

Aspects of tragedy: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 2A, Section A)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 2A.

Paper 2A, Section A, Band 4

Sample question

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

Sample response

Keats writes in the tragic tradition, which is characterised by the inclusion of a tragic victim, being a, typically high status, individual that undergoes a downfall as a result of a tragic flaw, or hamartia. At least partially, if not fully responsible for that downfall, is a villain, who is a character inflicting harm on others, acting in their own self-interest. A boundary is a border or a parameter, and the idea that this is continually blurred means that it is consistently unclear. Characters may show traits of both victims and villains. In this sense, the boundaries between Keats' victims and villains are indeed consistently blurred as a result of certain authorial methods employed by Keats in *Lamia*, *Isabella* or *The Pot of Basil*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

In this particular extract, Apollonius is introduced by Keats'. Lycius describes him as a "good instructor" (387) however states that he seems "The ghost of folly (388)". This causes the reader to be unsure of whether or not to trust Apollonius as Lycius' initial positive description of him is then contradicted with a gothic element of "ghost". This feature of the gothic is also used by Keats in *The Eve of St Agnes*, with reference to the "moonlight" (290). The darkness of the room when Porphyro watches Madeline makes the reader uncomfortable and causes them to question whether or not Porphyro is a villain.

The reference to a "tongueless nightingale" in *The Eve of St Agnes* is referencing the tale of Philomel an innocent woman who was raped by her brother-in-law and had her tongue cut off to silence her. One may interpret this as a mere reference to the fact that Madeline cannot talk as part of her ritual, however the hints at sexual violence blurs the boundary between victim and villain, as we begin to question Porphyro's intention.

The use of the narrator in Keats' poetry has a profound influence upon who we perceive to be the victim and villain. In *Isabella* or *The Pot of Basil*, the narrator uses anaphora "why were they proud?" in Stanza XVI to point to a conclusion that they have no reason to be, shaping us through a didactic method of *verfremdungseffekt* to believe that the brothers are villains. The boundary however is blurred through Keats' decision to not detail their murder of Lorenzo. This is potentially to not hold them accountable as villains if we later decide that they felt guilt shown through their self-banishment "with blood upon their heads". This, however, contrasts with the extremely negative light that they are portrayed in the "capitalist stanzas", which George Bernard Shaw refers to as "a prophetic marxist commentary". One could argue that the brothers themselves are the victims of their society, as they are described as "men of cruel clay" implying that they were shaped by their society. This is further developed as they approach the murder of Lorenzo "sick and wan", suggesting that the murder is not something that they relish doing, but something that must be done.

In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, it seems obvious that given the rank of knight, due to connotations of nobility and high status, who undergoes a downfall to which the narrator shows sympathy when he questions "what can ail thee?" that he is the victim. The woman's perspective however is not given. A modern reader would say that this in itself was grounds for believing that the woman is the victim, further blurring the boundaries. She is repeatedly described with reference to her "wild eyes" which could be both interpreted as meaning free spirited, painting her in a positive light, or alternatively as dangerous. This ambiguity blurs the boundaries between victims and villains further.

In conclusion, Keats blurs the boundaries between victims and villains in his play, adding a sense of dimension and realism to his characters that operate in such sublime and ethereal settings.

Examiner commentary

In this response the student has the question in mind throughout and there are good selections of material. The student's planning seems to have been helpful. There is some conviction in the argument although some of the ideas could be more securely developed. A weakness of the response is the limited focus on the extract and opportunities are not taken to develop the argument by using the given relevant passage to explore AO2 in relation to the question. The student hits all the AOs appropriately throughout the answer and generally integrates them into the argument.

The student begins by focusing sharply on the task though the unpicking of the task is somewhat mechanistic. Understanding of the task can be shown in ways other than explaining what the key terms (villains, victims, blurred and boundaries) mean and although the student shows she understands AO4, the approach is heavy handed.

A relevant point is made in the second paragraph about the ambiguity surrounding Apollonius and some attention is given to the extract. However, the

student does not stay with it long and soon moves on to discuss *The Eve of St Agnes* in relation to the gothic and here the argument is not very sharp. The student tends to pick out a detail – here the nightingale – and then discuss its significance rather than creating an argument to drive through ideas. This is also true in the discussion of *Isabella or The Pot of Basil* where it seems that the student is more concerned about getting terms into the answer (anaphora, verfremdungseffekt) than foregrounding the argument. However, there are points to credit in this section, for example the ideas about Porphyro and whether he is a victim or villain and the ideas about the killers of Lorenzo. There is also an awareness of Keats' literary context with the discussion of the nightingale. The student has clear understanding of Keats' authorial methods (his not detailing the brothers' murder) and this strengthens the argument. There is good discussion of different ways of interpreting the actions of the brothers and the Marxist approach works well both in terms of A03 and A05 and the comments are securely integrated.

Some apt discussion is given of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and although the assertion about what 'a modern reader' would think is not very helpful, there is some good commenting.

Overall this answer is a little inconsistent, but there is a good range of material and the student's knowledge is secure and selections are judicious. The argument is a little better than 'straight forward and relevant' and seems to just tip into Band 4.