

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 A – Band 5

Using Tennyson's '*Ulysses*', write a monologue by Ulysses' wife in which she reflects on the words he speaks.

Use ideas from the critical anthology to inform your work and include a commentary explaining how you have explored ideas from Feminist Theory and Narrative Theory.

The aged wife's story

I have been patient before and I must be patient again but my heart is breaking.

I hurt so much... to mean so little. I know I am old and long gone is my beauty but to mean so little, to be dismissed so easily. Am I no more than 'an aged wife'?

But I must be patient. I must not think of my own pain. In all the years, I have not dwelt on that. And now again, I have to think of him.

He is lost. His mind is adrift, floundering on the high seas he speaks of – or on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

He did not know I was here; did not know I could hear him speaking to himself. To him I am invisible, but I watched him and I heard. Perhaps it was just a rehearsal, a preparation for a ceremonious farewell – his final speech. Perhaps he has not lost his mind. Perhaps I am mistaken. But no... He believed he had an audience, he believed he was leaving today. He said his farewells and there was no one there.

It was pitiful. He stood alone – an old man, my husband, king of Ithaca and all those empty rhetorical flourishes – 'I am become a name; for always roaming with a hungry heart'. It pains me to remember what he said: 'Life piled on life were all too little' and 'this gray spirit yearning in desire'. He explained why he must leave, relived his past glories for what he felt were his captured listeners. – But there was no-one there.

I am so unhappy. I know he is no longer in his right mind. He seemed to think that there were

people listening to him, sympathising. But who were these people he had invented? Who would think it right to dismiss your wife and your countrymen. He hates his subjects, no more to him than a 'savage race', hates them because they do not 'know' him, do not understand what he was. I think he hates himself too. He knows he has failed as a king. He has no respect for his governance in the here and now... no place in the here and now.

Only when his memory took him away from 'this still hearth' did he come alive. He wants to be what he once was – a young man full of vigour, daring life with his comrades. He clearly loved those with whom he suffered greatly, enjoyed greatly. There was no mention of me. There he stood, telling the empty house of his love of adventure, of his experiences across the globe, of the honour he received. My heart weeps for him. He spoke of his life now as dull, a life rusting unburnished. And what he wants is still to be drinking the delights of battle with his fellow men, reliving Troy.

It was all so painful to hear. He knows that despite his imaginings the eternal silence is so very near. It was desperate – the desire to experience more of the gleaming untravelled world, to seek knowledge beyond human thought. Oh I know the words sounded admirable, noble even, but there was no-one listening. There was only himself, an old man – and me behind the door.

And it didn't stop there. Next he imagined Telemachus our son had entered the scene. And then such an elaborate deposition; he bequeathed to our son the sceptre and the isle. Did he expect his audience to applaud? Did he think he sounded sincere when he claimed that his son is well loved, sensitive and capable? He did not fool me. He has always felt contempt for Telemachus's tenderness. How feeble his words of praise sounded: Telemachus, so 'discerning', so ready to 'subdue' the people 'to the useful and the good'. In the end I don't think he could pretend any further, not even to himself: 'He works his work, I mine'. His interest was again on himself and the dream moved on.

And now for the last scene of all. He saw himself standing near the port – and all the while still by our hearth. He seemed to be in a reverie, seeing the vessel puff her sails, energised by the sight of his mariners. It was pitiful to hear him address them – 'You and I are old; Old age hath yet his honour and his toil', urging them forward, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world'.

But where has he gone to now? Why did I not speak to him? Why could he not have asked me to go with him to touch the Happy Isles?

I am no one. Just an aged wife. He wants to die and I cannot help him. Just an aged wife.

Student commentary

Having read a selection of Tennyson's poems in which narrative gaps occur – '*Mariana*' and the uncertainty of the narrative outcome, '*The Lady of Shalott*' and how she becomes encased in the tower, '*The Lotos Eaters* and *Choric Song*' and whether the mariners stay on the island intoxicated by the lotos plant or return home and '*Godiva*' and how the grim earl responds to her heroic naked ride through the streets of Coventry - I decided to look at the gaps in '*Ulysses*' and recentre the story from Ulysses' wife's point of view. I also applied the view of Macherey quoted by Peck and Coyle in the AQA critical anthology that the reader sees what the text is hiding from itself. The most common interpretation of the poem is that it is a celebration of those who want always to seek newer worlds and sail beyond the sunset, but this might just be Tennyson representing on a surface level the ideological code of his Victorian age – a code which promoted the adventuring pioneering spirit of men.

Ulysses' story is riddled with gaps and ambiguities. In '*Ulysses*' the key gaps are what does Penelope think, who is he addressing and what happens at the end. Abbot suggests that narratives gain in dynamism through the limitations of information given to us and this is certainly true of Ulysses' story. In my recreative response I sought to keep some of those ambiguities alive by suggesting that Ulysses could be mad, speaking to himself throughout his monologue or that his wife is a mis-reader of her husband. Perhaps, as he says of the savage rage, she also does not know him.

In my reading I also wanted to create a voice that could draw attention to the unreliability of Ulysses' first person narration though in doing this I have also drawn attention to his wife's potential unreliability. Lodge says though, that first person narrators cannot be totally unreliable (If everything he... says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that [the story] is a work of fiction'). In choosing Penelope as the voice which commentates on Ulysses judgements, I wanted to draw attention to the 'possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world' of the text. Ulysses, as an unreliable narrator, reveals the gap between appearance and reality. How he wants to be seen is not how he is seen by his wife and perhaps how Tennyson wants him to be seen is not how he is seen by readers. I have created Penelope as an emotional figure, but she has a clear view of her husband. I have made her seem grounded.

In writing a monologue from Penelope's point of view, I also wanted to offer a specific reading of the poem, one which is from a feminist perspective and gives the silent woman a voice. Although there is no reference in the poem to Penelope's back story (her waiting for him for over twenty years in Homer's text) I have alluded to this in her monologue. What we hear in Tennyson's monologue is Ulysses' voice (the male gaze) and the words Ulysses speaks reflect the phallogentric nature of civilisation. The aged wife is cursorily dismissed at the start of the poem and Ulysses then glorifies the actions of men. However, in my monologue, a revision takes place. Penelope rewrites the story, drawing attention to the fantasy world that her husband inhabits. Ulysses is not so much a hero but an old man who is losing his mind. He addresses not a large sympathetic male audience but the air. In reading the text in this way, I answer one of the ambiguities set up in the text about who Ulysses is actually addressing in his monologue. While some commentators suggest that there are three audiences, I suggest that there is only one: Ulysses himself. He rehearses the words he would like to speak to his son and to his mariners but the words are in his head.

Much critical debate has also centred on Ulysses' spirit, his being a role model for old people on how to conduct themselves in their twilight years. Sterne refers to Ulysses' Churchillian

spirit – presumably thinking of his call to his mariners to brace themselves with ‘One equal temper of heroic hearts ... strong in will/ To strive to seek, to find, and not to yield’. The fact that these words come at the end of the poem sharpen their impact.

The reading I am favouring here is of Ulysses as an old man, perhaps like Lear on the verge of dementia, who cannot cope with growing old and therefore resorts to fantasy, finding solace and meaning only in reliving his heroic past. However, I keep alive the ambiguity by suggesting that Penelope might be mistaken in her judgement and that Ulysses has in fact now left the island with his sailors.

Bibliography

AQA poetry anthology

AQA critical anthology

J B Sterne Tennyson

Moderator's commentary

This is an interesting recreative piece and there are a number of skills shown in this response. The voice is convincing and the piece is clearly anchored in the text. The commentary establishes effective connections with both the critical anthology and the base text which is not an easy task. The student makes it clear that other Tennyson poems have been read and that a clear choice has been made for this piece. The comments on the other poems show that there is clear understanding of how Tennyson uses narrative gaps in the telling of his stories. Perhaps at times points could have been a little more sharply made, but this is still an impressive piece.

Assessment objectives

AO1: This is a perceptive response and in both the recreative piece and the commentary there is some sophisticated writing. There is an assured use of critical concepts in the commentary.

AO2: There is very good understanding of how monologues work – demonstrated in both the recreative piece and the commentary. There is also an assured understanding of voice and structure. Comments on Tennyson's language are well integrated.

AO3: The sense of literary and cultural contexts is admirable. There is valid commenting on gender issues and on Tennyson's own time period. These contexts are integrated into the overarching argument put forward in the commentary.

AO4: Connections across texts are well made here with close links between Tennyson's poem and ideas from the critical anthology on feminist and narrative theory.

AO5: There is perception and confidence in the argument here and the recreative piece is clearly a part of the debate. Different interpretations are evident and the student has taken an unusual but plausible angle on how to assess *Ulysses*.

This seems to be comfortably operating in Band 5.