

Aspects of comedy: Exemplar student response and commentary (AS paper 1, Section B)

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 1, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

Sample script – Paper 1B, Section B, band 4/5 response

Explore the view that, in *She Stoops to Conquer*, barmaids are not simply figures of fun, they are positively celebrated.

Remember to include in your answer relevant comment on Goldsmith's dramatic methods.

Given the high 'laughing' comedy of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* it is hard to see any character or character type being celebrated. While it is true that Tony Lumpkin adores Bet Bouncer and in performance she is often portrayed as a barmaid, it is not the case that the play 'celebrates' barmaids since no-one is really celebrated. In this play, Goldsmith mocks the townsfolk and the country folk, the lower class drinking males and the women who serve them their beer – whether this is the disguised Kate Hardcastle or the lusty Bet Bouncer. I would therefore argue that barmaids are simply figures of fun – just as the gentry are and the gentlemen from the town. There is not anyone in the play who is not portrayed as ridiculous – a figure of fun – at some point in the play.

If anyone is celebrated in this play though, it is Kate Hardcastle – not because she is a barmaid, because she isn't, but because she is an intelligent trickster who dons the trappings of a barmaid to teach Marlow 'a little confidence'. She 'stoops' to conquer him. (The word stoops is important here as it does not suggest that barmaids are figures to be celebrated). When she meets her prospective husband she finds his bashfulness tedious but as becomes a comedy, she believes he may have many 'good qualities under his first appearance'. It is Kate's maid who gives her the idea of 'becoming' a barmaid as she tells Kate that Marlow asked her if Kate were a barmaid of the inn (which Tony has tricked him into believing is the Hardcastle's mansion). Kate then seizes the opportunity of using her acting skills to take Marlow off his guard and become an 'invisible champion of romance'. The encounter between Kate as barmaid and Marlow is funny. Even though she has the upper hand she surely makes barmaids figures

of fun when she speaks in a common tongue 'O la, sir, you'll make one ashamed', when she mispronounces words – 'obstropolous' for obstreperous and when she tries to evade the advances of Marlow's lips as he tries to kiss her by comparing herself to a horse, 'One would think you wanted to know one's age as they do horses, by mark of mouth'.

When Marlow is talking to Hastings about his nervousness around sophisticated women, he admits that he is completely different among lower class women. He confesses that fine women freeze him but barmaids and college bed-makers make him feel relaxed. This is not, however, proof that barmaids are celebrated in Goldsmith's play. After all, Marlow cuts a comic figure when he stammers in front of Kate and he is somewhat rude and ill-mannered when talking about the lower classes – and barmaids in particular. He doesn't celebrate them, he demeans them with his coarse behaviour. This can be seen when he is first with Kate the pretending barmaid. He has barely exchanged half a dozen sentences with her before he makes passes at her and then tries to kiss her. Though it may be a comedy, this is hardly a way of 'celebrating' the barmaid.

The other possible way it could be argued that barmaids are celebrated is through the character of Bet Bouncer and Goldsmith's choice of her name perhaps gives her celebrity status of a sort. Whether she is a barmaid though is debatable. Although many readers assume that she is a barmaid in *The Three Pigeons*, there is no specific evidence for this and Bet is not given a speaking part so she is certainly not celebrated through her own voice. However, she is certainly admired by Tony Lumpkin who talks fondly of her on many occasions. At the start of the play when Tony is in the alehouse singing with his drinking cronies, he states his interest in Bet and later when he talks to Hastings about his lack of interest in Constance Neville, his mother's choice of marriage partner, he says 'Ah! Could you but see Bet Bouncer of these parts, you might then talk of beauty'. At the end of the play when Tony has outmanoeuvred his mother, he is given the final words to speak in an Epilogue, in which he speaks of his hopes of going to London with 'big Bet Bouncer' who will bob 'to all she meets'. This could be seen as a celebration but Tony is the play's fool and it is hardly a recommendation to be praised by a fool.

In writing this play, Goldsmith did not want the play to be a sentimental comedy with noble speech, noble ideas and serious emotions. He wanted to make people laugh and to imitate ancient traditional comedy where audiences could laugh at low born characters and foolish behaviour. (He uses the Prologue to make his intentions clear). 'Celebration' would suggest a different kind of play from the one Goldsmith wrote. For this reason I think that barmaids are simply figures of fun, but then so are country bumpkins, would be inn keepers, high born country women, and gentlemen of the town.

Examiner commentary

This is a confident, focused and well written response and the candidate makes a number of clearly developed points about whether barmaids are simply figures

of fun in Goldsmith's play or whether they are celebrated. The student offers a range of points and there is relevant support for them. Some points could have benefited from further development and in places the answer becomes a little descriptive but the argument is sustained. Although this is a closed book exam, the student uses some relevant details and relevant quotations. Some very good choices are made here.

A01 – The essay is very well structured and the task is clearly focused upon. The candidate shapes the argument well and writes in an assured way with a clear personal voice. There is appropriate use of critical concepts and terminology and the expression is precise and accurate.

A02 – There is good understanding that Goldsmith's text is a drama. The student incorporates ideas about the play's structure and the kind of comedy it is, and although these ideas could have been developed more, there is some perception. Some relevant comments are made about language.

A03 – There is good understanding of the dramatic context of the play and there is some relevant discussion of attitudes to the different classes as represented in the play.

A04 – As the candidate engages with the task and the light hearted tone of the play and the demands of comedy, there is logical and consistent exploration of connections across literary texts showing very good understanding of the generic study of comedy.

A05 – There is thorough and confident engagement with the debate set up in the task and the student clearly disagrees with the proposition. The candidate is thinking well about the task.

This response seems to be operating at the border between Band 4 and Band 5.