

NEA: Theory and independence

example conventional response

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, in this case, a re-creative response with an accompanying commentary. 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 B – Band 4/5

Write a letter or produce a journal entry which fills in one of the 'narrative gaps' in *Pride and Prejudice*.

My dear Lady Catherine de Bourgh,

Please excuse my presumptuousness in writing but news of an alarming nature has reached me and, as I am unable at present to visit Rosings and pay my respects in person, due to being incommoded with a touch of head cold and not wishing to impart it to your Ladyship, I find myself compelled to convey in writing the discoveries that have recently been uncovered to me. I can only apologise profusely that I have not been more alert and observant of the activities within my own household but my dear wife, Mrs Collins, has been so encouraging me to take the outdoor air, for the benefit of my constitution, that I have been much away from home recently. It was only when I, perchance, happened across a letter to my dear wife from her friend, Miss Elizabeth Bennett, that I became alarmed. On closer questioning of Mrs Collins I discovered a state of affairs that I knew I must apprise you of forthwith. I only hope you will not too harshly condemn my tardiness in unearthing this scandalous situation and not consider me remiss in my service to you, to whom I owe the utmost respect and admiration.

My dear Lady Catherine, I can hardly bring myself to write the words but it would appear that your nephew, the esteemed Mr Darcy, has made a proposal of matrimony to Miss Elizabeth Bennett of Longbourn. This is the same Miss Bennett to whom you so graciously extended your patronage and hospitality during her recent stay with myself and my wife. In fact it was during her stay with my dear Charlotte and myself that he made his proposal! Believe me, Lady Catherine, I could not be more mortified that myself and my household have somehow, however unwittingly, contributed to this calamitous state of affairs by sheltering Miss Bennett under our roof. I have, of course, chastised Mrs Collins for keeping this news from me for so long but she felt it was not her secret to tell and I hope your ladyship can excuse her and forgive her misguided loyalty to her childhood friend.

I cannot imagine how you must be feeling on hearing this news, following as it does the

disgraceful and shameful escapades of the youngest daughter of that house. I have already written to inform Mr Bennett that the death of his daughter would have been preferable to the sorrow and disgrace she has brought down upon her whole family and as you yourself so insightfully pointed out just recently, no one of any standing will wish to be connected with the Bennetts now. I cannot for one moment believe that your nephew, given his long-standing tacit engagement to your own lovely daughter, was thinking correctly when he made his proposal; I am sure he was hood-winked by the guiles of a young woman who clearly has ambitions beyond her station.

I do not wish to speak ill of my cousin and I admit there was a brief moment when I did consider her as a suitable candidate to be my life partner but, Lady Catherine, I cannot express how grateful I am that I avoided the trap into which your poor, unfortunate nephew seems to have fallen. I would not have thought it of Miss Elizabeth Bennett but she is clearly a young woman who refuses to obey the claims of duty, honour and gratitude. Rather than being humbly grateful for the attentions you bestowed on her in the spring she was clearly, all along, attempting to ensnare your nephew's affections and destroy the noble line of your great household. Elizabeth is a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world and she is wholly unallied to the great de Bourgh family. Her alliance with your nephew would be a disgrace; they would be censured, slighted and despised by polite society and it would be impossible for your Ladyship to receive them.

Please forgive the peremptory tone in which I write but I feel as deeply moved as I know your ladyship must be. Honour, decorum, prudence and interest surely forbid this marriage and I am shocked that my cousin is so lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy. Your charming nephew is a man like any other and he has clearly been beguiled by the fine eyes and the upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections or fortune.

Oh my dear Lady Catherine, I urge you to seek out the offending party and discover the truth behind these reports. He may have proposed marriage but it is surely a scandalous falsehood that he is actually to enter into wedlock with her. You are his nearest relation in the world and have every right to be told the truth, then you can insist upon having such a report universally contradicted. If the shades of Pemberley are not to be thus polluted decisive action must be taken immediately, there is not a moment to lose.

God speed your Ladyship

Your ever humble servant

William Collins, Esq

Student commentary

I was very interested by the bold statement made by Porter Abbott in the *AQA Critical Anthology* that 'narratives by their nature are riddled with gaps' and that part of the reading process involves the reader in filling in those gaps, consciously or otherwise. This struck me as being very interesting when applied to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* which, once I started to look for them, seemed full of narrative gaps. I realised that we find out virtually nothing about life below stairs in the households of the novel; we do not know where Mr Darcy's (or indeed anyone's) money comes from and we do not witness the first meeting between Darcy and Wickham when he discovers him with Lydia. There are so many narrative gaps but one of the most significant, to me, is that the narrative does not make it clear how Lady Catherine comes by the 'report of a most alarming nature' that prompts her to visit Elizabeth Bennett and confront her about her relationship with Mr Darcy. This unseen event is crucial to the plot of the novel as it sets in motion a chain of events that lead to the narrative's conclusion – Lady Catherine is so outraged she confronts Lizzie; Lizzie's attitude to Lady Catherine causes Mr Darcy to 'hope' as he had 'scarcely ever allowed' himself to hope before; he is encouraged to renew his attentions to Lizzie and repeat his offer of marriage which, given her change of heart, is then accepted. The resolution which at one point in the narrative seemed so difficult is then achieved.

I was intrigued to investigate who could have told Lady Catherine the news of Darcy's proposal. Given her status in society and the secluded, carefully stage-managed life she leads at Rosings she is unlikely to happen upon such news, particularly given the fact that as far as the reader is aware Lizzie only informs her sister Jane. In an age before digital communication she could not have stumbled upon a rumour, as characters in novels might do nowadays, by overhearing a telephone call or being sent a text message. I realised that the only plausible solution was to consider a character who is part of Lady Catherine's circle and who would be eager to pass on such news should it come their way. I decided the character most likely to have communicated the news to Lady Catherine is Mr Collins. This is consistent with his character as we witness it in the novel; he is completely in awe of Lady Catherine and prepared to do anything he can to curry favour with her. He would realise how outraged she would be should the match go ahead and would be keen to inform her forthwith. In my text I have deliberately given him some of the language that she then uses in her exchange with Lizzie, as if she is being fuelled by his dramatizing of the event. I wondered also if he, being a jealous and mean-spirited man, would also be motivated to spoil Lizzie's chances given her earlier rejection of him?

However if, as in my reading, Mr Collins is the one who tells Lady Catherine, that does lead to the more interesting question of who tells him and why. The answer has to be his wife, the only other character it is believable that Lizzie tells, given they are longstanding friends and the proposal occurs while Lizzie is staying with Charlotte and Mr Collins. However, why would Charlotte do such a thing? She would know that her husband, delighting in being the bearer of bad news, would tell Lady Catherine and she would also know that Lady Catherine, who makes it quite clear on several occasions that her daughter is intended for Mr Darcy, would act decisively to put a stop to the proposed match. It is interesting to speculate that this, perhaps, illustrates a different side to Charlotte's character, another narrative gap, in that she knows what will happen as a result of her telling Lizzie's news and is doing so to deliberately destroy any chance of her friend making a union with the rich and handsome Darcy.

Could Charlotte, who ends up with Lizzie's 'ridiculous' reject, be taking her revenge on her younger and prettier friend who was so horrified at Charlotte's marriage?

This reading of Charlotte's character stems from the attempts to fill the narrative gap of who tells Lady Catherine the news. Other readings are of course possible but what is clear is that the narrative gains a certain 'dynamism' via this process. In the words of Abbott 'narrative comes alive as we fill in the gaps'.

Moderator's commentary

The student has taken the idea of narrative gaps from the section in the critical anthology that considers different ideas about narrative. They have 'filled' one of those gaps in the re-creative piece and in the commentary have then explained how different possible ideas about the characters, particularly Charlotte, have emerged from that re-creative process. There is some consideration of how the context of the text has a bearing on the plot and the student touches on the idea that modern narratives would, inevitably, work in different ways due to operating within a different social environment. There is a sense of how meanings are created in the base text and a link is made to it via the language of the letter. The student also considers how this point in the narrative is positioned within the narrative overall and they consider how it effectively marks the beginning of the ending. The voice is convincing and consistent with the character of Mr Collins however in the piece and commentary there is limited focus on AO2. Although the student touches on the shape of the narrative, opportunities to engage more with Austen's structuring of her novel could have been taken.

As it stands this piece seems to be operating at the top end of Band 4 or the lower end of Band 5 but it has potential.

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