Sample response: Poetry

Question:
Wilfred Owen’s poetry is shaped by an intense focus on extraordinary human experiences. Select TWO poems set for study and explore Owen’s portrayal of suffering and pity.

Prescribed text: War Poems and Others, Wilfred Owen

War changes young men and this is seen in the negative imagery and diction used by Owen. In ‘Mental Cases’ they are mentally ruined, their minds destroyed by the sight, sound and memories of so much death. Death is personified as the ravisher of their minds, an image suggesting that the carnage of the battlefield has irrevocably robbed them of their innocence and of their selves. They now “leer”, with “jaws that slob”, unable to control their facial expressions or their minds. They are unable to comprehend the reality of the world around them, instead living inside a mental hell that replays the war daily, when “Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh”.

Owen uses ironic subversion in the opening stanza of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’. We assume the people who are described as “bent double, like old beggars”, “knock-kneed, coughing”, “lame”, “blind” and “deaf” are old and decrepit. It is a shock when they suddenly spring into action at the start of the gas attack and we realise that they are really young men, made prematurely old through fatigue and injury. In this poem, the soldiers are also changed in other ways. Their concern for each other, “GAS! Quick boys!”, becomes callousness when the dying man is “flung” into the wagon; they know he will not survive, they have seen too much death already and they have no time for the niceties of civilian death. The dying man is changed as well. The agony changes him into a “devil”, “corrupt”, “bitter”, “vile” and “incurable”, the horror of war stripping him of his dignity, innocence and humanity.

More specifically, Owen says that war is hell. In ‘Mental Cases’, the traumatised soldiers inhabit a twilight world that Owen describes as death in life. They sit in “purgatorial shadows”, they have “skulls”, not faces, and “their heads wear this hilarious, hideous / Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses”. The soft sounding alliteration of “set smiling” creates a contrast to the terrible scene. They exist in a living hell where in their waking moments they relive the deaths and awful slaughter of the battlefield, the “carnage incomparable”. Death has invaded their minds so entirely that they can no longer think of life and hope. Even the sunlight is a “blood-smear”. Hell is also depicted in the colours of “fire”, “lime” and “thick
green light” of the mustard gas in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and in the hideous death, where the dying soldier’s rictus resembles a devil’s evil smile and the blood he coughs up is “corrupted” by the disintegration of his lungs.

To invoke our pity about the extreme and unnecessary suffering in war, Owen depicts the physical and mental agonies of soldiers, both during the battles and long afterwards as well. ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ uses sound and visual imagery to convey the exhaustion, misery, pain and futility of war. We can see them: the battle-weary soldiers are “blood-shod” and we can hear them: the dying man is “guttering, choking, drowning”. Even dreams are “smothering”, with the suggestion of a nightmarish choking death. The soldier’s “white eyes writhing” and his “froth-corrupted lungs” tell us clearly how ghastly his death is. The use of the continuous present participle form in “smothering” and “choking, drowning” suggests the continuity of the actions which will replay in the soldiers’ minds long after the event. ‘Mental Cases’ also evokes pain and suffering through visual and aural imagery. On the battle-field the soldiers are “treading blood”. They see the “shatter of flying muscles” and “human squander / Rucked too thick”. In the hospital ward, these same men’s “eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains”. The physical pain of the battlefield is now the mental pain of shell-shock. They have waded through so much blood, flesh and carnage they cannot free their minds from the horror of it.

Owen reminds us that we have treated our soldiers shamefully and are complicit in their misery and suffering. This is the final point in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’. The title itself works ironically, playing with the expectations of the audience who would have known the phrase, ‘It is a sweet and fitting thing to die for one’s country,’ and would have expected a poem about the greatness of war. Having described the appalling death from mustard gas, he addresses his audience directly to state that it is not at all a great and glorious thing to die for one’s country. He likens the dead soldier to a child, an innocent doing an adult’s bidding and implies that his death is based on propaganda and deceit, perpetuated for thousands of years and never really questioned. The capitalisation of “Lie” tells us that this is a deceit that has become a significant cultural belief and we are responsible for the young man’s death if we believe or promote this lie. The patients in ‘Mental Cases’, despite their madness, also know that we are to blame for sending them to their destruction. Their apparently uncontrollable hands are really “Snatching after us who smote them” by sending them to war, and “Pawing us who dealt them war and madness”. Even in the depths of their trauma, they know that war is a collective responsibility, even if they are the ones who have been singled out for suffering.

The structure and metrical features of the poems frame Owen’s commentary on the suffering caused by war. Both poems have a regular metrical beat, slow and brooding, in keeping with their sombre subject matter. There is no rhyme in ‘Mental Cases’, reflecting the disordered worlds of the traumatised soldiers. The regularity of rhyme in ‘Dulce at Decorum Est’ belies the actual chaos of death in war. This is a poem where things are not as they seem – the old cripples are really young men, the apparent devil is really a dying man and the old belief that dying for one’s country is noble is exposed as a “Lie”. The structure of ‘Dulce at Decorum Est’ also misleads the reader. The first stanza creates a sense of fragile hope – men are returning from the battlefield, injured but alive. That hope is
destroyed in the second stanza and the nightmare couplet beginning “In all my dreams …” ushers in a situation where it is almost impossible to distinguish reality from nightmare. Having presented us with this horrific death, Owen then reminds us that it was founded on a lie. In ‘Mental Cases’, Owen presents an argument to the audience. The first stanza asks questions: Who are these people? What are they doing here? Is this place hell? These questions are answered in the second stanza, through descriptions of the living hell of war. The third stanza provides an explanation for their madness and clearly involves the reader in the causes of the soldiers’ suffering.

Essentially, by depicting the suffering, Owen arouses the reader’s pity. Even though his poems specifically address an early twentieth century audience, they have remained powerful because Owen makes statements about an extraordinary human experience that transcends its setting and conveys a message to all audiences in all times.

Working with the sample response

Read the Notes from the Marking Centre that appear below. Then complete the questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement from the Notes from the Marking Centre</th>
<th>Example from the response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A thoughtful selection of material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A genuine personal engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Find examples of lines in the sample response that respond to these statements from the Notes from the Marking Centre.

Notes from the Marking Centre: General Comments on Module B

Responses that demonstrated a thoughtful selection of material supported by relevant examples, and embarked on an exploration of the question that showed a genuine personal engagement were more successful than generic, formulaic responses. Even detailed responses must demonstrate relevant textual knowledge to gain high marks.

Poetry: Wilfred Owen, War Poems and Others

The better responses demonstrated effective explorations of ideas and emotions focusing on suffering and pity, and supported them with detailed, relevant textual knowledge and well-selected examples. They showed a keen understanding of how Owen had portrayed suffering. In general, responses were better at handling the concept of suffering than pity. Some candidates limited themselves by their choice of poems. Many candidates found ‘The Parable’ a challenging choice, while ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and ‘Disabled’ were successfully handled by most. Less successful responses dwelled more on recount, paraphrasing and description, and tended to ignore the set question.

While language and expression were generally adequate or better, the spelling, syntax and punctuation of many weaker responses limited their quality.