

NEA: Independent critical study

Texts across time

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, with an accompanying moderator commentary illustrating why the response has been placed within a particular band of the assessment criteria. This resource should be used in conjunction with the accompanying document 'Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment'.

Example student response C – Band 5

It has been said that 'Writers often blur the boundary between the respectable citizen and the criminal.'

Compare and contrast the presentation of the respectable citizen and the criminal in Great Expectations and A Clockwork Orange in the light of this view.

'He is a gentleman, if you please, this villain'. Magwitch's words may appear incongruous to a reader whose attitudes toward respectability and criminality are clearly defined, but Dickens' Great Expectations and Burgess' A Clockwork Orange each challenge the use of stereotypes. Contemporary, post-war, and Victorian readers would surely all attribute the qualities 'law-abiding' and 'decent' to a respectable citizen, and denounce criminals as lawless threats. However, both novelists, assuming such understanding in their readership, discomfit readers by creating endearing criminals, and presenting a notion of respectability which is either ridiculous or abhorrent.

Dickens and Burgess choose to tell bildungsroman stories through first person narrators. Pip and Alex each speak retrospectively, feeding the narratives with their own opinions; however, Pip speaks as a reformed gentleman, condemning from a great distance, whereas Alex never repents, but simply grows up to tell his story affectionately just two years from its beginning. Despite their vastly different narrative perspectives, both characters, at different stages of their journeys, could be deemed either criminal or respectable, in terms of both legality and morality. This not only blurs the boundary between the two, but leaves readers questioning whether a line, or indeed any distinction, truly exists.

Great Expectations follows Pip's pursuit of social respectability; he initially confesses, 'I want to be a gentleman', desiring wealth, education and social standing. However, Pip's struggle is tainted by crime, though Dickens symbolically suggests that Pip chooses the path he takes; when he meets an escaped convict, Pip sees 'only two black things in all the prospect': a 'beacon' and a 'gibbet', a guiding light, and an ominous warning. Indeed Grant argues that 'Philip Pirrip is a palindromic name; things could go either way for him'. (Longman, 1984) Ultimately, Pip journeys in a circle to emerge with moral integrity, which Dickens implies to be more wholesome than the narrow Victorian notion of 'respectability'. With criminals, the author punishes any characters that are less than virtuous: Orlick, having killed Mrs. Joe and attempting to kill Pip, is imprisoned following a robbery; Molly, the vengeful murderess, is reduced to a tamed life of servitude; arch-villain Compeyson is drowned while attempting to capture Magwitch; and Bentley Drummle, who beats Estella, dies also. However, those guilty of committing immoral acts, such as Miss Havisham, who orchestrates Pip's life through lies, are often beyond the scope of our sympathy; until she repents we cannot pity her, therefore her decline seems almost deserved. Dickens weaves Pip's journey toward morality into this story filled with crime, rendering 'criminality' and 'respectability' indistinguishable within the novel.

Pip's journey, split into distinct stages by the novel's three equal parts, expresses his progression: the first displays a child consumed by criminal guilt; he pursues his 'expectations' through a stage of social respectability (paralleling his moral corruption); finally, he returns to criminality when aiding Magwitch's escape. Pip retraces these experiences without evasion, justification or denial. Such a layered narration, with Dickens manipulating Pip, who influences the reader, may be biased and unreliable, but Pip's eagerness to recount his failures, along with an insistence of internal compassion ('my conscience was not by any means comfortable'), ensures that we are willing to trust his story, and, without moral reprehension, condone his crimes – stealing from his sister, and attempting to free Magwitch. Indeed, when Pip is a criminal we respect him the most. For example, as a child Pip is overwhelmed by timorous guilt, stealing 'somebody else's pork pie', and yet Dickens presents a desperate convict ('soaked with water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars') whom we cannot begrudge the 'wittles' he forces Pip to steal. The mature narrator conveys this comically, allowing readers to disregard the crime, though the frantic pace portrays the chaotic guilt of a child's mind.

Conversely, when Pip is 'respectable' by conventional Victorian standards, he is, ironically, insufferable. The desire for respectability is understandable, and realistically that of an era for, as Faber argues, 'living people could turn themselves into ladies and gentlemen'. (Faber and Faber, 1971) However, Pip's respectability escalates to snobbery: this Dickens condemns. The humble blacksmith Joe, who protects Pip from Mrs. Joe's 'Ram-pages', and, ironically, rescues him from the debtors' prison, is victimised by Pip's moral crimes against human decency. When Joe visits London he naively anticipates 'what larks' they will have, but Pip believes that as a 'respectable citizen' he cannot associate with the 'common' and uneducated Joe, and views the visit 'with considerable disturbance [and] mortification'. During the visit Pip is inhospitable (whereas a true gentleman would have been 'easier'), allowing Joe to leave without a goodbye. While the middle classes were more contemptuous toward the lower in Victorian England, and some readers may identify with Pip shunning his working-class connections, any humanitarian reader is sure to be abhorred by his actions, especially as the narrator conveys his retrospective shame. Such behaviour is morally repugnant, particularly as Joe is a 'gentleman within' – a true Christian gentleman who forgives, rescues, and turns the other cheek.

When a man like Joe is 'not respectable', the standards of that 'respectability' must be questioned.

While Joe is Pip's most respectable role model, in Pip's London his guardian is Jaggers, whose actions render him neither entirely criminal, nor wholly respectable. As a wealthy professional, Jaggers is at the height of Victorian respectability, yet his business is tainted. It could be argued that he is devoid of moral integrity: in corresponding with and becoming employed by a deportee, overlooking his return, and bribing Molly to acquire Miss Havisham a child ('I know what you did...Give the child into my hands, and I will do my best to bring you off'), Jaggers knowingly commits crime in his own interest. However, he could also be discussed as an individual of finely tuned moral understanding.

Estella is rescued from criminal parentage through adoption, and given the advantage of social respectability. Jaggers believes that a child is safer in the hands of a 'respectable citizen' – an ironic sentiment as Estella is, despite her social status, condemned to live without love. The reader is intrigued by the narrator's presentation of this mysterious character who appears involved in every aspect of Pip's life. Arguably, we are more interested in such stories of corruption than those of virtue.

Jagger's association with Pip is forged by his link with Magwitch, who is used by Dickens to shape Pip's journey; he is the driving force of *Great Expectations*, financing Pip's social respectability, causing his criminality, and rekindling his moral integrity. Initially, Magwitch is a conventional villain; he is a figure of violent terror who threatens Pip with cannibalism. However, in his return he becomes a kind benefactor who loves his 'dear boy', worthy of sympathy. In his trial with Compeyson, Magwitch is a victim of society's belief in a distinct line between criminality and respectability. Magwitch, who has been 'in jail and out of jail', is scorned in court as 'the elder, ill brought up, who will be spoke to as such', and treated less leniently than the wealthier, more 'respectable' Compeyson; Magwitch receives a sentence double that of Compeyson, who has a 'good character and bad company'. The manner in which Magwitch is addressed suggests that the law equates the respectable class with morality, and so Magwitch, forced into crime by poverty, is a victim of society (evidencing Dickens' humanitarian sympathies with the poor). We realise that the more 'respectable' the citizen, the more cruel and calculating the criminal.

Pip's presumptions about Magwitch on the 'stormy and wet' night that he returns support the stereotypical attitude towards convicts: Pip is horrified. His immediate reaction is fear, loathing and revulsion: he cannot trust Magwitch, so locks him into a room overnight; he cannot abide the fact that this is his benefactor, so refuses further finance. Perhaps the most interesting of Pip's reactions is his immediacy in concluding (understandably, given his graveyard encounter) that Magwitch is a 'desperately violent man' with hands 'stained with blood'. Pip associates crime with violence but, like the reader, his understanding of criminality and respectability becomes distorted. The irony of his own gentleman status depending upon a criminals' wealth initially sickens Pip, but he learns that Magwitch is vulnerable and caring, not the villain that 'criminal' implies, and begins to see the complexity of human nature – that one is neither specifically criminal nor respectable. Dickens sets the escape on 'one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold', a deliberate contrast which highlights the conflicting situation: Magwitch's deserved freedom depends upon Pip breaking the law. Though Magwitch is recaptured, Pip's altered understanding is clear as he 'holds the hand that [Magwitch] stretched forth' from the dock. A 'criminal' within the dock, a 'respectable citizen' without, the two hands form a bridge across the boundary between, unifying them in a way which forces Pip, and the reader, to question who is the better man. By this point Pip's 'repugnance' of Magwitch has 'melted away' and he only sees 'a much better

man than [he] had been to Joe'. This point forms the moral climax of the novel, prior to Pip's illness and rebirth. He now sees beneath the unsavory criminal exterior to the good heart, and learns, like the reader, the damage of prejudices, and the limitations of stereotypes. Pip's catharsis separates him vastly from Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*; both emerge respectable, though Alex's reformation seems superficial, and neither voluntary nor convincing. While *Great Expectations* utilises a civilised Victorian setting, Alex is placed in a criminal world where crime overshadows respectability. Burgess' dystopia is futuristic, yet resonates the period in which he was writing. For example, the popular milk-bars of the 60s become the corrupt 'Korova Milkbar', where milk is served with drugs such as 'vellocet or synthemesc or drencom', and the 'teddy boy' gangs which troubled London police become the violent thugs such as Alex and Billyboy. This futurism creates a disconcerting setting which is engulfed by crime. However, the echoes of Burgess' present create a threat; a warning that the 'criminal world' of *A Clockwork Orange* would soon become the real 'world'.

Similarly to *Great Expectations*, Alex's narration is split into three equal parts, progressing thus: crime, punishment, recovery. However, Burgess' patterning is much tighter than Dickens', with each part consisting of seven chapters. The total of twenty-one chapters implies that Alex's final words are those of mature narrator (though Alex is not yet twenty-one). While Pip's narration is measured, endeavouring to portray the feelings of characters besides himself, Alex's feelings monopolise his narrative; this egocentric voice limits Burgess' exploration of other characters. He assumes us as 'brothers', drawing us into his journey as accomplices. Structurally, the third part mirrors the first, with Alex's initial crimes returning to haunt him. The 'filthy drunkard', for example, who Alex assaults, returns for revenge when Alex is incapable of retaliating – while he is 'respectable' against his will. Victims become aggressors, showing that in the novel's world no-one is consistently virtuous, unlike the resolutely good-hearted Joe in *Great Expectations*. The only person who comes close to human kindness is the chaplain, though even he is a promotion-seeking drunkard. In *A Clockwork Orange*, no-one is categorically respectable.

Alex's criminality is given the façade of something chosen; structurally the novel is pinned together by the question 'what's it going to be then, eh?' inviting the assumption that Alex's life is one of choice: 'badness is of the self', therefore Alex is wholly responsible for his actions. However, Burgess disputes the notion of choice, implying that Alex is constricted by the gang-culture of his dystopia.

Similarly, the Prison Charlie argues that 'goodness is something chosen', yet how can Alex choose 'good' when his society is so influenced by 'bad'? Burgess complicates the issue further, as the older Alex compares himself to a wind-up toy which 'bangs straight into things' and 'cannot help what it is doing'; he now believes that time moves cyclically with wayward youths continually maturing as they are, ultimately, controlled by 'Bog Himself...turning a vonny grahzny orange in his gigantic rookers'. Such reasoning suggests that though Alex initially prides himself in his choice ('what I do I do because I like to do'), he has as little control over his life as Pip, whose fate is sealed by chance in the graveyard.

Alex's 'choice' is to rape, beat, rob, and even kill his victims. However, just like Pip, Burgess' protagonist is arguably most attractive during crime, though Burgess uses audacity and aesthetics, rather than moral integrity, to make Alex alluring. Alex's confidence is presented through the ways he imitates Shakespearean syntax, with Falstaffian insults ('you eunuch jelly, thou') which are both comical and poetic. It can be argued that Burgess' presentation of violence helps readers to appreciate Alex's love of it. Though Aggler argues that 'there is something much more murderous about a 'cutthroat britva' than a 'cutthroat razor' (University of Alabama Press, 1979), Nadsat could be said to help readers dissociate Alex's

actions with violence; a 'fine fair tolchuck on the gulliver' is much less threatening than a 'brutal assault'. Kubrick's film adaptation (Warner, 1971) reproduces this aestheticism using classical music and ballet-style attacks – such as Billyboy's attempted rape in the old casino. Film critic Morales argues that such violent scenes are 'so physically graceful, visually dazzling and meticulously executed that our instinctual, emotional responses undermine any rational objections that we may have'; we enjoy watching 'ultra-violence'. (Harvard, 2003) Musicality is seen in Burgess' novel also. The rape of the 'two young pitsas', for example, is described as 'Joy Joy Joy Joy', suggesting rhythmic brutality. Through such methods Burgess makes the reader doubt their moral certainties; as with Pip's crime not all readers view Alex's violence negatively.

However, some readers, particularly those who have suffered violence, could never be allured by Burgess' aesthetics; while Dickens creates a repentant narrator abhorred by his previously pompous ways, Alex admires his younger self and is, therefore, forever appalling.

Though Alex is undoubtedly criminal, his philosophy, to 'take every veshch you need', is simple; he is dismayed to find that his 'droogs' become 'big bloated capitalist[s]'. Their aspiration to the 'big big big money' is, perhaps, more objectionable. Separated thus from his companions, Alex is, from a Marxist perspective, the lesser criminal: he is neither calculating nor greedy. The 'guiltless joy' he feels when committing acts of gratuitous violence is unnervingly charming, and its spontaneity, and the simple pleasure he gains, could, incongruously, bring the term 'innocence' to a reader's mind; he is like a child seeking gratification. Similarly, his orgiastic passion for classical music, which he considers to be 'gorgeousness and gorgeosity made flesh', challenges the assumption that 'Great Music...and Great Poetry would like quieten Modern Youth down and make Modern Youth more Civilised'. Despite Alex's brutal crimes, in the world of the novel he is, arguably, no worse than any other citizen: even the state is corrupt. While thugs like Alex commit contained crimes, the novel's totalitarian regime, like the state of *Great Expectations* (which gives thirty-two 'Sentence[s] of Death' in one trial), has great power. The state's potential to commit atrocities, comparative to Alex, is vast.

The 'Ludovico Technique' is introduced as the state 'may be needing...prison space for political offenders'; they begin transforming criminals 'out of all recognition', enforcing respectability. Government sanctioned scientist Dr Brodsky conditions Alex, causing the association of nausea with brutality. The films that Alex is forced to watch depict incredible violence, which he primarily determines 'could not really be real'. However, he finds that they are, and questions which 'respectable citizen' took the footage – for are not they criminal in filming such carnage without intervening? Based upon Skinnerian Behaviourism (a radical American procedure which produced the 'inclination to behave'), the technique is horrific, though some readers may condone such punitive methods to tame criminals like Alex. Yet, the scientists' enjoyment while watching is unpardonable unethical: 'Stop it? Stop it, did you say? ...And they smecked quite loud at that'. A government which champions such experimentation is surely corrupt; suppressing democracy and limiting free will in this way, the state is guilty of political crimes surpassing those of any individual.

Despite the frightening stance of the state, their opposition is little better. F. Alexander, the 'writer veck' whose wife Alex rapes is, superficially, a respectable Samaritan. He sees corruption in the current government, and opposes their 'attempt to impose upon man...conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation'. Readers cannot fail to support him raising his 'sword-pen' against minimising human rights. However, the prospect of power, and his resentment at the realisation of Alex's identity, makes him 'bezoomny', and he sees that Alex 'can be used'. He pushes Alex toward suicide to serve his political purpose, and his

initially honourable cause becomes detestable, as does the general image of politicians. Similarly, all the novel's superficially respectable citizens are, in some way, corrupt. As in *Great Expectations*, the seemingly respectable are questioned. Where Dickens uses Jaggers benefiting from crime, Burgess presents P.R. Deltoid, Alex's correctional officer. Deltoid has the appearance of decency, and maintains the pretence that he has 'sweated over' Alex's fate. However, it is self-interest, not compassion, which fuels his battle with Alex's criminality; he strives only against the 'big black mark' that will land against his name if Alex 'ends up in the stripy hole'. In such characters Burgess shows that anyone, regardless of respectable appearances, can be criminal.

Though much of the novel questions the value of superficial respectability, when Alex finally matures there is a desolate feeling; his final valedictory message is melancholic. Alex not only 'groweth up', but paints his progression with biblical images, addressing us directly: 'But where I itty now, O my brothers, is all on my oddy knocky, where you cannot go'. Such images echo Jesus' final goodbye to his disciples, suggesting death rather than maturation. The loss of Alex's former, youthful self represents a loss in his vitality, rendering the new Alex much less charming – perhaps the reason he wishes us to remember the charismatic 'little Alex he was', rather than the philosophical Alex that now is.

The questions raised by both texts, concerning the meanings of 'respectability' and 'criminality', challenge society's stereotypes. Each author manipulates perceptions of what is right and wrong, and our moral understanding becomes distorted. Where Burgess suggests that respectability does not exist, Dickens uses the growing understanding of his narrator to suggest that both states, as we define them, are deceiving. At the start of *Great Expectations* Pip is literally 'turned...upside-down' by Magwitch, symbolising how his, and our, understanding is turned throughout the novel. Such a state of distortion occurs in both novels, meaning that no line – not even one which is blurred – can separate 'criminality' from 'respectability'.

Bibliography and references

Primary texts

Burgess, Anthony. (2000) *A Clockwork Orange*, London: Penguin. Dickens, Charles. (2002) *Great Expectations*, London: Penguin.

Secondary sources: Books and articles

Aggeler, Geoffrey. (ed) (1979) *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist*, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press

Faber, Richard. (1971) *Proper Stations: Class in Victorian Fiction*, London: Faber and Faber

Grant, Allan. (1984) *A Preface to Dickens*, London: Longman

Morales Xavier. (2003) 'Kill Bill: Beauty and Violence', *Harvard Law Record*. Available at <http://hlrecord.org/?p=11285>

Secondary sources: Film and stage versions

Stanley Kubrick (director). (2004) *A Clockwork Orange*, Warner Home Video

Moderator commentary

AO1: This is a very well structured, coherent and assured essay, which employs sophisticated and academic expression throughout. Literary critical concepts and terminology are used in an assured way. Knowledge and understanding is often sophisticated too. The clear and focused argument drives the essay forward from the opening and is supported by a strong personal voice and excellent control of the material. Confident claims can need a little more support in places, but overall AO1 is in keeping with the top band.

AO2: The student demonstrates a perceptive understanding of a variety of ways in which meanings are shaped by authorial methods in these texts, including an excellent understanding of the ways that narrators are used and how the texts are structured. Sophisticated textual knowledge enables the student to range around the texts in an assured manner. Quotations are apt and well integrated. Language is often explored at a sophisticated level. The student is perceptive in their comments on the authors' use of the novel form and, in particular, the ways in which point of view is used.

AO3: The student demonstrates a perceptive grasp of social contexts and attitudes relevant to the task and includes particularly assured references to historical contexts. These contexts are well integrated such as where perceptive connections are made between structure and respectability/criminality.

AO4: The student perceptively explores several entirely relevant connections between the texts particularly around the narrators. Although the comparisons and contrasts are not interwoven throughout they are assuredly linked at the outset and the second section uses sustained comparison and contrast between the second and first texts. This systematic approach works well for this candidate in constructing an effective response to the task. The texts are not treated separately and are paid equal attention overall.

AO5: The essay is dominated by debate and there is a sense throughout that meaning is not fixed. The student engages with different possible readings and responses in an assured manner. A variety of critical views are perceptively employed to progress the argument and critical material is well-integrated.

Interpretations over time are considered.

This essay demonstrates the qualities typical of a Band 5 response.