
Student responses with examiner commentary

A-level English Language and Literature
Paper 1: Telling Stories 7707/1 Section C

For teaching from September 2015

For assessment from June 2017

Introduction

This collection of resources gives examples of student responses to questions from our A-level English Language and Literature specimen materials, with accompanying examiner commentaries. The student responses are extracts from full answers that exemplify the kinds of approaches students ought to take and the analytical frameworks with which they should be familiar.

The responses in this resource relate to A-level Paper 1: Telling Stories, Section C (Poetic Voices). Please see the separate resources for examples of student responses, with accompanying examiner commentaries for A-level Paper 1 (Sections A and B) and A-level Paper 2.

Paper 1: Telling Stories (7707/1)

As detailed in the specification (4.1), the aim of the area of study examined in this paper is to allow students to learn how and why stories of different kinds are told, and why stories are 'telling', or valuable, within societies. Students will explore the ways in which writers and speakers present stories and learn how language choices help shape different representations of different worlds and perspectives. This part of the subject content requires students to apply their knowledge to narratives that construct different views of a particular place; prose fiction that constructs imaginary worlds and poetry that constructs a strong sense of personal perspective.

Section C: Poetic Voices

In Section C, students answer one question from a choice of eight (two questions for each poet). The questions direct students to refer to one given poem and to choose another (by the poet they have studied) that they should refer to when answering the question. This section of the paper covers the subject content concerned with the nature and function of poetic voice in the telling of events and the presentation of people.

Question 13:

Examine how Browning presents speakers' attitudes towards others in 'The Lost Leader' and **one** other poem of your choice.

Assessment objective(s) covered:

AO1 (15 marks)

AO2(10 marks)

Total marks available: 25

Student response

Both of Browning's speakers present strong views about the individuals in their poems. In 'The Lost Leader', the use of repeated syntax and phrases such as 'Just for...' and then loved him so, followed him, honoured him' project a voice that promotes a passionate and angry persona. The use of the possessive determiner in the noun phrase 'our pattern', followed by the string of literary influences highlights that the speaker feels let down by the actions of the subject of the poem (widely believed to be Wordsworth). In fact the pronoun system is used throughout to set up a string of oppositions: 'he' v 'we', 'us' and 'they' that present the 'him' as an object to be criticised and downgraded. In 'My Last Duchess', this sense of idea of objectification is shown through Browning's presentation of a particular point of view. The speaker focuses on the body using lexis 'glance', 'wrist', 'throat'. His focus on her physical characteristics dismisses her thoughts and emotions – instead she is seen as a beautiful object, captured in a portrait, for the speaker and his guest to possess. The focus on physical characteristics rather than her emotional ones is a repeated idea throughout the poem, foregrounding the physical representation of her emotions while ignoring the cause, and denying her any voice except through the filter of the Duke's point of view. The entire poem focuses on a painting of the Duchess, the ultimate representation of her physical beauty and is dismissive of her emotional needs.

The terms of address used by the Duke towards the guest can also be considered. His repetition of 'sir' can be read as a formal and respectful way of address. However, this is contrasted by his use of negation and modal verbs. He addresses his visitor: 'Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir'. The modal auxiliary verb 'will', shortened to 'we'll', along with the negative 'nay' removed the idea of choice and possibility, dictating actions in a way that contradicts with the polite 'sir'. This creates a sense of irony, suggesting that perhaps all the respectful forms of address on the poem should be read in a similar sarcastic tone.

In 'The Lost Leader', there is also the sense that Browning's speaker is reaching out to an assumed addressee who shares his viewpoint about the 'lost leader' and deserting a cause. His attitude in this instance is one of commitment to a shared vision using modal verbs 'We shall march prospering..' and 'Deeds will be done'. He also refers to a number of poets from the canon such as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, and Burns to strengthen his argument and present the 'lost leader' in a wholly negative light. Like the speaker of 'My Last Duchess' the poetic voice presents a strong personal opinion on a series of events and expects his addressees to share his passion, even if we feel that we don't really share the same sentiments.

Examiner Commentary

AO1

The student covers a range of detail here: the effects of syntax and phrase patterns, the determiner and pronoun system, specific lexical choices, terms of address, registers and modality. These are all explored with clear examples from the poems. There is the sense that the student has a secure knowledge of appropriate terminology and is able to use this in discussing her ideas.

AO2

There is a very conceptualised discussion of meaning in the poems. The student selects a focus (objectification) and explores it in detail – the use of ‘My Last Duchess’ as a second poem is a good one. She interprets key features by examining them within the context of voice in the poems eg the attitude of the narrating speakers, and the sense that Browning is shaping their voices for particular effects. There is a good sense developing of the subtleties and complexities in each poem, which are linked to the ways in which each voice projects a sense of identity and a distinctive persona: the disappointment at what the speaker of ‘The Lost Leader’ sees as the abandoning of a cause; and the tension between reality and representation in ‘My Last Duchess’ evident in the intense focus on the physical description of the Duchess and the obsession of the speaking voice.

Question 15:

Examine how Duffy presents speakers’ connections with places in ‘Never Go Back’ and **one** other poem of your choice.

Assessment objective(s) covered:

AO1 (15 marks)

AO2(10 marks)

Total marks available: 25

Student response

In Duffy’s poems ‘Never Go Back’ and ‘Beachcomber’ connections with places are very significant. Each poem focuses on a number of places, with the extensive use of the second person pronoun. ‘Never Go Back’ moves between the places that are emphasised to stress particular aspects of them – for example the sterile emptiness of the bar, and the house full of haunting memories, while ‘Beachcomber’ begins and ends with the present, real situation. In between this framed structure each poem uses changes in location to reflect the imaginations and psychology of the poetic voice.

In ‘Never Go Back’, Duffy utilises a range of temporal and spatial deixis. Phrases such as ‘in the bar’, ‘outside’ and ‘The house’ set up focuses for each of the stanzas of the poem. The spatial deictic term ‘here’ is used throughout the poem to emphasise the connection that the speaker has to a particular space. In stanza 3, the past and present are brought together in a moment of revelation: ‘You lived here only to stand here now and half-believe that you did’. Duffy draws extensively on the sound system - on rhyme ‘lies’/‘cries’ and on sibilance ‘suddenly’, ‘swarm’, ‘sting’ ‘disappear’ to foreground the rapid painful connection that is re-established in the house and the image of the ‘window’ post-modified with ‘myopic with rain’ to highlight the previously repressed memories. This shows that Duffy seeks to portray the location negatively and highlight a destructive past. Further use of deixis is significant at the end, the deictic ‘pulls you away’ positions

the addressee of the poem as moving away from the town, with the painful connection being broken.

In 'Beachcomber', a rich description of the beach setting is given as 'the platinum blaze of the sun'. This appears on the longest line of the poem and is therefore foregrounded as 'Beachcomber' is mostly constructed of relatively short lines. This is a positive and rich description because of the beautiful and evocative meanings usually associated with the terms 'platinum' and 'blaze'. Unlike in 'Never Go Back', this suggests that the beach is a glorious location. However, Duffy subverts this with the use of structure as the following line states 'turn away' on a new and indented line. This creates a sense of pathos as such a positive, fiery description leads to a disappointing outcome. By placing this on a new line Duffy has enacted the content of the poem as the reader has to follow the new line and indent and 'turn away' from the positive description.

Examiner Commentary

AO1

There is a clear and well-explained focus on language throughout. The student identifies key features and explores them carefully and insightfully. Comments are made on the second person pronoun and narrating voice, sound iconicity, syntax, the semantics of individual words and phrases and verse structure. There are some developed comments on different kinds of deictic expressions and their effects. The student is confident and assured in her use of terminology at all times. She is aware of how Duffy manipulates form and structure to achieve particular effects, and can explain these in detail (eg the comments on the revelation and repression of memories in 'Never Go Back' and the description of the beach in 'Beachcomber').

AO2

The student's introductory paragraph neatly identifies the focus of question and the choice of 'Beachcomber' as a second poem is secure. There is good understanding of how Duffy's speakers project attitudes towards locations and the events that occur within them, and how these are framed within a broader notion of poetic voice and identity. The student provides a clear and perceptive interpretation of the significance of locations in the poems and associated ideas on memories, time, the representation of others and relationships and shifting identities.

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