victorian society.