

JC2 LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

CA3 REVIEW (2011 'A' Level Poetry Comparison)

I chose these two pairs of poems partly to attune you to 'choosing the **RIGHT QUESTION**'.

- Option (a) is far more abstract and the prompt, 'the sense of mystery' is not exactly a concrete theme. You need to infer from key lines in the poems to understand what they are about – the mysterious 'feelings' that 'stir' us and 'tug' at us.
- The poems in option (b) may be longer and the language slightly more daunting, but I think they are 'easier' in the sense that you have stark imagery to analyse. Their purpose is also clearer. Both pay tribute to the endurance of their respective figures. It is also relevant to the Paper 3 theme: both are about marginalised individuals who have suffered through war **and manual labour**.

They present vital **CONCERNS** you had yet to attempt and must learn to be comfortable with.

- Option (a) is philosophical or abstract in nature, one from the Romantic poets (note date) and one more contemporary poet. See also the 'value of a life' in 2012 and 'abandoned rooms' in 2010.
- Option (b) is more 'personal' in the sense that the poems are tributes to specific 'characters'. See also 'a woman contemplating motherhood' in 2012 and the 'parent' poems in 2008.
- For the record, we have explored poems with social commentary (Money / Wages), on emotions (Long Distance / One Art), the past (Piano / Those Winter Sundays), mortality (Winter Palace / Beautiful Old Age), life experience (Travel / Solitary Travel), outlook and lifestyle (Swineherd / Lying in a Hammock) and relationships (Slice of Wedding Cake / Marriage I Think). Quite a range eh! **Your MYE poems will be based on one of these broad themes.**

Whatever the case, I was hoping to **DIFFERENTIATE** between those who earnestly sought to ANALYSE as much as possible as closely as possible and those content to 'take it easy'.

- A number of traditional 'top performers' have clearly LAGGED and tried to bluff their way through this assignment to their own detriment, scoring 20-25. These students clearly attempted the task without reference to anything: the analysis guide in *Movement*, no essays whatsoever, nothing. They probably wrote 'whatever came' and never really tried to fix what they were not sure about. (Note my quite deliberate use of 'they' before you read the next line).
- At the same time, I'm heartened by the number of you who have clearly put my suggestions into practice and are REAPING THE BENEFITS. You would have improved 2 to 10 marks more. You used some of the guiding questions to your benefit. You were meticulous and looked at opening lines, closing lines, progression, the title and a list of features and always tried to look at the poem's effects and purpose.
- Students who attempted (a) were understandably uncertain about 'the sense of mystery' as a point of comparison. Nevertheless, those who paid attention to EFFECTS, with particular attention paid to the personae's TONE and ATTITUDE towards the 'mystery', were successful.
- Surprisingly, some students who attempted the more accessible 'endurance' option actually ignored the 'endurance' that the serf and peasant are portrayed as having and proceeded to describe their respective 'lives'. There was a lot to write about TONE and IMAGERY here. There were many scripts that devoted one and a half pages to comparing these two methods.
- Cambridge's Examiner Report stresses the importance of evaluating CLOSING LINES, which in all four poems, express their respective 'attitude', purpose and effects.
- There was improvement across the board, especially in terms of COMPARISON. I found some paragraphs that strangely inserted 'new' analysis whilst comparing. Use the first half of your paragraph to examine one poem. When analysing and comparing the second poem, simply *refer back to your analysis of the first*. Don't analyse new evidence from the first poem!

I also observed a significant number of 'outright MISTAKES', more evident for 1(b) than for 1(a).

- A minority of students are still not **COMPARING** enough. I see 'On the other hand' and the clause that follows just tells me that the form is different or that the images used are different. For the last time, don't take the easy way out and tell me the obvious! **COMPARE EFFECTS** (e.g. gloomier, more emphatic) and **IDEAS / PURPOSE** (e.g. Poem B presents this mysterious, 'restless' force as a source of wonderment, whereas Poem A **almost mourns our inability to understand it**)
- **MISREADING** was more common than before. Half the answers on 1(b) seemed to construe the serf as a Guy Fawkes-type **ANARCHIST** waiting to smash, destroy, blow up 'palaces, and thrones, and towers'. While I accepted this reading, I frowned upon those who wrote extensively on this. Such a reading doesn't 'fit' the whole poem. The preceding line demarcates his role as one 'nearest to the naked earth', ploughing, tilling the land near these scenes of royalty and power. He is one with nature but also credited with the achievements of Man, which would explain the use of enumeration in 'palaces, and thrones and towers'. It's kind of hard to recognise the suffering, patient, persevering serf when he is a terrorist in the final line. Be careful not to misread; if you're unsure, please be tentative: use words and phrases like, 'seems to', 'appears', 'one might say', 'it is as if'.
- There was also several **LITERAL** responses from unlikely candidates! Some decided to turn half the essay into one on **BLACK SLAVERY IN AMERICA** or something equally bizarre. Some decided to look at how bitter the serf feels (hello, he is not the speaker). Can one not answer the question on **ENDURANCE**? Focusing on 'information' will provide less room for comparison than **ABSTRACT IDEAS** (i.e. endurance) and **EFFECTS**. Being Paper 1 unseen, one is not expected to know the specific context! The poems are going to be general.
- Many chose to analyse **FORM** for symbolic meaning. Cue generic, rubbish analysis in the vein of 'oh the structure is very orderly so this is like the serf's life lor very orderly what' or (note the use of horrid Singlish for emphasis). Read the suggested answers and consider the **EFFECTS** of form instead, particularly rhythm and rhyme. Does any feature pertaining to form (e.g. structure) present finality, grandiosity, joviality, acquiescence, resignation, indifference? Go for effects first, then you can link these effects to the purpose of the poem (e.g. the grieving effect of the plodding rhythm in Poem A hints at how our search for self-knowledge is futile).
- Some students steadfastly refuse to listen to advice and build paragraphs on 'small', untenable methods like conjunctions, repetition, sounds et al when they can be weaved into **LANGUAGE, STYLE and FORM**. Do this again (at the Mid-Year), and it's name and shame time!

So what's next? What can and should you in the short run-up to the Mid-Year Exam?

- As obvious as it sounds, look at my feedback and be aware of the improvements you have to make. Some common areas include: (i) lack of comparison of effects and ideas; (ii) lack of close analysis / elaboration; (iii) poor organisation / confusing mix of methods; (iv) very superficial analysis.
- Read the following set of 'method breakdowns' so that you are more aware of what you can analyse and make meaning of. I will be asking you to write a new essay on the question you did not attempt in WEEK 7.
- Read the **SAMPLE ESSAYS** I've uploaded on the facebook group and livreordie. See where they've succeeded. You may have the exact same evidence and even the same analysis, but *close analysis, elaboration and close comparison* (i.e. linking back to the previous poem more than once in a paragraph) may not be there. Of course, **these** are not without their own areas for improvement, so you can learn from my comments on your friends' responses too!

THE BURIED LIFE / THE THREAD

OVERALL

The poems mostly differ in their 'intensity of attitudes' towards the unknown. Poem A expresses an intense yearning to understand 'the **mystery of this heart** which beats' and our very existence in this world ('**Whence our lives come** and where they go'). On the other hand, B ponders 'gently', 'silently' about life's '**knot about my neck**, a bridle' before 'stirring' with 'wonder'.

Most successful comparisons covered one of two main concerns: (i) our preternatural impulses and '**nameless feelings**'; (ii) our sense of **self** / who we are. I personally find it easier to critically compare the ways in which they present the unknowable feelings that 'pull at us' and 'course on for ever unexpress'd'. Some students cleverly extrapolated Poem A's concerns into Poem B. The thread is in many ways life's 'thousand lines', symbolic of our 'buried life', our inner world, our true selves.

LANGUAGE

Employing the first-person collective 'we', Poem A is more reflective / introspective / pensive in tone and universal in scope. The anaphoric repetition of 'But often' and 'And we' elevate the speaker's consideration of our 'thirst' and 'longing into inquire'. The speaker is finally resigned, lamenting or rueing the unknowability of our 'buried life' ('But hardly have we... Hardly had skill').

Poem B develops a burning curiosity towards the mysterious thread and moves to a 'stirring of wonder' at its continual hold on the speaker. It begins unobtrusively and ambiguously ('Something is...'). The series of questions ('Was it... Was I...') reflect trepidation or tentativeness. The poem ends on either exhilaration or helplessness at being caught off guard ('when I thought'), depending on how you read 'makes me catch my breath when I feel / the tug of it'.

STYLE

Poem A can be considered romantic in style, with its abundance of powerful visceral images, the 'unspeakable desire', a 'longing to inquire', a 'restless force'. Allusions to Nature complement these abstractions, in one's 'thirst to spend our fire' and feelings that are characterised as 'So wild, so deep'.

As the title suggests, Poem B is based on the extended metaphor of the 'thread'. Each iteration of the metaphor should be analysed in detail, whether for its control over the persona, its symbolising our mortality ('knot', 'bridle') and the delicate yet binding nature of our unknown emotions ('net of threads, finer than cobwebs')

FORM

Poem A is composed largely in iambic pentameter (Arnold's a Victorian poet - always look at the dates given!), the use of anaphora and rhyme adding to the overall 'high-flown' style of the poem. A shift in tone can be seen from line 12 ('But deep enough, alas!'). The end-stopped lines enhance the sense of rumination / introspection, as do the pauses in lines 9, 14-16. The closing lines encapsulate the persona's regret ('nameless feelings.. course on for ever unexpressed') at the inevitably elusive nature of our 'buried life'.

Poem B is similarly compressed but its shorter lines, frequent enjambment and caesurae present a more irregular, more hurried reading that conveys the 'wonderment' and 'stirring' uncertainty in mood. The poem seems to end on a twist, re-emphasising the hold this mysterious force (of emotion) has over the persona.

THE SERF / A PEASANT

OVERALL

The two poems here offer a largely similar purpose — either a tribute to endurance or a call for the reader to appreciate the labour and endurance of the serf and peasant. They differ in effects, not so much opposing as of different intensity, with Poem B far more direct and rousing in its exhortation to ‘remember’ ‘your prototype’ and Poem A more subtle and reflective in its first-person perspective. The titles emblemise the poems’ messages. Both are simple and lend emphasis to, maybe even exalt, their respective roles as serf and peasant. The use of the definite article, ‘The’ in Poem A and the more general ‘A’ in Poem B are open to interpretation. Does A endorse endurance more emphatically than B? Which is more personal? Why does B present ‘a peasant’ with a name?

LANGUAGE

Most answers aptly focus most of their attention on tone. The tone in Poem A would appear fairly ambivalent up until line 5, where the reference to his heart being ‘more deeply... wound(ed)’ and the emphasis on his suffering ‘long by the rasping share of insult torn’, under the ‘war-cry’ begins to evoke *pathos*. The choice of words in lines 10-12 mark the tone as reverential—grave yet respectful—of the serf’s ‘slow progress’ and ‘timeless... patience’. Amidst the tedium of his ‘strides’, the poet chooses words that are distinctly ‘tributary’ in tone. The serf’s many actions are described, from the ‘furrow(ing)’ to ‘drives’, as ‘slow’ and ‘surlly’. The choice then of the alliterated and poly-syllabic ‘slow somnambulist’ enhances this sense of tedium.

By contrast, the beginning of Poem B seems nonchalant and dismissive through the reference to Iago Prytherch as ‘Just an ordinary man’ and the subsequent description of his ‘half-witted grin / Of satisfaction’. This apparent condescension is combined with a detachment in ‘So are his days spent’ and ‘There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind’. It is almost as if the speaker is judging the peasant on behalf of society, in contrast to the more neutral and grave tone in Poem A. There is then a shift in tone and perspective in line 17: the direct address to the reader (‘Yet this is your prototype’) is both impassioned (‘Remember him, then...’) and reverent (‘Enduring like a tree’, ‘winner of wars’), more so than in Poem A.

STYLE

The purpose of Poem A is arguably obvious from the opening line. The introduction of the serf by ‘His naked skin’ paints an image of vulnerability, tortured by the harsh, perilous circumstances of the ‘torrid mist’, the ‘red clod’ and the ‘fatal sheaves of corn’. The adjectives, particularly the reference to colour, and the sheerness of ‘clothed’ (he is scarred *entirely*) enhance the pain and suffering the serf endures under the burning hot, even deadly, sun. The pity we feel for the serf is evoked in equal measure by him being ‘nearest to the naked earth’, the poet at once stripping him of protection and unifying him with Mother Nature. The final line, an enumeration of the majestic and the mighty (images) captures the poet’s desire to ‘glorify’ his toil on the land as one just as deserving of recognition as ‘palaces, and thrones, and towers’.

The reader witnesses a similar intent at the end of Poem B, where the peasant is likened to a tree enduring timelessly ‘under the curious stars’. His undying endurance is portrayed through the brutal ‘siege of rain and the wind’s attrition’ that suggest the peasant’s ordeal beneath the elements. Like Poem A, the first half of Poem B reflects a testing, desolate environment of ‘bald Welsh hills’ under a ‘gaunt sky’ that explains the peasant’s pathetic state. The peasant is described through images of decay in his ‘green skin’ and ‘yellow bones’ and ‘crack(ed) cheeks’. These initially appear foul, as the ‘sour (clothes) with years of sweat’ seem presented to ‘shock’ and repulse the reader. This scorn is overturned with the subsequent tribute to his strength and courage is most evident in another military image, ‘an impregnable fortress’. These images, whilst no less symbolic than in Poem A, express a greater degree of awe than the muted admiration in Poem A.

FORM

The structure of Poem A is perhaps more cogent. Its 14-line rhymed stanza can be conceived as a sonnet, the rhyme imbuing lyricalness to the serf's labour—his 'hooves' and 'grooves'—and heightening the harshness of the 'plain' and 'rain'. The poem shifts from a third to first-person point of view: the persona first describes the serf's actions and 'torrid' circumstances and later conveys his personal reflections ('I see in...') on his endurance. This progression in tone and focus is signalled to the reader by the change in rhyme scheme from abababab to ccdede (as in a Petrarchan sonnet). We are cued then to recognise the serf's 'patient', 'rasping' labour as worthy of 'palaces, and thrones, and towers'.

We find a more emphatic progression in Poem B, from a sense of disdain towards the sympathy and reverence expressed lyrically in Poem A. The overall style and rhythm is more prosaic (i.e. like prose) and reflective in Poem B, with its pauses (notably in lines 1, 8, 21) and sometimes slow, extended lines (lines 14-15). The poem similarly moves from the peasant's labour to dwell on a more physical description of his appearance and him 'fixed in his chair / Motionless'; this shift arguably takes the reader through a greater 'epiphany' or realisation of their own attitudes towards peasants who are, as the speaker exhorts, 'our prototype'. The closing lines in B are evidently more poetic / metaphorical than A and so more reverential: the peasant's strength and perseverance are compared to a tree 'enduring... under the curious stars', as if to be universally and timelessly held as triumphant.