

NEA: Theory and independence

example conventional response

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, in this case, a conventional response rather than a re-creative piece. The moderator commentary illustrates why the response has been placed within a particular band of the assessment criteria. This resource should be read in conjunction with the accompanying document 'Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment'.

Example student response D – Band 4

It's Time to Reclaim Shelley – He's Too Good for the Canon!

Imagine that on the occasion of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012 the poet Laureate chose to write a poem which depicted certain members of the coalition government as the embodiments of hypocrisy, fraud and murder. Such an irreverent poem, which depicted monarchy, state and church as one unholy trinity, slaughtering the masses and wielding their power with impunity, would be unthinkable (and it certainly would not be published within the pages of the broadsheet press).

Poet Laureates and the literary canon serve many of the same purposes; they both signal approval and they both cloak self-justification in the language of objectivity. Canonical writings are said to deal with 'universal themes', be complex and challenging and yet have artistic unity and relevance across time. The poet Laureate is also 'respected' and 'acclaimed', supposedly embodying all that is good about the nation and its literature. What this means in practice is that the poet Laureate, and the canon itself, have to meet an unstated requirement of non-offensiveness to the ruling class and its ideology.

There are however a few outstanding examples within the canon that don't meet the above criteria. Many relate to the work of the Romantic poets, a group whose poetry is unashamedly politically radical yet still it forms an integral part of many English Literature degree courses, even at the most conservative of universities. At the heart of this group of protest writers is the belligerent figure of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Upon closer inspection his poetry reveals why he should not be considered as part of the canon, not because his work is of insufficient value, but because it shows us a poet whose passion and message is not one to be colonised and owned by a ruling elite. He is, above all things, the voice of his age and the voice of the people.

Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* has been lauded as 'the greatest political poem in English'¹. Most canonical texts, due to the requirement for relevance and greatness over time, do not

1 Richard Holmes, *Shelley, The Pursuit*, 1974 (1st Edition)

address specific contemporary political concerns but instead focus on the eternal human condition. At the very least canonical texts tend to be coolheaded rather than polemical in their engagement with current realities. Not so with Shelley. He references several contemporary government figures and subjects them to unremitting condemnation in his poem, 'I met murder on the way he had a mask like Castlereagh'.

Some would argue that Shelley is using the events of his present time to elucidate on the universal themes we have come to expect of canonical writing and, for sure, there is a beautiful passage which poses the philosophical question 'What art thou freedom?' However it would be a more accurate interpretation of Shelley's work to say he is not using the present as a means of highlighting a broader philosophical point but rather that the philosophy is a means to call for action within the present as he urges his readers to 'Rise like lions after slumber in unvanquishable number'. This call to action surely makes the poem 'great', even though it goes against the vested interests of so many of the Establishment and challenges the position of powerful people like 'Lawyers and priests, a motley crew'.

The idea that pieces of art can embody values that are universal to all is ultimately a myth. Even those who hold this view should recognise that Shelley's work does not do this. *The Mask of Anarchy* is specifically appealing to the masses and does not try to maintain some phoney pretence of general values that transcend class boundaries. Its politics are radical and thus controversial and so surely it does not belong in a canon which proclaims itself as the guardian of some set of universal values?

The sonnet *England in 1819*, written in the same year as *The Mask of Anarchy*, is another of Shelley's poems that attacks figures and events of the day. The 'old, mad, blind, despis'd and dying King' is George III and his sons are 'the dregs of their dull race'. Shelley's anger courses through the poem as he attacks 'Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know'. He cries out on behalf of the people who suffer within their 'fainting country' and refers to the infamous Peterloo Massacre when he describes 'A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field'. In this poem Shelley uses the traditional, courtly form of the sonnet and turns it against the court, listing its failings relentlessly as the poem builds towards its climax.

In both *The Mask of Anarchy* and *England in 1819* Shelley allows his language, at times, to be inelegant and uncontrolled; the emotions that drive his verse being more important than the finesse of the poetry. Language in canonical pieces, on the other hand, often revels in carefully crafted complexity and ambiguity. Shelley's images and metaphors are stark and vivid - the rulers are blood-sucking leeches, the multitude stand 'ankle deep in blood'. There are images that are simple and dramatic, involving 'lions' and 'rushing light', which give his poems great energy and accessibility. The structure of his poems also contributes to their accessibility. *England in 1819* is a sonnet driven by the energetic force of its opening sestet and, while there are some more obscure images in the octet, the poem concludes with the vivid, but fleeting, image of Liberty triumphant. *The Mask of Anarchy* resembles, more than anything, a traditional ballad; it has 91 verses, most comprising of a pair of rhyming couplets. The strong and regular rhythm gives the poem an accessible energy and Shelley deliberately uses this simple form and language so that his work is open to all readers. None are excluded by complexity or difficulty; this is poetic democracy in operation.

Compare this raw, accessible writing to the craftsmanship of Shakespeare, the ultimate canonical writer. In his play *Henry V* such self-control is exhibited that the protagonist can be interpreted as both a great King and an evil war mongerer. Shakespeare pens a piece so delicately balanced that none of his own personal political viewpoint is evident and multiple

possible interpretations are simultaneously open to the reader. The same quality cannot be said to be found in Shelley's poetry, whose angry political message is impossible to mistake.

That is not to say that *The Mask of Anarchy* and *England in 1819* are not worth reading, they most certainly are, but their worth primarily lies in the powerful way in which they point to injustices within the society in which they were written. There may be analogies with modern times, where the uncaring rich get wealthier while the poorest parts of society bear the brunt of cut backs, but these are fortuitous rather than planned. Shelley's poems are bound by their context, they have meaning and power because they are tied to and comment upon the world around them, so they surely fail the test of universality that the canon appears to hold so dear.

When considering the worth of Shelley's poems it is perhaps more meaningful to speak of their utility, as opposed to their aesthetic qualities. This goes against the role that literature is supposed to fill in the canonical conception of it. The canon often exalts writings which it claims represent 'art for art's sake', as if great literature exists in a vacuum, removed from and unsullied by the drudgery of everyday life. Shelley's poems, on the other hand, are intrinsically linked to his society and the fortunes of the oppressed within it. In *The Mask of Anarchy* the oppressive forces of 'God, and King, and Law' are condemned and Shelley calls for a new force in society, 'Let a great assembly be, of the fearless, of the free'. In writing poetry that is a direct criticism of political figures, the Home Secretary is Hypocrisy and the Lord Chancellor is Fraud, and which is also a call for social action, Shelley departs from his purely 'artistic' role as a poet and adopts a more practical one.

The value that is assigned to a text is, in reality, down to an assessment of its worth and usefulness and that is dependent on context. A piece of art might reflect aspects of humanity or its potential; it might simply fulfil our human need for nourishment in the form of comedy or drama. If a piece of art is worthy because it is useful and serves a purpose, in a broad sense, then the canon as a fixed, immovable reference point to the 'greats' is inherently flawed.

Shakespeare, in some societies or situations, may seem to offer impoverished and limited insights and yet the canon is not designed to take account of this.

The canon is too staid and detached from 'real life' to house a writer like Shelley. His work is too vibrant, too relevant and speaks too directly to everyday people for it to be burdened with a label that is synonymous with elitism, detachment and obscurity. Save Shelley from the canon; he deserves so much better!

Bibliography and references

Shelley, *The Pursuit* (1974) 1st Edition, Richard Holmes

Moderator commentary

This journalistic style piece, suitable for publication in an English Literature magazine such as *emag* or the literature supplement of a newspaper, counts as a conventional response within the NEA folder. It is lively and well written with a clear point of view and line of argument. It takes a rather unusual approach in relation to the canon, by arguing Shelley's writing does not meet the criteria for canonical literature but that that is, in fact, its strength. In explaining their point of view the student shows a good understanding of the ideas about the canon from the critical anthology. They do not directly quote from the critical material but that is perhaps to be expected in a piece of this nature. The student addresses AO2 by considering the form and language of the poems and ideas about context are woven in throughout as they are central to their line of argument. There is an awareness that different ideas exist about literature and that these may alter over time, although the student is persuasive in arguing the point that Shelley's work is, to a large degree, intentionally time-bound.

Although the student has met the requirements of the unit by referencing two poems from Shelley's collected works (a single authored published collection) more political poems could have profitably been explored and this would have enhanced the piece. It is a shame this student has only covered two poems as the argument would have been much stronger if more examples from Shelley's work had been used and this would have been more in the spirit of the unit.

Because of this limitation it is placed in mid (possibly high) band 4.