

Aspects of tragedy: Exemplar student response and commentary for AS Paper 2A

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

Sample script – AS Paper 2A, band 5 response

Explore the view that, in Keats' poems, the boundaries between villains and victims are continually blurred.

In your answer you need to analyse closely Keats' authorial methods and include comment on the extract below.

From *Lamia*

Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,
Her fingers he pressed hard, as one came near
With curled grey beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown,
Slow-stepped, and robed in philosophic gown:
Lycius shrank closer, as they met and passed,
Into his mantle, adding wings to haste,
While hurried Lamia trembled: 'Ah,' said he,
'Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?
Why does your tender palm dissolve in dew?' —
'I'm wearied,' said fair Lamia: 'tell me who
Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind
His features—Lycius! wherefore did you blind
Yourself from his quick eyes?' Lycius replied,
'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide
And good instructor; but tonight he seems
The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams.'

Keats often in his poems attempts to use classical or mythical ideas – sometimes in mythical language and other times structurally, such as the ballad-like form of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* – to gain recognition amongst the other romantic poets of his time, whilst revealing his own, more unique opinions through these words, perhaps subconsciously. As a result the boundaries between villain and victim are often blurred due to the contrast between traditional ideas and Keats' own.

A perfect example of this is his epic poem *Lamia*. The title and main focus of the poem is Lamia herself, named purposefully after a mythical demon who ate children as a result of having hers stolen by Zeus' jealous wife, clearly placing her in the domain of villain before the poem has even begun. However, as the poem continues Keats uses language that seems to pity her ('Happy in beauty, life, and love, and every thing, a song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres') as well as language that reminds us of who she is ('the cruel lady'). He writes of her as beautiful and pure when he mentions her love, and by the end of the poem we are made to feel as if this love has converted her to goodness, for she submits to Lycius and lets him marry her. Her ultimate death blurs the line even further. Is Lamia a villain entrapping an unwilling man, or is she a victim of prejudices held against her who only wishes to be in love?

Thus we turn to Apollonius as the antagonist of the poem shown by Lycius' sudden fear of him when they pass in the street. As the philosopher passes by 'Lycius shrank closer' and Lamia trembles. When Lamia asks who he is Lycius ominously says it is his 'good instructor' but also that he haunts his 'sweet dreams'. Herein lies the ambiguity of the sage – the blurring of villain and loyal servant, though Apollonius could also be said to be a victim because Lamia later insists that he is not invited to their wedding. In the extract Keats uses contrasting language and images of beauty, love, secrecy and fear to highlight the way that boundaries are blurred. Lycius muffles his face; Apollonius has 'sharp eyes', Lamia 'trembled', Lycius speaks of her 'tender palm' and his 'sweet dreams' and Lycius talks of Apollonius as both a 'good' instructor and a 'ghost of folly'. In the extract Keats also has his characters asking each other questions, some of which cannot be answered. Lycius asks 'Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?' and Lamia asks who is the old man.

Later in the poem it could be said that Apollonius, in his attempt to save Lycius, 'murders' Lamia suggesting that, despite his being a sage and 'trustworthy guide' of Lycius, he is in fact a villain. However, whether Apollonius can be seen as a victim at the end is debatable. Perhaps the blurred line is not between victim and villain but between hero and villain, though it is easiest to conclude that he is the latter, for his actions are not congratulated but mourned.

If Keats does blur the lines between victim and villain in *Lamia*, he does not do this in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Here it is clear that the man 'alone and palely loitering' is the victim of the 'faery child', for the cyclical nature of the poem creates a sense of hopelessness as if his pain and the pain of entrapped men like

him will never cease, and the use of a shortened last line in every stanza means we are left to hang on the words 'and no birds sing' in silence, deprived of the last syllable in reflection of his deprivation. Although the woman is not at first displayed as a villain, her destructive nature is perhaps foreshadowed from the beginning by the description of the natural world. Keats opens the poem by creating an appropriate setting in which – 'the sedge has withered from the lake'. It is significant that on the knight's cheeks 'a fading rose fast withereth too'. The lady is linked closely with nature with her collecting food from the wild and having 'wild' eyes. This is not only a fulfillment of the earlier foreshadowing – that nature is damning and destructive- but also the word 'wild' in itself can be seen to have negative connotations and foreshadow her abandonment of the knight later on.

However, this clear cut definition of who is villain and who is victim means that the general literary lines for villains and victims is blurred, in a sense that Keats goes against the traditional gender portraits of victim and villain. Normally the knight in shining armour would be the hero who would save the damsel in distress from the villain; here, the damsel in 'distress' ('And there she wept and sighed full sore') is the villain herself, and the knight in armour is the victim. By doing this Keats exploits the traditional form of poetry to perhaps convey his own opinion of the entrapping nature of women and of the power they can have over a man through love.

Finally, Keats uses yet another technique to convey a different message in his poem *Isabella*. Rather than blur the lines as in *Lamia* or define a different set of lines and challenge the conventional as in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, he defines clearly the villains and victims in *Isabella* whilst covertly expressing a contrasting set of boundaries, thus blurring the distinction between villain and victim by creating different layers to each character. First we notice that the obvious villains are Isabella's brothers, firstly for their oppression of those who work for them, secondly for their cruel murder of Isabella's lover Lorenzo, thirdly for lying to her about his death and fourthly for taking her precious Basil pot, which contains Lorenzo's head, from her. Isabella is clearly the victim here, not only because of the foreshadowing in the first line clearly placed by the narrator – 'Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!' – but also because of the fact that she is described as having 'died in drowsy ignorance' before she has even, in the poem's narrative, died.

The confusion of character, therefore, is found with Lorenzo. The deep love expressed in the first quarter of the poem establishes him as a protagonist with Isabella, and thus at his murder we believe him to be a victim of the clear villains of the tale. Although upon first glance this stance of victim is continued throughout, when focusing on his role in the story we find the boundary between victim and villain blurring – had he not returned to Isabella and told her of his murder, perhaps she could have eventually moved on or felt that he had abandoned her and in anger renounced her love for him. Either way it is unlikely that she would have died so forlorn, and at the least could have still depended on her brothers and perhaps even taken their advice to marry. His return

dooms her life, for she becomes truly alone and crazed – ‘and so she died forlorn, imploring for her basil to the last (...) ‘O cruelty, to steal my basil-pot away from me!’ ‘ Here, then, we find Keats blurring the boundaries of villain and victim so much that one character can fit into both categories; Lorenzo is both victim and villain within the poem, to such an extent that he can only be described as both rather than as one or the other. Keats’ point in doing this may have been to question whether clinging onto the dead can ever bring satisfaction, or perhaps to prove that ‘true love’ can make villains out of victims due to their need to cling to their lover.

In conclusion, it is true that in Keats’ poems the boundaries between victim and villain are continually blurred due to his love of making the writer think about the meanings of his poems. This feature makes the poems multi-dimensional by providing different perspectives of most characters, and is therefore essential in all Keats’ poems.

Examiner commentary

This is a detailed response and the candidate fully engages with the task making very good selections from three of the four set poems to answer the question. Throughout the answer there is a very secure focus on the key terms of ‘continuously blurred’, ‘victims’ and ‘villains’ and the candidate offers comprehensive coverage for an AS response. Although not all points are sharply expressed and although at times the candidate writes about the characters as if they are real, the candidate is clearly thinking here and there is some complexity in the argument. Credit is therefore given for the ambitious approach.

A01 – this is a perceptive argument and the candidate structures ideas in an assured way. Literary critical concepts and terminology are confidently used and for the most part the expression is mature and impressive. The conclusion is a little flat and nothing would be lost if it were omitted.

A02 – the candidate has an excellent sense of the ways Keats crafts his tragic stories and there is relevant analysis of the given extract which is worked seamlessly into the argument. The candidate is very clear about how meanings are shaped by the methods Keats employs. There is some impressive analysis of Keats’ use of setting, titles of poems and structure.

A03 – there is perceptive understanding of a number of relevant contexts including the literary, moral, gender and biographical contexts, all of which are integrated into the answer. The contextual discussion is also linked to comments about the tragic genre.

A04 – in writing so securely about villains and victims and tragic outcomes the candidate perceptively shows an understanding of the wider tragic genre and connects well with it.

A05 – the candidate’s argument is personal and confident. Ideas are explored and points are supported with relevant textual detail. There is plenty of sophisticated debate going on throughout the answer.

This seems to be comfortably operating in Band 5.