

NEA Independent critical study: Texts across time – exemplar response D – band 5

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 'Guidance on non-exam assessment – Independent critical study: Texts across time'.

Exemplar student response

It has been said that 'human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.'

Compare and contrast the presentation of human culture and the physical world in *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy and in the poetry of R. S. Thomas in the light of this view.

Charlotte Barrett argues that Hardy's novels 'establish a reciprocal relationship between environment and character' (2015) and this is exemplified through Gabriel Oak and the natural world in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Of all the novel's characters, Oak is portrayed as at one with nature, if not able to directly affect the physical world, certainly able to respectfully work with it, a prerequisite for Hardy if man is to 'get fulfilment in her company.' (Anand, 2006) In the same way, the Welsh hillside farmer Prytherch mirrors the harsh natural environment described by R.S. Thomas in his early poetry; his relationship to the physical world, however, is arguably portrayed as more complex than that of Oak's because of the later effects of modern technology which Thomas believes adversely affect the natural environment.

Williams suggests that 'in creating Oak, Hardy has created a character who drew his characteristics from nature, simple yet tender' (1965) and his symbiosis with nature is clear for the reader: he is a mixture of the pastoral figure of the shepherd and the natural symbol of the oak tree; he rejects the mechanics of the analogue watch in favour of examining the sky to 'ascertain the time of night from the altitude of the stars'; his care for the sheep during lambing renders 'their frames...in a sleek and hopeful state, pleasantly contrasting with their death's door plight of half an hour before' and, when his young dog tragically

drives his sheep to their deaths, so robbing Oak of his livelihood, 'his first feeling was now one of pity for the untimely fate of these gentle ewes and their unborn lambs.' Hardy perhaps best demonstrates Oak's connection to the physical world through his ability to read the signs nature has chosen to send him as a warning of an impending storm: the garden slug 'was nature's way of hinting to him that he was to prepare for foul weather'; kicking the toad in his doorway, 'which felt and sounded soft, leathery and distended, like a boxing glove', alerts Oak to the struggle ahead to combat the storm's effects, and ensures that he treats nature with respect so that, in spite of extreme weariness from the gargantuan effort required to save Bathsheba's hayricks, 'he was cheered by a sense of success in a good cause'. This supports Williams' assertion that, through Oak, Hardy connects man and the environment so that 'the differences in their nature are hardly discernible...like the sturdy Oak...he does not break from the storm's fury.' (1965)

Critics disagree about the extent to which Hardy's portrayal of nature is influenced by an interest in Darwinian theory in this early novel, with some suggesting readers have to wait for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for Hardy to remove 'authority from human hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it.' (2015) Williams, however, describes *Far From the Madding Crowd* as 'hardly a pastoral dream of valleys and hills' (1965) and the storm scene certainly presents Hardy's growing view of the 'duality of Nature' as both 'a monster as well as a friend.' (1965) In his early poetry, R.S. Thomas also moves 'from his early penchant for pastoral...to find his unique voice' (Conradi, 2013) about the relationship between man and the natural environment.

First introduced in *A Peasant* in 1942, Thomas creates the persona of Iago Prytherch who mirrors Gabriel Oak in his description as 'an ordinary man...who pens a few sheep' and who is like 'an impregnable fortress.' Like Oak, Prytherch faces the full force of nature but, unlike Hardy's use of rich, romantic imagery to describe the natural environment, Thomas conveys Prytherch's struggle through stark description of the unforgiving landscape which is then mirrored in the baseness of this hillside farmer. Thomas's use of harsh adjectives in the 'bald Welsh hills', 'the crude earth' and 'the gaunt sky' helps to portray a landscape where Prytherch works 'against the siege of rain and the wind's attrition' to protect his sheep. Whilst Hardy invests his pastoral hero with an 'imposing' presence and a 'quiet modesty' to reflect his symbiosis with nature, Prytherch is 'an improbable hero' (Conradi, 2013) who sits in the evening 'Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.' This lack of refinement is coupled with 'the vacancy of his mind' and 'clothes, soured with years of sweat' to complete a harsh portrait of the persona Thomas created to stand against 'English gentility and the strident materialism of the modern world' (Conradi, 2013), which Thomas believed were contributing to a breakdown in man's harmony with the natural environment. Whilst Prytherch lacks some of the Romantic characteristics of Oak, both Hardy and Thomas are keen to portray in their early work a connection between human culture and the physical world. As with so many of Thomas's 'nature' poems, the concluding rhyming couplet in 'A Peasant'

sums up his message about this relationship where Prytherch is 'a winner of wars,/Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.'

Through the poetry form, Thomas clearly lacks the same opportunity for character development that Hardy enjoys in his novel form but nonetheless forms an ongoing relationship with Prytherch, who appears in twenty poems, in order to explore the impact of modernity on the farming community. Conradi argues that 'Thomas confers on [Prytherch] his own fierce integrity' (2013) and Prytherch's confusion about the impact of modernity on his simple life in *Invasion on the Farm* exemplifies this. Here Prytherch addresses modernity and begins by humbly apologising for his lack of understanding of the changing world. The pace of change is moving 'too swiftly' for this simple farmer who is used to being able to 'dawdle' but now finds that he cannot 'fish in their quick stream/With crude fingers.' Thomas effectively helps to convey this confusion through a lack of rhyme and the use of caesura in most lines of the poem which, in creating a halting pace, juxtaposes with the runaway pace of change. A desire for continuity of his current life is conveyed through the repeated sounds achieved in the use of assonance throughout the poem and by Prytherch's recollections of paddling 'in the bright grass' on his farm, which felt 'warm as a sack about me'; in spite of the implied poverty here there is also sense of comfort which Prytherch feels will be lost in 'the cold/Winds of the world blowing.' Thomas shows the inevitability of modernisation because Prytherch has 'no place to run' and again with a summative abrupt ending where 'The patched gate/You left open will never be shut again.' Through the characters of Oak and Prytherch, therefore, Hardy and Thomas explore the connection between human culture and the physical environment but it is perhaps Thomas who is the more explicit about the effect of modernity on the natural world.

In *Lament for Prytherch*, Thomas builds on the sentiments expressed by his persona in *Invasion on the Farm* by suggesting how Prytherch's life as a hillside farmer has become less 'rich'. The opening repetition of 'When I was young, when I was young!' immediately signals a nostalgia for times lost and a former richness provided by working with simple farm animals; Thomas uses contrasting similes to convey the effect of modernity on Prytherch where his former richness saw 'the barns oozing corn like honey' but now his 'heart...is dry as a dead leaf.' Once again, the final two lines sum up Thomas's message, here the pointlessness of clinging to tradition, which has become 'a bare bough/Where once in April a bird sang.'

Hebron describes how, in several poems, Thomas expresses 'his deep horror of many aspects of modernity' including an 'intense indignation at the damage wrought by English cultural imperialism' (2007), and the tone of two later poems addressed to Prytherch betrays the emotional impact of this on the poet. In *Too Late*, Thomas conveys deep sadness that he feels compelled to describe Prytherch as having inevitably succumbed to modernity: 'I would have spared you this', and a fierce protectiveness towards his persona, and so towards tradition, in 'You were like a child to me.' Thomas regrets the resultant loss of the farmer's freedom: in Stanzas one to three, Thomas suggests that, although

the natural environment is harsh, traditional farming is rewarding with 'comfort' and a 'contented' feeling from 'membership of an old nation.' The final two stanzas, however, portray Prytherch now as a 'servant' who is 'hired' to 'come obediently as a dog.' Once a giver of life in his work with animals and the earth, Prytherch now has to 'flog/The life out of the slow soil' for a different master, namely 'the machine/That will destroy you and your race.' Interestingly, however, in *Absolution* Thomas acknowledges his misplaced anger in *Too Late* and suggests that this blinded him to the fact that the connection between the hillside farmer and his natural environment is so strong that Prytherch can overcome the effects of modernity:

'...the day's end
Finds you still in the same field
In which you started, your soul made strong
By the earth's incense, the wind's song.'

Once again, Thomas is investing Prytherch with an integrity which reflects his own stand against modernity and which can confer 'forgiveness' on the poet for his anger. As Conradi suggests, Prytherch is 'a stubborn survivor' (2013) and this links him to Gabriel Oak, whose ability to survive nature's harshness is symbolised through the description of his shepherd's hut as 'a small Noah's Ark on a small Ararat'. Much as Hardy does through Gabriel Oak, Thomas appears to be saying here that if man treats the natural environment with the respect it deserves, he can find an inner peace.

Where this inner peace seems the only reward for Prytherch, Hardy rewards Gabriel Oak for his respect of nature in the way that the natural world brings Gabriel and Bathsheba together; here too we see the influence of Darwinian theory in Hardy's use of chance (connected to nature) to move the novel's plot along. Early in the novel, Gabriel is introduced to Bathsheba 'by one of those whimsical coincidences in which Nature, like a busy mother, seems to spare a moment from her unremitting labours to turn and make her children smile'. Excuses to meet with Bathsheba again, in an attempt to make her his wife, are provided when the wind knocks Bathsheba's hat off and Gabriel finds it 'among the leaves' and later under the pretext of concern at 'the death of a ewe.' The dog's warning of Gabriel's potential suffocation in his hut brings Bathsheba to Gabriel's rescue and, when he is forced to give up his farm through the loss of his sheep, in itself described by Hardy as 'another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion', this brings him back to Bathsheba as her shepherd. His gift for tending sheep means that Bathsheba has to send for him, in spite of a recent estrangement, when her sheep break through a fence and eat the potentially fatal clover and Hardy describes him working with 'the instrument of salvation...with a dexterity that would have graced a hospital surgeon' to again emphasise his oneness with the natural world. Finally, it is the storm which brings Gabriel and Bathsheba together as the only people awake

enough to tend the hayricks and their ability to work together yields success: "Hold on!" said Gabriel, taking the sheaf from her shoulder, and grasping her arm again.'

Not only does the storm scene enable Hardy to show Oak's connection to the physical world and the way that man can be rewarded through a respect for nature, but also it gives him the opportunity to show how nature conversely punishes those who do not heed its warnings. Whilst Gabriel responds to nature's signs of the toad and the slug, Troy dismisses Gabriel's advice as 'fidgets' and fails to keep his promise to Bathsheba to attend to the haystacks, leaving them, to Bathsheba's horror, 'all neglected!' Boldwood also neglects his hayricks, dismissively commenting to Gabriel, who had worked so hard to save Bathsheba's hayricks, that he 'overlooked them', an attitude which leaves Hardy unable to 'describe the intensely dramatic effect that announcement had upon Oak at such a moment.' Having been oblivious to the storm because of their drunken state, Troy and his friends show their disrespect for nature when, in the morning, 'not a single one of them had turned his face to the ricks, or apparently bestowed one thought upon their condition.' Whilst they are lucky that Gabriel and Bathsheba saved her hayricks, Boldwood has to face the consequence of his neglect: 'Much of his wheat and all his barley of that season had been spoilt by the rain. It sprouted, grew into intricate mats, and was ultimately thrown to the pigs in armfuls.' Hardy clearly shows the difference in fate of those characters who foster a respectful connection with the natural world and those who do not: Gabriel and Bathsheba end the novel successful, happy and together whereas Troy and Boldwood meet tragic ends.

Thomas also contrasts his pastoral hero Prytherch with other personas in order to show what is lost to those who ignore nature's power and beauty. In *Cynddylan on a Tractor*, Thomas creates a 'new man' who, instead of being at one with nature, appears to have become part of the machine to such an extent that his nerves are 'metal and his blood oil.' Any apprehension Cynddylan may have felt about modernity is conveyed through the cursing of the clutch when he tries to change gear, a metaphor for a change from tradition to embrace modernity, but now he has become part of the modern world, 'the gears obey/His least bidding.' Thomas's ironic tone permeates the description of Cynddylan as 'a great man' and 'the knight at arms' but we recognise this greatness as the folly of pride when Thomas then goes on to describe how the noise of Cynddylan's tractor drowns out the noises of nature, leaving Cynddylan oblivious to nature's beauty. As the noise of the machine portrays a careless ignorance in 'scattering hens' and 'emptying the wood/Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays', Cynddylan is robbed of the 'kindling' of the sun and of the birdsong; because he now uses 'a different fuel', the birds are singing 'bills wide in vain.'

Cynddylan on a Tractor was the first of Thomas's poems to concern itself with 'the machine' but the sentiments about the adverse effects of modernisation on the natural environment therein are replicated in a number of other poems. The metaphor of 'fuel' is continued in the short eight-line poem of that name where the machine is personified and portrayed as mocking old traditions by

'laughing/up what would have been sleeves/in the old days.' The machine offers an escape to 'the places that are far off/from yourselves' but for Thomas this comes 'at a price'. According to Davis, Thomas also believed the machine was 'impinging on the life of the spirit' (2007) and in *Welsh Landscape*, Thomas suggests that the machine has distracted man from his heritage and from remembering the 'spilled blood' of his ancestors who fought for his freedom. Sometimes seen as anti-pastoral in its use of stark adjectives, such as 'brittle', 'wind-bitten', 'sham', 'mouldering' and 'impotent' to describe the past, the opening line of the poem 'To live in Wales is to be conscious' is Thomas's reminder of the need to respect your heritage and the aforementioned adjectives simply serve to demonstrate the vulnerability of that heritage. The long, single stanza with its lack of rhyme and different line lengths combines with Thomas's choice of language to further convey the sense that tradition is under threat: the Welsh language is now 'strange to the ear' and reflections of the past are now 'shadows' which have been 'hushed.' That tradition remains important to Thomas is evident in the simple exhortation that 'There is only the past', in the repetition of the idea that 'There is no present in Wales', and in the bleak outlook of 'no future.'

This disrespect of Welsh heritage extends for Thomas to the effects of Anglicisation and Davis argues that, above anything else, Thomas 'believed the decay of the Welsh countryside and culture was due to the intrusion of the English into Wales' (2007). In *The Welsh Hill Country*, Thomas describes how the sheep are now 'Arranged romantically' as if in a travel brochure for the English tourists. This idea is further explored in *Looking at Sheep* where the romantic description of sheep 'like primroses', with eyes like 'two halves of a nut' is dismissed by Thomas as 'sheer fancy'. The blame for this loss of natural beauty is firmly placed on Anglicisation and Thomas lists the causes as the artificiality of 'green grass/That is not ours' and the intrusion of 'visitors/buying us up.' As a juxtaposition to this artificiality, in *The Village* Thomas typically offers a barren landscape in this setting locked firmly in the past. As in *Welsh Landscape*, the sparseness of the village could be read as anti-pastoral but the final stanza serves to show Thomas's regret that village life is now giving way to city life and his desire that 'This last outpost of time past' is not lost altogether. The use of the modifiers 'scarcely', 'too few' and 'just a', along with the emphasis in the repetition of 'one' conveys a sparseness in this Village landscape that perhaps harks back to a time before humanity developed the earth at all. The lack of civilisation is suggested by a track which 'leads nowhere' and by the fact that 'so little happens.' What activity took place is now firmly locked in the past and Thomas's use of caesura in 'the hot sun/Is history' emphasises this. As with so many of Thomas's poems, the key message is saved for the end of the poem. Davis comments that Thomas's nature poems are often 'overlaid with philosophic...trappings' (2007) and the final stanza supports this assertion. The commas in the first line's plea of 'Stay, then, village' slows the pace of the poem down to introduce a philosophical tone, which places this village in the 'vast and meaningful' world as envisioned by such as 'Plato'; the untrained eye will see the village dilapidated in a modern world but the enlightened thinker will understand

the importance of the survival of such barren landscapes to humanity as a whole. As in *Absolution*, Thomas realises that man's reciprocal relationship to the physical environment is enduring and can overcome the effects of modernity and in *Power* Thomas sums up this symbiosis in what man needs: 'a tree's patience/Rooted in the dark soil.'

Unlike Thomas, who is writing from a post-industrial revolution and post-world war perspective, Hardy is only just beginning to introduce the idea of the adverse effects of modernity on the natural world in his early novel. A hint is given with the setting of Norcombe Hill, which begins the novel described as 'indestructible' but we learn later becomes 'altered very much'. Changes include the uprooting of an old apple-tree 'that used to bear two hogshead of cider' and the replacement of the old well with 'a solid iron pump with a large stone trough, and all complete.' Noticeably less dramatic than the changes described by Thomas, the farm labourers nevertheless reflect on 'how the face of nations alter, and what we live to see nowadays!' Instead of dwelling on the negative impact of modernity, Hardy prefers to emphasise what might be lost through it by vivid descriptions of the animals, of the natural environment and of age-old farming traditions. He portrays the sheep-shearing barn as an almost superior setting to a church or castle and proudly declares that it 'embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hand of time'. As Thomas reaches the conclusion only after much soul-searching, therefore, that the strong traditional relationship between human culture and the physical environment can overcome the ravages of modernity, Hardy has the comfort of writing at a time when the pastoral task of sheep-shearing gives 'a satisfied sense of functional continuity' where 'medievalism and modernism had a common standpoint.'

Bibliography and references

A) Primary texts

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Conradi, Peter. J. (2013) *Imagined Greetings: Poetic Engagements with R.S. Thomas*, by David Lloyd – review: available at <https://new.spectator.co.uk>.

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Moderator commentary

A01: This is a perceptive, assured and often sophisticated essay, which uses literary critical terminology impressively. The argument would perhaps benefit from greater clarity in the early stages of the essay, before grasp of Thomas and Hardy are fully developed, and from a conclusion focused more on summary and judgment of interpretation.

A02: The student demonstrates consistently perceptive analysis of authorial methods including precise analysis of both structure and language. The student ranges around the texts in an assured manner and textual evidence is apt and well integrated. The student is confident in their contrast of the use of novel and poetic forms.

A03: The student demonstrates a perceptive understanding of contextual similarities and differences and the significance of time and setting contexts are particularly well understood and well integrated.

A04: The student perceptively explores several entirely relevant connections between the texts in a sustained and sophisticated manner. Whilst the student writes concentrated sections on each of the individual texts, there is sustained comparison throughout. The treatment of the poetic form is as substantial as that of the prose.

A05: The student demonstrates an assured and perceptive engagement with a range of critical interpretations including over time. A variety of critical views are perceptively employed to progress the argument and critical material is well-integrated.

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