



Trial Examination 2021

Sample essays

QCE English Units 3&4

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ABOUT THE SAMPLE ESSAYS

The sample essays in this booklet are not intended to be prescriptive. Each essay represents one possible way to construct an informed and critical perspective in response to the question. It is recommended that these essays are dissected as learning tools rather than taking them as exact models of what should be replicated in exam conditions.

For your reference, these essays include page numbers or act/scene numbers for direct textual quotations, though students are not expected to include these in their external assessment essays. The quotations are taken from the following editions.

- Kent, Hannah (2013) *Burial Rites*, Picador, Sydney.
- Atwood, Margaret (1988) *Cat's Eye*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Shakespeare, William (2012) *Hamlet*, Collins Classics, London.
- Brontë, Charlotte (2010) *Jane Eyre*, Collins Classics, London.
- Shakespeare, William (2010) *Macbeth*, Collins Classics, London.
- Orwell, George (2008) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin, London.
- McGahan, Andrew (2005) *The White Earth*, Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest.
- Fowler, Karen Joy (2014) *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, Serpent's Tail, London.

The assessment instrument is used to determine student achievement in the following objectives.

1. use patterns and conventions of an analytical essay to respond to an unseen question/task
2. establish and maintain the role of essay writer and relationships with readers
3. analyse perspectives and representations of concepts, identities, times and places in a literary text
4. analyse the ways cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs underpin a literary text and invite audiences to take up positions
5. analyse the effects of aesthetic features and stylistic devices in a literary text
6. select and synthesise subject matter to support perspectives in an essay response to an unseen question/task
7. organise and sequence subject matter to achieve particular purposes
8. use cohesive devices to emphasise ideas and connect parts of an essay
9. make language choices for particular purposes in an essay
10. use grammar and language structures for particular purposes in an essay
11. use written features to achieve particular purposes in an essay

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SAMPLE ESSAYS

Burial Rites by Hannah Kent

- a) Analyse the impact of the Jónsson family on Agnes' character development.

The ways in which others see and judge us can have a profound impact on our own self-image. This is effectively shown in Hannah Kent's novel *Burial Rites*, which chronicles the life and death of Agnes Magnúsdóttir who is detained with the Jónsson family while awaiting her execution. The evolution of her relationships with each member of the household reflects many of her own internal and interpersonal conflicts, and Kent deftly uses the Jónssons' conversations with and attitudes towards Agnes to characterise her protagonist as a complex but ultimately sympathetic character who deserves compassion and acceptance.

Early in the novel, Agnes is depicted as socially withdrawn and mistrustful towards others. She declares that she is 'determined to close [her]self to the world' (p. 29), and the initial responses of the Jónsson family to Agnes' arrival seem to validate her desire to remain emotionally distant. Even Margrét, who is renowned for her staunch realism and rationality, at first brands Agnes a 'murderess' and 'a landless workmaid raised on a porridge of moss and poverty' (p. 52). Through these epithets, Kent communicates the notion that everyone is susceptible to gossip and rumour in their judgements of others, even those who consider themselves too shrewd for such vices. There are hints in these early chapters of Margrét's nascent sympathy for Agnes, whose body is a 'terrain of abuse' (p. 54) that shocks and haunts Margrét. However, she also derives some self-righteousness and 'secret satisfaction' (p. 54) in scrubbing Agnes' wounds so hard that they bleed, later dressing these wounds and spitefully pointing out she is using 'Natan Ketilsson's own medicine [...] God rest his soul' (p. 54). At this stage, neither Margrét nor the reader is aware of what transpired between Agnes and Natan, and hence Kent positions us alongside Margrét in having suspicions about Agnes and her past. This apprehension is mirrored in Margrét's children, particularly Lauga, who 'refuses to sleep in the next bed' near Agnes and 'watches her like a hawk' (p. 118). This treatment and characterisation of Agnes as prey or subhuman is shown to exacerbate her grief and strengthens Agnes' perception that she is 'not one of them [the Jónssons]' (p. 120). Hence, Kent utilises the first impressions and the suspicions of the Jónsson family to explore the detrimental and dehumanising effects that such prejudices have on Agnes.

However, the Jónssons are also vital in facilitating Agnes' burgeoning openness and self-acceptance in the novel. This is particularly true of the surrogate mother–daughter bond she develops with Margrét. Initially, the older woman's emotional detachment is shown to compound Agnes' feelings of loneliness. The fact that, upon their first meeting, 'Agnes' face was impassive' (p. 47) is indicative of her hesitancy in opening up to strangers. Although Margrét at first considers this a consequence of Agnes' physical maltreatment – beaten, deprived of food and water, and 'ke[pt] bound like a lamb ripe for slaughter' (p. 46) – Kent gradually reveals that Agnes' fears also have a more profound, emotional element as Agnes is disinclined to trust others due to her history with Natan. For much of the novel, she labours under the delusion that 'the only person who would understand how [she felt] is Natan' (p. 83). Kent implies that her eventually trusting others like Margrét and Tóti is a transformative journey for her character. Specifically in Margrét, who quips that 'in good time I'll be dead' (p. 20), Agnes finds a kindred spirit. Both women are somewhat isolated and disempowered in society, and both believe their deaths to be imminent – Agnes by capital punishment and Margrét by a chronic illness caused by the damp in their home. Agnes' realisation of this is ultimately what enables her to open up to Margrét and tell her story. By contrast, Steina is far more compassionate from the outset and establishes a rapport with Agnes, inquiring 'how did you sleep' and expressing a desire to 'keep [Agnes] company' (p. 123). By establishing Steina as being burdened with a similar outsider status – the more 'ungracious' sister (p. 21), ill-content with the expectations of domestic womanhood – Kent creates a parallel that unites Agnes and Steina from their younger and more conventionally valued counterparts, Sigga and Lauga. Moreover, Agnes is aware of this, noting that Lauga 'reminds [her] a little of Sigga' (p. 178), and by implication realising that she has something in common with Steina. Thus, Kent explores how Margrét and Steina are instrumental in alleviating Agnes' loneliness to facilitate her achieving a sense of closure before her execution.

Ultimately, the greatest impact the Jónssons have on Agnes is reaffirming that she is valued and that she deserves kindness. Agnes recalls that ‘the night before the execution, the family of Kornsa sat together’ with her, Steina ‘gather[ing] as many lamps as she could find [...] to dispel the shadows’ (p. 321–322). Here, the Jónssons bring symbolic lightness to Agnes’ imminent fate, and offer her the warmth of a nuclear, loving family. Margrét’s commitment to provide Agnes with new clothes, including a ‘fine woollen shawl’ (p. 322) and Lauga’s brooch, is emblematic of her belief that Agnes is worthy of empathy and dignity. She also expresses this verbally in her high modal declaration that Agnes is ‘not a monster’ (p. 323) and her promise that the family will remember her. Tragically, this prompts Agnes to realise ‘I don’t want to be remembered, I want to be here!’ (p. 324). In this moment, Kent communicates how kindness and compassion can revitalise one’s desire to live, as the benevolence of the Jónssons has enabled Agnes to cast off her feelings of worthlessness, replacing them with hope for the future. Likewise, Agnes remarks in her final moments with the family, ‘that is the first time [Lauga] called me by my name’ (p. 324) signifying the substantial shift in Lauga’s perspective and her belated acknowledgement that Agnes does not deserve to suffer. Hence, Agnes’ final moments are characterised by her realisation that she is not ‘a monster [...] Agnes of the fire, Agnes of the dead bodies with the blood’ (p. 128) but rather a person who has become an indelible part of the Jónsson family; or in her own words, although she ‘cannot swim’, there is some comfort in being amongst others and knowing ‘we are all underwater’ (p. 324).

To this end, Kent depicts Agnes’ experiences with the Jónssons as a catalyst for character growth and extols the potential for humane and empathetic treatment to restore one’s sense of self. Although these relationships are initially fraught, ultimately the family plays a vital role in Agnes’ emotional journey, and they along with Kent’s readers come to view the protagonist with the compassion that Kent suggests she deserves.

***Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent**

b) The execution of Agnes was unjust.

To what extent do you agree with this interpretation of *Burial Rites*?

Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* is ostensibly the story of the complex and dubious justice of capital punishment. The novel evocatively explores how the effects of societal prejudices, gender norms and close-mindedness become justifications for cruelty and vengeance. Ultimately, Kent's stark portrayal of state-sanctioned execution is one that encourages her readers to view the protagonist Agnes as more of a victim than a perpetrator.

Much of Agnes' treatment in the lead-up to her execution is callous and vindictive, fuelled by gossip that marginalises her and suppresses the truth about what happened at Illugastadir. Such rumour-mongering is epitomised in the character of Róslín, who relishes in consoling Margrét about the horrors of 'having to keep a *murderess* under [her] family's roof' and 'being forced to look at her hideous face every day!' (p. 66). When the sympathetic Margrét attempts to quell this hyperbole by remarking that Agnes' 'face is not so hideous', it is noteworthy that Róslín '[i]sn't listening' (p. 66). Here, Kent emphasises the inability of rational characters to reign in the frenzy of fear and gossip that leads Róslín to the erroneous conclusion that 'Agnes is the worst of the three' just because this is the general consensus that 'folks are saying' (p. 67). Moreover, Agnes is unable to escape the confines of societal preconceptions that she is an archetypal 'witch caught in the webbing of her own fateful weaving' (p. 29–30). By consistently integrating Agnes' point of view throughout the novel, Kent reveals the injustices of a lifetime of tragedies and a ruthless, unforgiving society that fails to take this into account in her sentencing. The use of multiple character perspectives also serves to reinforce notions of subjectivity and the unreliability of memories that 'shift like loose snow in a wind' (p. 111). Thus, Agnes comes to acknowledge that 'it doesn't matter' (p. 218) if she is honest with Tóti because of the pernicious impact of prejudicial thinking. Through this, Kent highlights the unfairness in Agnes' inability to disprove these rumours, and the tragedy of her death is made all the more cruel as she lives her final days as 'already a dead woman, destined for the grave' (p. 35).

Moreover, the fact that such rumours have sway over the authority figures in the novel strengthens Kent's portrayal of an unjust and even bloodthirsty justice system. Their punitive attitude towards Agnes exacerbates her outsider status and compels them to see her execution as justifiable since 'He that Smiteth a Man so that he Die, shall be surely put to Death' (p. 6). This is predominantly evident in the character of Blöndal, who is unique in his steadfast belief that Agnes deserves to be executed. Unlike other characters, who are depicted as gradually softening or wavering in their judgements about Agnes, Blöndal repeatedly and aggressively asserts that Agnes is a vile murderess. Whilst Kent provides some sympathetic justification for this by revealing that Natan cured Blöndal's wife's terminal illness, she nevertheless depicts the brutal pragmatism of the man using Agnes' execution as a means of reaffirming and solidifying his control over the Icelandic district population. Blöndal's declaration that Agnes is 'a woman loose with her emotions, and looser with her morals' (p. 170) is especially distasteful to a contemporary readership and compels us to be suspicious of his capacity to be impartial, let alone to dispense justice. Hence, Kent's portrayal of Blöndal as a personification of bureaucratic selfishness emphasises the systemic biases that exist against Agnes and similarly outcast women in a patriarchal society.

The novel's structure further underscores the injustice of Agnes' fate. Kent deliberately juxtaposes chapters with Agnes and Tóti sharing intimate, personal revelations with historical documents that provide authenticity and depth to the plot whilst also demonstrating the officially authorised condemnation and maltreatment of Agnes. For instance, Agnes' profound lamentation that 'God has [...] pinned me to ill fortune [...] I am run through and through with disaster; I am knifed to the hilt with fate' (p. 84) is immediately followed by Blöndal's letter to the Deputy Governor regarding the size and cost of the axe that will be used to execute her. Similarly, Blöndal's final note that the executions were 'appropriately quiet and well-ordered' (p. 329) is somewhat discordant given the evocative imagery of Agnes clutching Tóti's hand and confessing 'in a panicked voice' that she isn't 'ready' to die (p. 328). Kent's use of interpolation therefore evokes in readers a sense of disquiet over the justification for Agnes' sentence. This is strengthened by her inclusion of many mitigating and complicating factors surrounding the Illugastadir murders, such as

Natan's abuse of Sigga, his betrayal of Agnes and the fact that Agnes stabbing Natan was an act of mercy after Fridrik inflicts grievous wounds but leaves him to 'slowly die' (p. 302). Hence, the truth that Kent unearths and interweaves throughout the narrative paints Agnes as a nuanced but ultimately kind character, doomed more by the cruelty of others than her own actions.

By highlighting how Agnes' life and death were in large part a result of maltreatment at the hands of malicious individuals and society as a whole, Kent effectively expresses her condemnation for the layers of injustice that permeated Agnes' experiences. Hence, *Burial Rites* articulates the tragedy of a fallible justice system that does not account for the complexity of people or circumstances.

Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood

- a) Analyse the impact of Elaine's relationship with Stephen in shaping her sense of self.

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is a postmodern bildungsroman that explores the character growth of Elaine Risley. Over the course of the novel, much of Elaine's identity is derived from her close relationship with her older brother, Stephen, to the point where her sense of self fluctuates and becomes somewhat unstable in his absence. This bond and later sense of loss are instrumental in moulding her world view, and hence *Cat's Eye* explores the multifaceted impacts that others can have on how we see ourselves.

Atwood depicts Elaine's relationship with Stephen as having a significant effect on her protagonist's understanding of gender identity. Notably, the two siblings are closest before either one develops a sense of the different attitudes and expectations for boys and girls in the 1940s. She simply recounts that 'Stephen gives me a gun and a knife and we play war' (p. 26) – an activity traditionally reserved for boys. Later in life, Elaine acknowledges that 'sisterhood is a difficult concept for me [...] because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not' (p. 375). In this sense, her familiarity with boyhood and Stephen's self-assuredness is juxtaposed with her lack of a sisterly role model, and hence Atwood implies that Elaine struggles to understand girls and by extension her own burgeoning womanhood. Friendships with girls remain things she has 'read about [...] in books' (p. 30) but not experienced for herself, and this unease persists throughout adolescence wherein Elaine is 'wary' of her female peers and 'dislike[s] the changing room' (p. 228) where their physical maturity makes her uncomfortable. At this age, she struggles to form new relationships as she feels emotionally 'older' and less prone to the 'whirlwind of teenage emotions' that govern the lives of her fellow students (p. 229). Instead, she casts herself as a detached observer, 'regard[ing] the antics' of others with 'scientific curiosity' (p. 229) inherited from her father, and is filled with 'claustrophobic panic' (p. 237) at the thought of going to an all-girls' school. Moreover, as the siblings grow up, Stephen becomes more distant and doesn't seem aware of Elaine, only occasionally asking 'benign, avuncular, maddening questions [like] how do I like Grade Nine' (p. 240). Hence, Atwood utilises the gradual distancing of Stephen from Elaine's childhood development to reveal the vacuum this creates, both in the loss of Elaine's first close peer relationship and in her incomplete understanding of independent girlhood.

The consequences of this alienation also influence Elaine's subsequent relationships, especially as she navigates emotional torment at the hands of Cordelia. Elaine specifically does not know how to ask Stephen for help, because she has 'no black eyes, no bloody noses [...] if it was boys, chasing or teasing, he would know what to do [but] against girls and their indirectness [...] he would be helpless' (p. 173). Indeed, she feels 'ashamed' (p. 173) for being the victim of verbal and emotional bullying, afraid that Stephen would laugh at her and ultimately be incapable of bridging this gendered divide. She is rendered 'numb' (p. 172) by Cordelia's abuse, even contemplating suicide by 'eating the deadly nightshade berries' or drinking household poisons and imagining Cordelia encouraging this 'in her kind [voice]' as Elaine would be 'doing these things to please her' (p. 172–173). Here, it is the lack of close relationships that irrevocably impacts Elaine, as she has no one to confide in and hence is utterly unable to navigate the dynamics of female cliques and peer pressure. This absence and insecure sense of self leaves her further vulnerable to the philandering Josef Hrbik who 'rearrang[es]' (p. 331) her appearance and attire as symbols of her self-expression, and she describes herself as having been 'made spineless by love' (p. 333). Thus, although Elaine and Stephen drift apart for most of their adult lives, the void that Stephen leaves behind still has profound effects on Elaine as she seeks emotional intimacy and self-esteem.

Furthermore, Stephen's tragic death unravels Elaine's sense of belonging to a nuclear family, albeit a distant one. When she reunites with Stephen at his lecture, she is struck by his 'amazing brilliance' (p. 360) and endeavours to bond with him over nostalgic memories: 'remember that song you used to sing? [...] Remember that jar of marbles you buried, under the bridge?' (p. 362) However, the fact that he seems 'not entirely willing to be reminded of his former, younger self' (p. 362) suggests to both Elaine and the readers that Stephen is already somewhat detached or at least more independent from his family and memories of them. Their encounter is marked by frequent use of low modal language as Elaine struggles to place what he 'maybe' thought or what she 'wonder[s]' about their shared

experiences (p. 362). Hence, Atwood shows how both the physical and emotional distances that developed between the siblings made it difficult for them to reforge their relationship. It is noticeable that Atwood does not depict Elaine's response to learning of Stephen's death – rather, she has her poetically recount an imagining of his final moments on the hijacked plane without explicitly acknowledging her own emotional state as a result of this tragedy. In the wake of this, Elaine's connection with her parents also suffers, as 'before [he died], they were active, alert, vigorous; after it they faded' (p. 429), dying within a year. As Elaine later notes, 'I've been prepared for almost anything; except absence' (p. 452), and the loss of her family (coupled with the revelation of Jon's infidelity) leaves her adrift in adulthood. Though Atwood portrays her as establishing the veneer of a nuclear family with Ben, Sarah and Anne, her unresolved traumas nevertheless bring her back to the bridge at the end of the novel. Through this, *Cat's Eye* reveals how the memories and loss of Stephen indelibly affect Elaine's life.

In essence, whilst Stephen plays a significant role in Elaine's childhood upbringing, it is her ruminating on and recontextualising these experiences in adulthood that truly shapes her psyche. Hence, Atwood's novel reminds us of the potency of our memories as touchstones with the capacity to give meaning to our present and even influence our future.

Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood

b) What perspective on the significance of art is communicated through the novel?

In her 1988 novel *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood depicts the importance of art for fulfilment and self-expression. Her protagonist Elaine is in some sense defined by her identity and accomplishments as an artist – a passion that facilitates her coming to terms with the past and various traumatic events. Moreover, Elaine's paintings are shown to be undeniably connected to her experiences and hence are expressions of her emotions. However, Atwood suggests that this self-expression is somewhat intransitive, as only Elaine understands the true meaning of her paintings. Nevertheless, the novel extols the power of art and suggests that subjective art does not need to be interpreted correctly by others in order to have meaning to the artist.

Throughout the novel, Atwood frequently unites the ideas of artistry and identity, such as by having the adolescent Elaine proactively declare 'I am going to be a painter' (p. 281). That she has this revelation in the middle of a botany exam serves to amplify the disparity between her chosen path and that of her scientist father and brother. Though she shares her brother's curiosity for physics phenomena, she is more introspective and intrigued by what these concepts mean to people, as is evidenced by her *Unified Field Theory* painting. This piece takes its title from Stephen's highly advanced knowledge of particle physics, but is also intimately personal in its depiction of the wooden bridge and cat's eye marble from Elaine's childhood. These symbols carry meaning known only to Elaine; hence, although she commits to showcasing her works at her retrospective, Atwood intimates that the significance of her works will never be fully understood by outside observers. The novel also explores the catharsis of creating art, particularly in Elaine's *Pressure Cooker* – a series of six images about her mother, made 'right after she died' (p. 167). She is delighted by how people misinterpret this as being about 'the Earth Goddess' or 'female slavery [...] and trivial domestic roles' when in reality, 'it was only my mother cooking' (p. 167). For Elaine, the importance of the art is not what it depicts, but the emotional state it captured – 'I suppose I wanted to bring [my mother] back to life. I suppose I wanted her timeless' (p. 167). This experimental and meaning-laden work also sets her apart from contemporary male artists like Jon who merely imitate famous artists. Hence, Atwood elevates Elaine's merging of art and personal memories, even though such messages may not be understood by others.

Atwood also emphasises the importance of art for the purpose of self-expression by having Elaine explicitly reject the misinterpretations of her art and her identity. She 'think[s] savagely' (p. 248) of the press coverage of her retrospective, scornfully noting with displeasure their references to her as an 'eminent artist [...] *eminent*, the mausoleum word. I might as well climb onto the marble slab right now and pull the bedsheet over my head' (p. 248). She further derides the 'usual misquotes' and the focus on her 'looking anything but formidable in a powder-blue jogging suit that's seen better days' (p. 248). Here, she is depicted as being equally offended by the disrespectful descriptions of her age and appearance as she is about the back-handed devaluing of her paintings as '*eclectic*' (p. 248), suggesting that her art is just as central to her sense of self as these fundamental attributes. The juxtaposition of her artistic intent with Charna's interpretation at the retrospective further exemplifies this divide; the gallery owner praises the 'early forays by Risley into the realm of the female symbolis[m] and the charismatic na[t]ure of domestic objects' (p. 442). This extravagant and sophisticated language of art analysis is strikingly different from the sparse honesty of Elaine's actual intent: to 'paint things that aren't there [...] a silver toaster [...] a glass coffee percolator [...] a wringer washing machine' (p. 366). The act of painting these is for Elaine a cathartic exercise in examining things outside of her memory, allowing her to paint something 'suffused with anxiety, but not [her] own anxiety' (p. 367). Though this profound meaning is too abstruse for outside observers, *Cat's Eye's* narrative structure allows us to revel in the truth behind Elaine's paintings and share in her secret meanings.

However, Atwood does not shy away from the subjective nature of art, allowing for some ambiguity as to whether the symbolism in Elaine's work was a conscious or unconscious effort. Although Elaine explicitly acknowledges some elements of her paintings as representations of real people like Mrs Smeath or imagined

figures like the Virgin of Lost Things, there are also some that are less concrete. In *One Wing*, Elaine paints a man falling from a plane in a manner that echoes her brother's death, except 'in his hand is a child's wooden sword' – her explanation for this is that 'this is the kind of thing we do, to assuage pain', and she facetiously remarks that Charna misinterprets this as being 'a statement about men, and the juvenile nature of war' (p. 446). Though Atwood does not condemn Charna for her overzealous interpretations about more grandiose ideas, she undoubtedly implies there to be more resonance for Elaine with more unspoken 'pain' (p. 446) than readers may be aware of. Likewise, the only picture she ever paints of Cordelia is imbued with contradictions and abstraction. Its title is *Half a Face*, and yet 'Cordelia's entire face is visible' alongside another unidentified face 'covered with a white cloth. The effect is of a theatrical mask.' (p. 249). This equivocation defies interpretation, and Atwood reveals that even Elaine fumbles for a precise description of what the piece means. This notion is strengthened by her realisation at the end of her retrospective that she 'can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over' (p. 447), as well as her lamentation that 'perhaps all I will ever be is what I am now' (p. 373), implying that her ability to create as an artist is inextricably tied to her potential as a person.

Cat's Eye exalts artistic expression as a mode for understanding and articulating one's identity. The depths of meaning in Elaine's artwork reflect the multifaceted nature of the character Atwood creates, and, to this end, the novel revels in the complexity of both art and people that can sometimes be ineffable or elusive to us all.

***Hamlet* by William Shakespeare**

- a) Analyse the significance of *The Mousetrap* as a metatheatrical play within *Hamlet*.

The Shakespearean tragedy *Hamlet* is renowned as one of the playwright's most complex and ambiguous works. In particular, his use of metatheatricality and the play-within-the-play in Act 3 Scene 2 are instrumental in conveying ideas and beliefs about guilt, deception and fate. This scene is a telling embodiment of Hamlet's intentions, as it condemns Gertrude and Claudius for what he perceives to be their moral transgressions while also affording audiences a glimpse into Hamlet's psyche as a conflicted and morally dubious character himself.

The Mousetrap mirrors the wider narrative of Shakespeare's play, containing similar motifs of deception and double meaning. Hamlet declares as much when he proclaims the actors' roles to be ones which 'hold [...] the mirror up to nature' (3.2.22) and by imitating life, 'the play's the thing / Wherein [he will] catch the conscience of the King' (2.2.599–600). Hamlet begins by stage-managing the players, instructing them not to 'saw the air too much' with hand gestures (3.2.4) and to 'speak no more than is set down for them' (3.2.37). His preoccupation with how things seem here supports a multitude of possible interpretations – the audience is likely unsure whether Hamlet has been overcome with genuine madness, is blinded by his revenge fantasies or is shrewdly devising ingenious scenarios to confirm Claudius' regicide. Although Hamlet's manic behaviour with Ophelia may hint at the former, the fact that *The Mousetrap* succeeds in disturbing Claudius and Gertrude suggests this was a pragmatic ploy, as the King and Queen put an end to the play and depart after the depiction of the murder. Meanwhile, Hamlet wryly remarks that it merely 'means mischief' (3.2.134) and that the players 'do but jest, poison in jest' (3.2.230), even concocting a lie about the play being based on a Viennese duke, Gonzago. Hence, after the mock poisoning when Claudius rises to leave, Hamlet mocks him for being 'frightened with false fire' (3.2.260). This alliterative jibe is indicative of Shakespeare's depiction of deception and subjectivity, as the false fire of metatheatricality is effectively used to expose dangerous embers of truth.

However, *The Mousetrap* also functions as a commentary on the role of women in society, particularly in terms of their duty and fidelity to their husbands. Throughout his choral commentary of the metatheatrical play, Hamlet engages in sexual innuendo with Gertrude whilst also condemning women for 'mis-tak[ing] [their] husbands' (3.2.246) or for loving too 'brief[ly]' (3.2.148). This patriarchal judgement of women as fickle and disloyal is strengthened by *The Mousetrap* wherein the Player Queen proclaims eternal loyalty to her husband, since 'none wed the second but who kill'd the first' (3.2.176), implying that Gertrude is complicit in the murder of Old Hamlet. Furthermore, the couplet 'A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed' (3.2.180–181) explicitly equates the act of remarriage to the sin of murder, thereby conveying Hamlet's bitter objections to his mother's actions. To some extent, however, this moralising is then undermined by Hamlet protesting that he only wishes to 'speak daggers to her, but use none' (3.2.386). This suggests that his branding of the Queen as a murderer is more hyperbole and emotional lashing out as opposed to the more literal accusation of poisoning that he levels against Claudius through the medium of *The Mousetrap*. Nevertheless, the metatheatrical play is rife with gendered lines that complicate our view of Hamlet, particularly from a contemporary perspective as these cultural assumptions have shifted over time. Imperatives like 'die thy [loyal] thoughts when thy first lord is dead' (3.2.211) that imply women are intrinsically unfaithful hypocrites are particularly troublesome for a modern audience. Through this, perhaps Shakespeare encourages us to take note of the flaws and hypocrisies in Hamlet's own thoughts and actions, thereby questioning the attitudes expressed by both *The Mousetrap*'s characters and *Hamlet*'s.

Ultimately though, as a symbolic trap to capture Claudius, *The Mousetrap* somewhat succeeds in progressing the revenge plot. Hamlet ends the scene buoyant with the outcome, albeit mildly regretful of having upset his mother, and Claudius opens the subsequent scene with the pithy aspersion 'I like him not' (3.3.1) and announces his intent to banish Hamlet. However, structurally, it is a fairly long and elaborate scene that does not publicly or overtly unearth Claudius' crime. In fact, *The Mousetrap* could also be viewed as an extension of Hamlet's tendency to delay and prevaricate, which contrasts greatly with the attitude of Laertes when he discovers his own father dead and seeks immediate, bloody

vengeance, casting ‘conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit’ (4.5.129). That Hamlet instead constructs an artifice of metatheatre could be interpreted as evidence of his reluctance to take more serious action, preferring to remain a puppet-master who ‘set[s] down’ (3.2.37) lines for actors and steps back to watch the play unfold, only achieving vengeance by proxy. However, since Claudius’ reaction to *The Mousetrap* serves to confirm his guilt and convinces Hamlet to ‘take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound’ (3.2.280), it also represents a turning point in the overarching play whereby Hamlet cannot escape the knowledge that he must avenge his father. Thus, Shakespeare draws greater attention to the question of Hamlet’s madness by having him see shapes in clouds when Polonius comes to fetch him at the end of Act 3 Scene 2, raving about an amorphous ‘camel’, ‘weasel’ or ‘whale’ (3.2.368–372). To this end, where *The Mousetrap* solidifies Hamlet’s knowledge of Claudius’ regicide, it also coincides with an unravelling of Hamlet’s mental state as he struggles to comprehend the burden of what has been done, and what he must do.

The significance of *The Mousetrap* can be seen in the psychological toll it takes on Hamlet, and hence Shakespeare explores the power of theatre and fiction as ‘false fire’ with very real consequences (3.2.260). Therefore, *Hamlet*’s metatheatre compels audiences past and present to question the impact of well-crafted narratives for a given context – a universal concern that cements *Hamlet*’s place in the canon of classic literature.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare

b) What perspective on inaction is communicated through the play?

In William Shakespeare's 1603 revenge play *Hamlet*, the notion of inaction is central to the psychological complexity of the eponymous character. Hamlet experiences self-perpetuating psychological torment over his fundamental moral dilemma – whether to avenge the death of his father by killing his murderer who usurped the throne, or whether committing regicide himself is immoral and self-destructive. His tendency to procrastinate can also be seen later in the play as his mental state deteriorates and he falls victim to suicidal thinking. These existential fears exacerbate Hamlet's suffering, and hence Shakespeare suggests that sometimes not taking action can be just as consequential and disastrous as the action itself.

From the first moment audiences see Hamlet, he is depicted as an ambiguous and noncommittal character. In Act 1 Scene 2, Claudius and Gertrude inquire as to Hamlet's morose mental state with 'clouds still hang[ing]' over him and still wearing 'nighted colour' mourning clothes months after his father's death (1.2.66–68). Hamlet retorts that he is actually 'too much in the sun' (1.2.67) and that 'alone my inky cloak [...] can[not] denote me truly' (1.2.77–83). He declares, just as much to his mother as to the audience, that things he does 'are actions that a man might play / But I have that within which passeth show / These but the trappings and the suits of woe' (1.2.84–86). Here, Shakespeare explicitly warns audiences of Hamlet's complex inner world, introducing the idea of deceptive appearances and the inability of characters to truly understand the depths of the protagonist's emotions. His melancholic characterisation is distinct from the archetypal heroes of canonical literature, but is in keeping with Shakespeare's desire to explore psychomachia – the conflict within one's soul. Typically, the impediments to the hero's success would come in the form of obstacles posed by other characters that he would triumph over, but for Hamlet, the fact that 'time is out of joint' is something that he rues, even cursing himself 'that ever was I born to set it right' (1.5.188–189). Later, he even complains that 'all occasions do inform against [him] / And spur [his] dull revenge!' (4.4.32–33) with the word 'dull' connoting something lacklustre and uninspiring. This motif is also seen in the ghost's remark about Hamlet's 'blunted purpose' (3.4.111), suggesting that his vengeance lacks a sharpness and vigour that should be propelling him into action. Hence, Shakespeare explores how even the personal and political crime of killing Claudius is insufficient in compelling Hamlet to act swiftly – instead, both Hamlet and the audience languish in the protracted psychological drama that precedes the tragic ending.

As the play progresses, this inaction causes Hamlet to spiral into existential rumination. This is largely because his moral quandary of how to avenge his father in a morally justifiable way is unresolvable, as he cannot repay such a 'foul and most unnatural murder' (1.5.25) committed by 'the serpent that [...] now wears his crown' (1.5.38–39) except by also committing the moral sins of murder and regicide. The famous 'to be, or not to be' (3.1.56) soliloquy distils his fear of mortality and autonomy, and actively involves the audience through inclusive pronouns in 'we have shuffled off this mortal coil' (3.1.66) and 'makes us rather bear those ills we have' (3.1.81), as a testament to the universal nature of these concerns. For the broader play, Hamlet's revenge plot is a pretext for examining Elizabethan society's moral fault lines, but for the character of Hamlet, committing to revenge is challenging given that he views his life as being governed by the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (3.1.58). He ponders whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer' (3.1.57) through these circumstances, and employs the telling metaphor to describe taking action as 'tak[ing] arms against a sea of troubles' (3.1.59), implying futility and powerlessness against the forces of nature. Thus, he concludes, 'conscience does make cowards of us all' (3.1.83) with his 'hue of resolution [...] sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought' (3.1.84–85). It is clear through these references to cowardice and a sickly, pale complexion that Shakespeare is intimating that inaction or overthinking is dishonourable and unhealthy. Ironically, Hamlet's efforts to delay are a major contributing factor to his declining mental state that inevitably leads to his death.

Even in the final scene of the play, Hamlet's dialogue is characterised by fatalism and a belief that his actions are futile. As Claudius and Laertes collude to have Hamlet compete in the fencing duel, Hamlet's only remark is 'if it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all' (5.2.212–215). This somewhat obtuse reasoning is evidence

that Hamlet does not proactively plan to spring a trap – rather, Laertes dies ‘as a woodcock [in his] own springe [...] justly killed with [his] own treachery’ (5.2.297–298). Likewise, it is only when Laertes confirms to him that ‘Hamlet, thou art slain’ (5.2.305) that Hamlet takes decisive action and stabs the king, and yet even here his words belie his ability to bring about consequences, as he cries ‘venom, to thy work’ (5.2.314), attributing the death of Claudius to the poisoned rapier rather than the hand that holds it. Further, when force-feeding the king more poison, Hamlet uses the imperative ‘drink off this potion [...] Follow my mother’ (5.2.318–319), as though Claudius is the active agent and not Hamlet. Shakespeare peppers this lengthy scene with examples of Hamlet’s diffusion of responsibility, and even in his final moments, he compels Horatio not to commit suicide: ‘absent thee from felicity a while / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain’ (5.2.339–340). Although Hamlet equates death to felicity and relief, he also appears to cling to the societal view that ‘the Everlasting had [...] fix’d His cannon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ (1.2.131–132) and that suicide is a sin. Hence, Hamlet’s final words confirm that he never resolves ‘the question’ (3.1.56) posed by his soliloquy, and he dies clinging to his conviction that it is better to ‘draw thy breath in pain’ (5.2.340) than to not draw breath at all.

Hamlet’s hamartia of inaction and delay brings about tragic consequences for every character in the play. Through this, Shakespeare explores the fallibility of Hamlet’s mindset, constructing him as a psychologically complex character fraught with fears of mortality but too afraid of such fears to ever escape them by taking action. Hence, *Hamlet* is a play that affirms the inevitability of consequences while warning audiences of the perils of fatalistic thinking.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

a) To what extent does Jane sacrifice her independence for love in the novel?

Charlotte Brontë's semi-autobiographical bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre*, depicts a plain but impassioned heroine who strives to attain both independence and love without compromising either. The novel charts Jane's moral and spiritual growth and showcases her assertive nature in spite of societal expectations for Victorian women to be meek and deferential. Although her relationships with Mr Rochester and St John Rivers at times challenge her values, ultimately she triumphs at the end of the novel as a woman with agency who only makes sacrifices on her own terms.

Jane derives a strong sense of self through what little independence she could acquire and exert given her socioeconomic context. She resents being deprived of love at Gateshead Hall and Lowood Institution, and even when Rochester pleads for her to marry him so that he may be the one who 'cares for' her, she boldly declares '*I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself*' (p. 320). This tone of conviction and the repetition of 'I' convey an almost anachronistic independent streak. In Brontë's milieu, women were not considered to be predisposed to autonomy or independence; hence, many of the women in the novel do not strive for such. Georgiana, Bessie and even the educated and high-ranking Miss Temple prioritise marriage above potential careers or the financial independence this would afford. However, Jane is characterised as being far more radical – a 'vivid, restless, resolute captive' (p. 139) that seeks freedom from oppression and confinement. Though neither Jane nor Brontë express contempt for the docile femininity and gentleness of characters like Helen Burns, it is nevertheless clear to readers that Jane cannot wholeheartedly devote herself to servitude of God any more than she could a husband who did not love her.

Jane's tumultuous relationship with Rochester reflects these convictions, as Jane comes to realise she cannot have love without some independence and equality. Rochester's 'flaming and flashing eyes' (p. 291) stoke the 'lighted heath' (p. 33) of Jane's personality and the 'emblem[s] of [her] mind' (p. 33). This repeated symbolism of fire conveys the enduring, passionate nature of their love. However, Brontë also utilises fire in the novel as a more destructive force through the actions of Bertha, who critics often consider the embodiment of Jane's yearning for independence made manifest as an unbridled creature regarded as barely human. Bertha may also be interpreted as a representation of the fate that may await Jane if she acquiesces to the demands of men who are not her equal. Thus, Brontë perhaps implies that prioritising independence above all else is not as valuable as striving to attain both independence and love, as Jane does by acknowledging the need for compromise but not sacrifice. Her commitment to him at the end of the novel challenges Rochester's view of women, having previously been tainted by his unconditional and ultimately unrequited love for Céline Varens, as well as his marriage to Bertha. He warns Jane that any feelings of love will inevitably be followed by jealousy and disappointment, but she counters this with both words and actions. On the surface, her declaration that 'all my heart is yours, sir: it belongs to you; and with you it would remain, were fate to exile the rest of me from your presence for ever' (p. 453) may seem contrary to Brontë's proto-feminist values. However, Jane's decision to marry the 'blind lameter' (p. 444) is not only framed as the active choice of a self-proclaimed 'independent woman' (p. 444), but also a love that can only be consecrated after Rochester acknowledges and asks 'Jane suits me: do I suit her?' (p. 454). Therefore, the union of Jane and Rochester communicates the importance of mutual respect and understanding in forging a love that does not require sacrifice from either party.

This stands in contrast to the characterisation of St John Rivers as a love rival who Jane rejects due to his inability to truly love her. She is wary of growing 'pliant as a reed under his kindness' (p. 426) and preoccupation with duty. His offer of a loveless marriage is akin to a 'refined, lingering torture' (p. 419) that Jane is certain 'would kill [her]' (p. 420). More egregiously though, he cannot comprehend her refusal, chiding her: 'your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue [...] they merit severe reproof' (p. 420). Undaunted, Jane declares it is '*my time to assume ascendancy. My powers were in play, and in force*' (p. 427) as she departs to find Rochester. Again, Brontë's foregrounding of Jane's agency reinforces her depiction of a feminist heroine who asserts herself with

emphasis on first-person pronouns and inspiring invocations of her power and independence. That Jane uses her independence and status of being ‘my own mistress’ (p. 444) to pursue a future with Rochester cannot be dismissed as a sacrifice – Brontë even has Jane explicitly deny this assertion, claiming that it is not a sacrifice but a ‘privilege [...] to press my lips to what I love’ (p. 454). Thus, readers are invited to celebrate Jane scorning the ‘counterfeit sentiment’ (p. 415) of St John and instead becoming Rochester’s wife ‘as fully as he is m[y life]’ (p. 460).

The love rivalry in *Jane Eyre* serves to highlight the inner conflict between love and duty, and Jane’s ability to establish a loving marriage whilst retaining her independent spirit makes her an enduringly admirable protagonist. Therefore, Brontë extols the autonomy of women even in choosing a life of domesticity and devotion, provided this is founded on mutual respect.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

b) How are the impacts of a rigid social hierarchy represented in *Jane Eyre*?

The world of *Jane Eyre* is one governed by the expectations and confinements of early nineteenth-century England. Throughout the novel, Charlotte Brontë skillfully explores the inequalities and contradictions that exist as a result of rigid hegemonies. In particular, she examines the detrimental consequences of sexism, elitism and xenophobia in exploiting and isolating the vulnerable, which is made all the more inexcusable by the fact that these victims can do little to improve their station in society. However, Brontë does not endorse social climbing as a worthwhile aspiration, as she exposes the upper echelons as complacent, hypocritical and spiritually bereft. Instead, *Jane Eyre* reveals that pursuing autonomy and self-determination is the only way to triumph in the face of strict social hierarchies.

One of the most obvious examples in the novel of maltreatment sanctioned by the socially powerful is Jane's experience at Gateshead. The Reeds epitomise the moral corruption of the upper class, with Mrs Reed as the stubborn, callous matriarch who looks at her niece Jane as a 'strange child she could not love' and an 'uncongenial alien permanently intrud[ing] on her own family' (p. 10). Despite being related by blood, Jane is treated even more poorly than the servant class in the Reed household, and the moral vacuum created by Mrs Reed unleashes the nascent nastiness of the next generation – John, Eliza and Georgiana – to enact their own childish bullying of their cousin. Jane also learns that her mother was 'cut [...] off without a shilling' by grandfather Reed who disapproved of her marrying someone 'beneath her' (p. 20). In showcasing how this 'miserable cruelty' (p. 32) can be learned behaviour, Brontë subtly critiques the endurance of these societal expectations and implies that values inherited from previous generations may be flawed or unethical. Furthermore, Mrs Reed's children all lie to her and conspire to have Jane thrown in the Red Room, which is juxtaposed with Jane's awareness that Mrs Reed views her as the 'compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity' (p. 12). This dramatic irony further undermines the credibility of Mrs Reed's beliefs and encourages readers to observe how her attitudes facilitate and exacerbate the snobbish, entitled behaviour of her children. However, we also see how such treatment leaves Jane with a sense of worthlessness – when Mr Brocklehurst meets her and asks whether the ten-year-old is 'a good child', Jane finds it 'impossible to reply to this in the affirmative' because her 'little world held a contrary opinion' (p. 27). The fact that such thoughts occur to a child further solidifies Brontë's criticism of parochial 'little world[s]' (p. 27) that inflict emotional trauma on a vulnerable orphan. Therefore, much like how the novel invites us to cast judgement on Mrs Reed for her complicity in the abuse perpetrated by her children, so too does Brontë criticise the overarching society that allows this treatment to occur.

The hypocrisies and immorality of society are also made evident in how women are treated throughout the novel. Although 1800s England was undeniably patriarchal, and characters like Mr Brocklehurst and John Reed relish in the additional authority afforded to them by their gender as well as class, there are also hierarchical distinctions between various female characters. The orphan girls at Lowood are undoubtedly the lowest in this hierarchy, expected to 'clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel' (p. 62). When Brocklehurst's wife and daughters are introduced, 'splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs', Jane wryly remarks that 'they ought to have come a little sooner, to have heard his lecture on dress' (p. 62) as she is cognizant of his hypocritical instruction that all women should dress modestly while his own family is entitled to extravagance. However, the Brocklehurst women are 'deferentially received' and 'conducted to seats of honour' (p. 62) by Miss Temple, whilst Jane is made to stand on a literal 'pedestal of infamy' by Mr Brocklehurst (p. 64), as the hierarchy is reinforced by both lower and upper classes who have internalised their respective feelings of inferiority and superiority. This too is reflected in Jane's self-image, as she later paints herself with the cheap medium of chalk whilst rendering Blanche Ingram, 'an accomplished lady of rank', in 'the freshest, finest, clearest tints [and] most delicate [...] pencils' (p. 161). This superlative language emphasises Jane's perception of Blanche's perfection and how extremely unattainable these qualities feel to her given her lower social standing. Hence, Brontë exposes the detrimental effects of rigid hegemonies that exist within and between genders.

Although Jane's class is somewhat ambiguous, her experiences nevertheless support the notion that elevating one's status in the social hierarchy is not what leads to true happiness. Much of the novel critiques the maltreatment of the lower classes, particularly Bertha who embodies the literary notion of the Other in her race and inability to conform to Victorian society. Even Jane initially thinks of her as a 'creature' (p. 212), and upon first seeing her cannot tell 'whether [she is] beast or human being' (p. 296). Though readers are certainly made to pity Bertha's suffering, we are also invited to empathise with both Jane and Rochester due to their circumstances – this nuance forms part of Brontë's defiance against nineteenth century critics who considered women to only be capable of writing trite and sentimental fiction. The complex psychology of Rochester is made apparent in his concerns that Jane thinks of him as a 'base and low rake' (p. 303) who had misled her, and his unfounded fear that her rejection is due to her valuing 'only my station, and the rank of my wife' (p. 307). That rank and class are at the forefront of his mind during such emotional turbulence suggests that the upper classes do not have the privilege of being unconcerned with status – rather, they too are afraid of societal ramifications for transgressions. Brontë also uses Jane's attitudes to endorse this idea of the commonalities across class and gender boundaries when she proclaims that being 'poor, obscure, plain, and little' does not preclude her from having 'as much soul' and heart as Rochester (p. 255), speaking to him as her 'spirit that addresses your spirit' without concern for 'the medium of custom [or] conventionalities' (p. 256). In the end, it is only when Jane acquires the financial autonomy to join with Rochester on her own terms that the two of them can achieve happiness. Brontë intimates this is earned not because Jane ascends the class hierarchy but because the couple disregard social mores and unite with a 'quiet wedding' (p. 458) with only each other in mind.

Jane Eyre presents readers with an array of class concerns; the novel is steeped in its era but also timeless in its depiction of universal ideas of suffering and discontent. Ultimately, Brontë encourages us to observe the failures of the rigid Victorian social hierarchy to satisfy anyone, no matter their standing, and thus celebrates her protagonist for defying these limitations.

***Macbeth* by William Shakespeare**

- a) Analyse the significance of Banquo in relation to Macbeth in the play.

In his 1606 play *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare makes deft use of the character Banquo as a foil to the titular tragic hero. Written during a time of political tumult, the play's depiction of Banquo – who King James I claimed as a distant ancestor – serves to affirm the divine right of kings by demonstrating the disastrous consequences for subverting God's will and committing regicide. Where Banquo, like Duncan, is a morally upstanding victim of his formerly trusted friend, Macbeth is by contrast even more monstrous and corrupt for betraying his friend, his king, and by extension, his country.

The juxtaposition of Macbeth and Banquo's responses to the witches' prophecies is indicative of their true values and the stark differences between them. Shakespeare's deliberate decision to portray Banquo's more rational, incredulous reaction accentuates Macbeth's rapid descent into paranoia and murder. Banquo astutely highlights to both Macbeth and the audience that 'oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths' only to 'betray [us] / In deepest consequence' (1.3.124–127). This sage advice contrasts greatly to Macbeth's ironic aside that these prophecies are 'happy prologues to the swelling act' (1.3.126) and 'cannot be ill' (1.3.132). Within minutes of the witches stoking his ambitions, Macbeth acknowledges that he already 'yield[s] to that suggestion' (1.3.135) of murder and duplicity, and becomes momentarily lost in his 'present fears' and 'horrible imaginings' (1.3.138–139), prompting Banquo to remark to the noblemen Ross and Angus 'look, how our partner's rapt' (1.3.143) before Macbeth ominously declares in another aside 'if chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me' (1.3.144). Here, Shakespeare juxtaposes the present-minded shrewdness and canny interpersonal observations of Banquo with Macbeth's foolish amazement at hypothetical possibilities, thereby showcasing the clear differences between the two men. Where Banquo is cautious and requests proof of the witches' predictions, Macbeth is gullible and easily deceived by promises of power and prosperity. Though Macbeth interprets the prophecy of Banquo being 'lesser than Macbeth, and greater' (1.3.66) as a potential threat to his own ambitions, the audience can interpret this as an intimation that although Banquo achieves less than Macbeth does in life, he lives on as a greater character, untarnished by moral sins.

Typically, Shakespearean characters who embody honesty and perceptiveness would be rewarded for such virtues; however, Banquo's fate suggests that these qualities often cannot triumph over true depravity and a lust for power. In Act 3, Scene 1, Banquo expresses his suspicion of Macbeth's role in the murder of Duncan, fearing that his friend has 'play'dst most foully for't' (3.1.3), and the scene concludes with Macbeth arranging murderers to dispense of Banquo and Fleance. No sooner had he commanded this than he laments his mind is 'full of scorpions' (3.2.37) because Banquo is still alive. Hence, as his former friend embodies the looming threat of the prophecy that Macbeth is so invested in, he decries Banquo as his enemy and 'every minute of his being thrusts / Against my near'st of life' (3.1.116–117). However, it is only after his death that the most significant influence of Banquo becomes apparent. The death of Banquo is one of many heinous crimes committed by Macbeth, and yet has arguably the most detrimental effect on his psyche. Although the subsequent murders of the Macduffs represents a more odious slaughter of innocents, the decision to kill Banquo is perhaps a deeper, more personal betrayal. Initially, Macbeth seems at ease with this decision, facetiously joking with the murderer that 'tis better' Banquo's blood is on the murderer's face 'than he within' (3.4.14). However, his euphemistic enquiries about whether Banquo is 'dispatch'd' (3.4.15), meaning killed, or 'safe' (3.4.25), meaning his body is concealed in a ditch, could be read as a desire to distance himself from the confronting reality of the crime. Thus, Shakespeare depicts Banquo's death as a tragedy for the realm, but also uses it as an indictment of Macbeth's character, transforming him from a victim of ambitious desires to an irredeemable anti-hero.

Shakespeare further condemns Macbeth's actions through his depiction of Banquo's ghost, though the ambiguous nature of this spectre invites various alternate interpretations. For instance, though the stage directions indicate that Banquo's ghost enters the scene and takes Macbeth's seat, productions of the play vary in whether this ghost appears to the audience as a corporeal, restless spirit, or merely functions as a manifestation of Macbeth's guilty conscience visible only to him and not us. This has implications for our interpretation of the scene, as if the ghost is present and in Macbeth's chair, it is

impossible for Macbeth to take a seat and maintain his pretence of innocence, meaning we see that Macbeth has brought about circumstances that now make it untenable for him to succeed. Whereas, if the ghost is not visible to the audience, the scene instead amplifies Macbeth's insanity and implies that the psychological toll of his misdeeds is what now undermines him. In both instances though, the horror of 'gory locks [...] which might appal the devil' (3.4.51–59) are emblematic of the appalling nature of Macbeth's actions. The ghost never speaks or gestures; its presence alone is enough to wreak havoc on Macbeth's conscience and warn the audience of the eternal consequences of unjust murder. Moreover, though Fleance escapes and is not seen again in the play, Shakespeare confirms that the prophecy will indeed come true for Banquo's lineage with the apparition of a 'procession of eight phantom kings' (4.1.111), thereby endorsing the divine right of kings by foreshadowing how Macbeth's efforts to subvert fate and secure the crown will be short-lived and sinful.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo is an affirmation of Jacobean values and reminds audiences that crimes of usurpation and betrayal, though tragic, do not go unpunished. To this end, the play presents diametrically opposed characters in Macbeth and Banquo that embody guilt and innocence, compelling us to see that, in spite of his brutal death, Banquo is indeed as the witches foretold – greater than Macbeth.

***Macbeth* by William Shakespeare**

b) What perspective on violence is communicated in the play?

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most renowned and complex tragedies, but it is also one of the bloodiest, featuring brutal and immoral murders of innocent characters. The play repeatedly demonstrates that violence only begets more violence, as its protagonist must commit increasingly reprehensible crimes to retain his tenuous grip on the throne. Hence, Shakespeare warns audiences against using violence to accomplish one's goals, revealing the detrimental consequences this has on both the innocent and the guilty.

The play deftly depicts violence as an extension of ambition and a means of achieving ends for immoral and corruptible figures like Macbeth. That the play opens in a wasteland with thunder and lightning immediately establishes an atmosphere of disorder and 'hurlyburly' (1.1.3). The first scene of the witches has each of them speaking in catalectic trochaic tetrameter with lines alternating between seven and eight syllables. Thus, although the depiction of witches and supernatural forces is less frightening for a modern audience than it would have been for Shakespeare's contemporary one, the unsettling pace of the verse and their references to 'killing swine' (1.3.2) and subversion of 'fair' and 'foul' (1.1.11) still disturb us and set the stage for the unnatural and sinister events that unfold. When the witches vanish, Macbeth takes up the mantle of calling upon dark forces and expresses an intent to conceal his true intent with the declaration, 'let not light see my black and deep desires' (1.4.51). This motif of darkness to conceal the morally unconscionable is mirrored in Lady Macbeth's request for 'thick night' to hide her 'keen knife' so that it 'see[s] not the wound it makes' (1.5.49–51). Thus, before even depicting acts of violence in the play, Shakespeare cements our understanding of how menacing and reprehensible the mere idea of violent urges can be.

Subsequently, the murders that Macbeth orders and carries out solidify the notion that 'blood will have blood' (3.4.122). When Macbeth commits himself to slay Duncan – not only a cardinal sin of regicide but also a violation of his trust as the king sleeps in Macbeth's castle in Inverness – he begins to hallucinate a dagger already coated in 'gouts of blood' (2.1.47). This visceral imagery sees the motif of blood transfer from the murder weapons onto the hands that held it, as after the murder Macbeth fears 'great Neptune's ocean' could not 'wash this blood' from his hands (2.2.56–57). In fact, he believes that his hand would make 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine' (2.2.59), as though his violent act is such an enduring sin that he could turn all the oceans red and corrupt the whole world. Similarly, his frantic behaviour after the murder concludes not just with the personal revelation that Macbeth will 'sleep no more' (2.2.40) but with the more general realisation that 'Macbeth does murder sleep! – the innocent sleep' (2.2.33), as though his actions have transcended him and have indelibly corrupted the essence of sleep and innocence. Furthermore, as the character most complicit in the violence, Lady Macbeth also experiences a parallel phenomenon of a 'damned spot' (5.1.31) of blood that will not wash away. On one level, this functions as a symbol of the pair's guilty consciences, though Lady Macbeth's remark about 'who would have thought [Duncan] to have had so much blood in him' (5.1.35) is also a subtle indictment of how Duncan had so much vitality and reason to live that it was as though he was full of blood and life force. In their destructive lust for power, the Macbeths forge their own 'murky' hell (5.1.32), and their violent misdeeds and callous disregard for human life leads to their psychological unravelling as well as their own brutal deaths.

Although the consequences of these actions on the guilty parties elicit some pity, the more distressing ramifications are undoubtedly the impact of the Macbeths on innocent people. In particular, the slaughter of Macduff's wife and son are unjustifiable war crimes that strengthen our sense of Macbeth as irredeemably immoral, as he has killed utterly innocent people solely on impulse; 'the very firstlings of [his] heart shall be / The firstlings of [his] hand' (4.1.147–148) and no 'unfortunate souls' (4.1.151) will be spared. This serves no pragmatic purpose for the battle, as it only enrages Macduff and guarantees he will be willing to fight to the death given that he has lost his family. Indeed, each of Macbeth's murders destroy familial bonds, specifically father–son relationships; the murders of Duncan and Banquo leave Malcolm and Fleance fatherless, while the murders of Macduff's son and Young Siward rob two men of their children. In each instance, the violence not only inflicts physical pain on the victim but also emotional pain for the ones left to come to terms with their loss. The fact that Macbeth dies childless means he has

no one to grieve his loss. Thus, although the play undoubtedly depicts the cyclical inevitability of violence, the ending offers audiences some hope that in the aftermath of the bloodshed, the kingdom can be restored with the coronation of Malcolm – the character robbed of the throne by Macbeth’s murder but who has no blood on his own hands, and therefore serves as a promise of peace and order for the realm.

Shakespeare effectively conveys the inadequacy of violence to bring about desired outcomes, and instead endorses the more moral and magnanimous characters like Macduff and Malcolm who seek to put an end to this cycle, not pursuing vengeance or power for themselves but rather seeking harmony for the sake of the whole body politic. Hence, the violence in *Macbeth* highlights to audiences the perils of egocentric ambition, and Shakespeare condemns those who choose violence for their own selfish gain.

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell**

- a) Analyse the relationship between Winston and Big Brother in the novel.

In the dystopian world of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the persona of Big Brother is instrumental in inculcating loyalty in Oceania. Although Big Brother never physically appears in the novel, his presence is inescapable both in propaganda and in the minds of his citizens. The horrors of this totalitarian ruler are explored through the narrative perspective of Winston Smith, whose failed rebellion earns him nothing but physical and psychological suffering as his individuality is supplanted by an all-consuming love for Big Brother. Hence, Orwell conveys the terrifying powers of the surveillance state's figurehead in manipulating and indoctrinating the population.

In keeping with the novel's exploration of paradoxes and contradictions, the persona of Big Brother is simultaneously ubiquitous and unknowable. Orwell paints Big Brother as an ever-present figurehead on posters depicting the 'enormous face [that] gazed from the wall [...] the eyes follow you about when you move' with the caption 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU' (p. 3). This motif of surveillance is further shown during the Two Minutes Hate when he appears on the telescreens, 'full of power and mysterious calm' with his face seeming to persist after it disappears 'as though the impact that it had made on everyone's eyeballs was too vivid to wear off immediately' (p. 18). Hence, from the outset, Orwell conveys the inescapability of Big Brother and the psychological damage of being always watched by an oppressive authority. Although Winston's act of writing '*DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER*' (p. 20) in his diary can be seen as an act of defiance against this regime, our appreciation for this is undercut by his fatalism and certainty that his thoughtcrime will be instantly detected and punished, as though he is 'already dead' (p. 30). Orwell therefore explores how paranoia can sometimes be a sufficient tool for suppressing revolutionary hopes, though Winston is unfortunately subject to a worse fate to quash these sentiments.

The essence of Big Brother is also inherently contradictory, as he supposedly inspires blind devotion and all-consuming love, as well as a primal fear and resentment in Winston, hence embodying the dualism of tyrants. Although Winston comes to question his existence, the palpable effects of indoctrination and oppression are undeniably real, exemplified in the fates of the unpersons. Orwell's subversion of language and the invention of Newspeak also clarify our understanding of the relationship between Big Brother as a symbol of the Party and Winston as the embodiment of the everyman. 'The purpose of Newspeak,' as Orwell explains in the epilogue, was to make all 'heretical thought [...] literally unthinkable' (p. 312) with words meant 'not so much to express meanings as to destroy them' (p. 318). The use of euphemisms can even be seen in the epithet of Big Brother – a term connoting a protective sibling who offers wisdom and guidance to someone more vulnerable, whilst also implying a familial bond between the state and its citizens. As a result of this fraught dynamic, Winston laments that 'no emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred' (p. 133). Thus, Orwell showcases how the influence of Big Brother pervades all facets of Winston's life – from his words to his feelings – and, in spite of his belief that 'with all their cleverness [the Party] had never mastered the secret of finding out what another human being was thinking' (p. 174), his fall ultimately reveals that the omnipresent Big Brother has far more control over Winston's psyche than he realises.

Winston's torturous 're-integration' (p. 273) in the Ministry of Love and Room 101 is the turning point in his conception of Big Brother. That this corruption of his value system is carried out by his supposed ally O'Brien and culminates in his desperate pleading that they instead 'do it to Julia' (p. 300) signals how personal this betrayal is. O'Brien also functions as an embodiment of Big Brother's ideal citizen – a man so devoted to the Party that he willingly inflicts 'unendurable' (p. 297) suffering on fellow citizens such that 'after... you don't feel the same towards [any] other person any longer' (p. 306). In these scenes, O'Brien becomes a mouthpiece for Big Brother's intentions and underlying ideology that 'obedience is not enough' (p. 279), as he didactically explains to Winston that people must genuinely want to have their identities subsumed by the Party, as evidenced by O'Brien's use of the inclusive 'we' in delineating the Party's accomplishments (p. 280). When Winston asks O'Brien whether Big Brother exists, he is told 'you do not exist,' and a 'sense of helplessness assail[s] him' as Winston grapples with the notion that he must

have more loyalty to the ‘embodiment of the Party’ than belief in his own existence (p. 272). In the final moments of the novel, Winston sees Big Brother’s face and any lingering ‘equivocation’ is replaced by a conviction that this emblem of the Party is ‘the colossus that bestrode the world! The rock against which the hoards of Asia dashed themselves in vain!’ (p. 310). Likewise, the final line – ‘He loved Big Brother’ – dashes any hope for Winston’s individuality or identity as he is consumed by ‘blissful dream[s]’ of ‘confessing everything, implicating everyone’ and anticipating a ‘long-hoped-for bullet [...] entering his brain’ (p. 311). This pessimistic ending underscores Orwell’s bleak vision of totalitarianism and justifications of it, with Winston’s trajectory from hating to loving Big Brother depicted as a harrowing inevitability.

That Winston not only comes to ‘love’ Big Brother in the novel’s final moments but also considers this a ‘victory over himself’ (p. 311) is perhaps the most confronting part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell’s chronicling of the disintegration of Winston’s values and identity forces readers to observe the extent to which devotion to the Party governs every facet of life in Oceania. Hence, the amorphous Big Brother is an enduring warning to readers past and present about the insidious, inescapable cruelty under totalitarian regimes.

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell**

- b) The truth does not matter in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
To what extent do you agree with this interpretation of the novel?

George Orwell's Juvenalian satire *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a haunting examination of what happens when a society no longer values truth. Ingsoc's manipulation of language and punishment of thoughtcrime are instrumental in brainwashing the population such that they accept contradictions and embrace doublethink. However, the Party is undoubtedly aware of the power of truth, given their commitment to controlling the past and altering memories of it. Thus, although objective truth is shown to be an insufficient defence to the coercion and oppressive regime in the novel, Orwell suggests that the ability to control the truth is incredibly valuable.

Central to Orwell's depiction of the manipulation of truth in Oceania is his use of language and construction of Newspeak. Syme describes the purpose of this as 'narrow[ing] the range of thought' in order to 'make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it' (p. 55). Not only does the Party abolish unfavourable words and concepts like 'equality' and 'science' (p. 323), with every 'reduction' considered a 'gain' (p. 322), it also distorts people's perceptions under the guise of pursuing 'euphony' (p. 321) and simplicity. For example, 'the word *goodthink*, meaning, very roughly, orthodoxy' (p. 317) is demonstrative of the Party's ideology infiltrating the vocabulary. Orwell also remarks that while it is theoretically possible to express discontent like '*Big Brother is ungood*' or champion what readers would consider a universal truth like '*all mans are equal*', these sentences 'expressed a palpable untruth' and would thus be unthinkable (p. 323). The appendix also mentions the translation of historical literature from Oldspeak into Newspeak, 'when th[is] task had been completed, their original writings [...] would be destroyed' (p. 325). Through this, Orwell intimates that the Party is not only altering the truths of human history and individual thought but, more horrifyingly, rewriting them within the parameters of what it deems acceptable *goodthink*.

The novel also foregrounds what Winston calls the 'mutability of the past and the denial of objective reality' (p. 163). Winston's employment in the Ministry of Truth affords readers a view into the process of censorship in Oceania, as he is tasked with 'rewrit[ing] a paragraph of Big Brother's speech, in such a way as to make him predict the thing that had actually happened' (p. 41), thereby strengthening the Party's stranglehold over reality. Any evidence of his work is disposed of in the ironically named 'memory hole to be devoured by the flames' (p. 42), as readers infer the Party obliterates anything that does not conform to their alternate truths. However, as Winston notes, his work 'was not even forgery. It was merely the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another' with most information having 'no connection with anything in the real world' (p. 43), a fact made clear by the Party demanding that Winston revise the estimated number of millions of pairs of boots produced by the Proles to make it seem as though quotas were over-fulfilled and yet 'very likely no boots had been produced at all. Likelier still, nobody knew how many had been produced, much less cared' (p. 44). Winston distils this irony by noting that 'astronomical numbers of boots were produced on paper, while perhaps half the population of Oceania went barefoot' (p. 44). Hence, Orwell highlights how the oppressive regime is entirely unconcerned with the material realities of the people and is fixated solely on retaining control over records of the past, present and future.

The contradictions of the Party, epitomized in their oxymoronic slogans – 'WAR IS PEACE', 'FREEDOM IS SLAVERY', 'IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH' (p. 6) – are further evidence of encouraging doublethink and corroding any self-evident truths that exist in the minds of its citizens. The propaganda tool of doublethink enables an array of alternate truths, such as that 'Oceania was not after all at war with Eurasia. Oceania was at war with Eastasia. Eurasia was an ally' (p. 187–188) despite Orwell noting in the same paragraph moments earlier that the 'hatred of Eurasia had boiled up into such delirium' that they want to get their hands on 'the two thousand Eurasian war-criminals who were to be publicly hanged' so they can tear them apart (p. 187). The fact that this moment is juxtaposed by the newly announced war and revision of Eurasia from enemies to allies highlights the absurdity of such volatile, unpredictable political circumstances. Moreover, the intense realities of public sentiment up until that moment are completely

subverted, showcasing how the Party's propaganda not only controls the truth but also how its citizens think and feel. Thus, those like Syme who are still capable of realising that orthodoxy is not *goodthink* but 'unconsciousness' will, as Winston remarks, inevitably be 'vaporized' for 'see[ing] too clearly and speak[ing] too plainly' in the face of Ingsoc's authoritarian monopoly of truth (p. 56).

To this end, Orwell presents readers with a conceivably realistic dystopia that builds upon perennially relevant concerns about truth and misinformation. Although the exposure of such contradictions and inconsistencies are not enough to save Winston from succumbing to a love for Big Brother, the essence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a cautionary tale for readers to safeguard truth as a potent weapon that is all too easily misused in authoritarian societies.

***The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan**

a) ‘Most of all he loathed his own helplessness and poverty’ (p. 74).

To what extent does suffering dictate the lives of the characters in *The White Earth*?

Set against a backdrop of rural Australiana, Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* depicts many kinds of suffering and self-perpetuating struggles through its characters. Beyond the overt distinction between emotional and physical suffering, McGahan also highlights the different extents to which trauma can have reverberations throughout one’s life, particularly in terms of impacting relationships with others. In this sense, where most characters wrestle with grief and coming to terms with the past, some have the added challenge of needing to navigate relationships with others who are struggling with their own issues. Thus, the novel showcases the ways in which characters’ lives can be defined not just by their suffering but also by the suffering of others.

McGahan’s dual narratives, which intertwine the stories of William and John, foreground the cyclical, intergenerational nature of suffering in the text. The fatally flawed John is depicted as being keenly aware of his own standing and how unfairly others treat him, and he comes to ‘loath[e] his own helplessness and poverty’ as traits that he believes hinder him from achieving the ‘great things he had been promised’ (p. 74). His inner monologue is characterised by references to injustice and a tone of indignation about how ‘no one cared’ (p. 74) about his misfortune, which contrasts greatly with the innocence of William, who is implied to be too young to have developed such bitterness. He even remarks that ideas of pride and shame ‘had never occurred to him’ (p. 82) until John indoctrinates him into this selfish, aggrieved way of thinking under the guise of valuing conservative heritage. The death of William’s father leaves the young boy adrift without a male role model – a void that his mother is utterly ill-equipped to address. She is not only dismissive of William’s emotional trauma but goes so far as to blame him for her husband’s death, smacking him for being a ‘stupid boy’ who just ‘sat there and watched’ (p. 4), leaving him with a serious ear infection. McGahan utilises the ‘ringing in [William’s] ear [that] wouldn’t go away’ (p. 4) as a symbol of the enduring ramifications of both physical and psychological violence, and it is only when William is in the care of Ruth – a competent, compassionate adult – that the sources of his suffering can be addressed. Hence, McGahan explores how the suffering and unresolved issues of one generation may be passed down to and inflicted upon the next.

Where characters like John and Daniel allow suffering to define their lives by wallowing in it, others like Elizabeth and Ruth are depicted in a far more positive light for their commitment to escaping past traumas and misery. Elizabeth’s decision to fire Daniel is described as something within ‘her right[s]’ as the inheritor of Kuran Station, and yet simultaneously ‘inconceivable’ to the McIvors ‘that she would have the *nerve* to do so’ (p. 54). Though this could be seen as a callous dismissal of a loyal worker, ‘*only ever an employee*’ (p. 55), the long-lasting resentment stemming from this event is almost exclusively due to the McIvor’s sense of entitlement over not only the land but also over Elizabeth. That John defines this loss as Elizabeth having ‘wielded an axe upon his life’, comparing the loss of Kuran Station to ‘a limb [having been] lopped away’ (p. 71), affirms McGahan’s portrayal of a father and son who are both driven into misery by their own selfishness. This emphasis on family grudges is also evident in John’s fractured relationship with Ruth who harbours an ‘unqualified and permanent’ (p. 270) hatred for her father, holding him responsible for Dudley’s abuse. When the two meet in John’s hospital room, William sees no ‘real resemblance between them’ (p. 343) as McGahan implies the different ways these characters have dealt with their suffering has irrevocably changed them both: Ruth is ‘cold and without pity’ (p. 343), motivated by a sense of justice, whereas John is ‘hollow and wretched and beyond hope’ (p. 364). Through these contrasting portrayals, McGahan therefore reinforces the idea that it is not necessarily the severity of suffering that dictates its effect on our lives, but rather how we choose to respond to it.

Ultimately, the characterisation of William as an innocent makes him the victim of other characters' greed and indifference, but his inner strength is where McGahan conveys the importance of overcoming trauma and suffering. When he escapes from the clutches of his entitled mother and uncle, he is shown to be an imaginative and curious child, playing with his 'captain's hat' (p. 165) and experiencing the land in a much purer way than the adults in his life can fathom. However, he also identifies 'undercurrents [...] of hidden motives and threats' (p. 114) between his mother and Mrs Griffith, even though he does not understand the classist rationale behind Mrs Griffith's contempt for his mother's 'white trash' family (p. 115). He is exposed to such prejudices at Kuran Station, and he is isolated from other children, having been taken out of school. This creates a sense of a stolen childhood, as William is prevented from enjoying his innocent play and is instead forced to grapple with adult problems of family and national politics. The League rally is another occasion where William's perspective is paramount – even at age nine he knows that 'nothing felt right [...] it all looked distorted' as the crowd declares 'we're the ones who suffer' and 'the blacks are getting cocky, they think they're gonna end up owning everything' (p. 210). By the end of the novel, William loses both of his parents in separate tragic circumstances, and almost dies of medical complications from chronic neglect – 'malnourished, dehydrated, extensively bruised and badly sunburnt' (p. 374). His journey throughout the text is marked by many kinds of suffering, and by complications he is far too young to understand. Hence, *The White Earth* serves as a cautionary tale for unchecked avarice and entitlement, as it is only when William is free from those who fixate on such ideas that he can begin to heal and dictate his own life.

McGahan's novel adroitly examines the lingering effects of characters' actions in compounding the suffering of others. The intergenerational and interpersonal traumas in *The White Earth* form a complex portrait of what it means to suffer, and the inherited pain and guilt is shown to have harrowing consequences.

***The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan**

- b) Analyse the significance of the land in shaping William's development.

Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* is a novel that extols the power of a spiritual connection with Australian land through the eyes of a young boy. William is initially naïve to the disturbing history and weight of a racist past that looms over the Kuran Plains. However, McGahan explores how discovering the natural landscape parallels William's discoveries about himself and others. Hence, the land plays a vital role in the text, and is instrumental in William unearthing the truth.

The novel is steeped in its potent setting of the Australian outback, but the land is also immediately established as a place of danger and loss for William. The very first chapter depicts the violent death of his father in a tractor accident, 'suffocated probably as much as he was burned' (p. 3) while tending to the land to support his family. This leaves William with deep emotional scars, as well as physical ones inflicted by his mother who falsely attributes blame to him, and he is haunted and 'lost in a half-dream of fire' (p. 190) throughout the text. Discovering the mysteries in the land of Kuran offers him respite from this past trauma, though initially he is disappointed to not have a friend to do so with, as since 'he was alone [...] the act of discovery seemed hollow' (p. 35). Likewise, his first few expeditions are somewhat scary, stumbling upon a cemetery with the grave of Malcolm White, a dilapidated church and a dead, rotting cow, leading him to conclude that 'he hated Kuran Station, every inch of it' (p. 70). However, as John introduces William to the meaning of land ownership and the belief that 'land has to belong to someone to really come alive' (p. 85), William gradually develops an understanding of what land can mean to people. He also observes John's suspicions when a national park ranger and PhD student come to his property to study the history of Kuran. The student's curiosity for the 'big old trees, the ones that are a hundred and fifty, two hundred years old' (p. 89) mirrors William's own burgeoning awe for the landscape, and his reverence for 'oral sources' and 'Aboriginal legends' (p. 91) stokes the young boy's interest. Thus, William's inquisitiveness and openness to the land around him is a catalyst for his subsequent development and discoveries in the novel.

McGahan also contrasts William's spiritual journey in discovering a connection to land with the more mercenary, entitled attitudes of John as a microcosm for descendants of colonial Australians. This is conveyed through the symbolism of the bunya pines which 'for the loggers [...] promised many thousands of feet of timber, but for the Aborigines [...] they had promised food [...] tribes from far and wide would converge' for a great festival every three years when the pine nuts ripened (p. 99). This serves as a stark difference between a utilitarian desire to strip the land of profitable resources and the coexistence and cultural traditions forged by First Nations Australians. Through William's eyes, readers are made to see that the selfishness of the former is alive and well in his mother, who compels William to ingratiate himself to John because 'this property is worth a lot of money – we could sell it and move away to somewhere nice' (p. 113). We also observe this sense of entitlement crystallise into something even more pernicious as John's 'league of concerned citizens' (p. 131) is corrupted by racism and a disregard for Native Title in the wake of the Mabo judgement. John explicitly calls the Native Title Act 'a disaster' that will be 'terrible for people like us' (p. 135), creating a dichotomy between his family and the 'Minorities', 'Elites', 'Activists' and 'Aborigines' (p. 136) that he holds in contempt. John's declaration that he 'kept this station alive despite everything the world has thrown at [him]' (p. 139) and that the 'land talks to [him]' (p. 181) could be seen as an endorsement of self-determination and individualism. However, McGahan instead encourages us to view the flaws in John's beliefs, that he 'deserve[s] respect' (p. 181) and land ownership, in contrast to William's shockingly mature realisation that 'knowledge was the essence of ownership' (p. 181). This sets the foundation for William's realisations about Kuran and his walkabout.

As his child-like impressionability begins to falter, William begins to doubt John's convictions, wondering 'what did the old man really know about the property at all? And yet everything William had ever believed about Kuran Station was based on what his uncle had told him' (p. 326). John's proud declaration that 'I claim Native Title' prompts William to realise 'something crucial was being warped here, bent into a shape it wasn't meant to be' (p. 294) as the old man's fixation on possession is depicted as largely selfish. However, John's view that 'this country will speak to you too, if you listen [...] it's not an

Aboriginal thing. It's not a white thing either. It's a human thing' (p. 295) is shown to be somewhat true, as William embarks on a three-day walkabout and hallucinates ghosts that lead him to the dried-up water hole. Ruth's subsequent revelation that the water hole is a mass grave containing the bones of First Nations people slaughtered by Daniel is what facilitates William's understanding that the land is a sacred place, 'their place', and in this moment he literally and metaphorically breaks free from his uncle who 'gripped so hard it hurt' (p. 353). John's desperate attempts to sign the land away to William – a boy who he spitefully considers 'mine' (p. 357) as further evidence of his preoccupation with ownership, culminates in John attempting to burn the bones William found, thereby desecrating the land and its inhabitants by inadvertently destroying the house and killing himself and William's mother. Ultimately though, this tragedy offers William a momentary 'relief' as he 'sank his ear into the cool earth' (p. 370), as both he and the land are finally free of the corrupting, self-serving grasp of Daniel and John McIvor.

William's transformation from a boy who wonders 'how could you be proud of a square mile of dirt?' (p. 82) to one with a deep respect and understanding for the significance of land affirms McGahan's illustration of the potency of connection to the Australian landscape. Though the novel explores the political and legislative ramifications of this, McGahan implies the more meaningful connections to be personal and spiritual, inviting us to empathise with William as he develops this awareness.

***We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler**

a) What perspective on normality does Fowler communicate through the novel?

Karen Joy Fowler's witty bildungsroman *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* challenges the reader's preconceptions about normality. From the non-linear narrative structure to the unique life experiences of the protagonist Rosemary and her family, the novel subverts expectations in order to explore the bounds of what we consider abnormal and deviant while simultaneously celebrating how universal some of these feelings and concerns can be. Thus, the equivocal nature of normalcy is a central part of Fowler's text.

The most obvious example of deviating from normalcy is the family structure of the Cookes, an otherwise nuclear family with the unexpected inclusion of Fern as a chimpanzee little sister. Fowler deliberately withholds this revelation until part two of the novel, wanting to establish Fern as a sister first and a chimpanzee second. Any dehumanisation of Fern greatly upsets Rosemary; for instance, Grandma Donna's likening of the loss of Fern to the loss of a family pet is utterly offensive to Rosemary who recalls that 'our parents had promised to love her like a daughter' (p. 78). Beyond the emotional trauma, however, Rosemary is also aware of the dubious merits of her father's scientific endeavour, since raising Fern as her sister was 'an experiment with no control' (p. 79). The introduction of Fern to their family unit precludes the Cookes from ever being considered or feeling normal, but the loss of Fern is also unique in that it is not directly analogous to losing a pet or a child. The hindsight narration of Rosemary after Lowell's departure provides readers with the stark reality that although her parents 'persisted in pretending we were a close-knit family [...] in light of my two missing siblings, this was an astonishing triumph of wishful thinking [...] we were *never* that family' (p. 17). Her emphatic stress on *never* suggests there are innumerable and deep-seated reasons why her family was unconventional. Hence, Fowler positions the Cookes as fundamentally and irrevocably abnormal.

However, although the novel does not shy away from communicating the long-lasting damage of the Cooke parents on their children and Fern, Fowler does not imply that their deviations from normalcy are to blame. At times, Rosemary and her family champion eccentricities, such as when her father recounts how at age seven, Rosemary chose the word '*refulgent*' in a class game of hangman and 'came home crying because the teacher said she'd cheated by inventing a word' (p. 24). His tone in this passage is one of uninhibited parental pride, and much of Rosemary's intelligence is implied to have come from growing up in such an intellectual, academic environment. In fact, she somewhat facetiously notes that her parents were not 'weird' but just 'as ordinary a pair of people who'd tried to raise a chimp like a human child as you were ever going to find' (p. 132). But upon convincing her freshman college peers that her family is normal, she dejectedly realises that 'now I'd achieved it, normal suddenly didn't sound so desirable [...] I still wasn't fitting in' (p. 132). Here, Fowler equates normalcy with social acceptance and a sense of belonging, both of which elude Rosemary for most of her life until she learns to embrace abnormality.

Moreover, Fowler forces us to confront the subjectivity of normalcy when passing judgements on others. The fact that Rosemary thinks of herself as a 'counterfeit human' (p. 102) and the only Cooke child 'not currently in a cage' (p. 304) denotes an abnormal upbringing and damaged psyche, but also characterises a challenging experience that destabilises her identity – something not entirely uncommon. The withholding of Fern's 'simian-ness' (p. 77) also challenges our preconceptions about the strength of familial bonds, compelling us to sympathise with the protracted emotional harm that unfolds. Ultimately, Fowler shows that the extent to which characters internalise feelings of normalcy and deviance are what determine the trajectory of their lives. Rosemary, who spent 'the first eighteen years of [her] life defined by this one fact, that [she] was raised with a chimpanzee' (p. 77) knows in hindsight that 'there was something NotSame about Fern and me' (p. 213) but cannot successfully repress memories of or feelings for Fern. Likewise, Lowell pursues a 'childish' dream of rescuing Fern and 'go[ing] off together, like Han and Chewbacca' (p. 217), though this allusion implies that this is merely a fictional fantasy. He is nevertheless decidedly abnormal well into adulthood, choosing to be 'tried as an animal' (p. 305) in court when he is arrested for animal rights activism. It is only when Rosemary confronts the 'lie that got [Fern] sent away' (p. 270) and publishes the notebooks of memories with her mother that she is able to close one chapter of her life. She acknowledges in the past tense that 'I've spent most of my life carefully not talking about Fern

and Lowell and me' and states, with optimism, 'it will take some practice to be fluent in that' (p. 304). Through this, Fowler implies that normal human connections require practice, and that although fluency may not come naturally to those with complicated upbringings or trauma, achieving such healthy relationships is more important than any socially prescribed normalcy.

Thus, whilst the Cooke family are depicted as having some difficulties in adjusting to normalcy, Fowler suggests that this nebulous notion is different for every family and every individual. Ultimately, the novel suggests that abnormality and individuality cannot be suppressed – instead, these traits should be embraced to facilitate a sense of belonging and connection with those we are close to.

***We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler**

b) Family fractures greatly impact Rosemary's self-esteem.

To what extent do you agree with this interpretation of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*?

Karen Joy Fowler's novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* examines the profound impacts that family can have on our upbringing and self-image. Throughout the text, Rosemary is shown to have myriad unresolved issues, both internally and interpersonally, as a result of how her family treats her, and these greatly affect her ability to navigate adolescence and young adulthood. Rosemary also internalises the blame for her family breaking apart, as her relationship with each family member changes drastically when Fern is sent away. Fowler's introspective narrative style therefore allows readers to explore the psychological toll this takes on Rosemary, and the extent to which rekindling relationships with her family aids her in rebuilding her self-esteem.

Rosemary's retrospective narration is instrumental in shaping readers' understanding of the magnitude of her traumatic upbringing. It also affords her character more maturity in being able to look back with hindsight at the negligence of her parents, most notably in their decision to attribute the abandonment of Fern to Rosemary's wishes. As an adult, she can acknowledge how egregious this is, and she rhetorically questions 'what kind of a family lets a five-year-old decide such things?' (p. 224). This contextualises much of Rosemary's inner turmoil, as from a young age she is cognizant of the fact that 'unfairness bothers children greatly' (p. 66). Fowler peppers the novel with these wise maxims that reflect how Rosemary has rationalised these experiences, but the non-linear chapter structure also allows her to expose her maltreatment, particularly the misdirected rage of Lowell, 'eleven years old to [Rosemary's] five' who would punch her 'high on the arm so the bruise would be hidden by [her] T-shirt sleeve' for not 'ke[eping her] goddamn mouth shut' (p. 64). Their parents make no mention of this abuse, and even more upsettingly, five-year-old Rosemary is described as merely happy to 'see someone' (p. 64) having felt so alone in the absence of Fern. When recounting the family dynamics – 'I loved Lowell best of all. Fern loved our mother best. Lowell loved Fern more than he loved me' – Rosemary remarks that these facts 'seem essentially benign' (p. 59). However, Fowler implies that this denial and unwillingness to confront emotional realities is precisely what makes the Cooke family fracture so damaging.

This is especially evident in Rosemary's relationship with her siblings. Lowell is depicted as more prone to taking action than his sister, and his inability to be a bystander to injustice is what motivates him to blame Rosemary and subsequently run away from home. When the two reunite, Lowell is still preoccupied with trying 'so hard to rescue' Fern and considers himself a 'miserable excuse for a brother' (p. 218) for his lack of success. Notably, he does not express the same disappointment for his treatment of Rosemary, and 'the last thing [Rosemary] remember[s] him saying' is that 'Harlow seems to care a lot about you' (p. 223). This remark betrays his lingering grudge towards Rosemary for her role in Fern's banishment, though readers are prompted to see beyond Rosemary's rose-tinted view of her brother: in his pursuit of grand-scale justice for animals and his simian sister, he is blind to the injustice and misery he inflicts on his own biological sister. By contrast, Rosemary's separation from Fern has a more complex effect on her sense of self, forcing her to question her own humanity. The sisters are treated as 'twin[s]' (p. 79), and even in adulthood, Rosemary feels as though looking at Fern is 'as if I were looking in a mirror' (p. 308), illustrating the unbreakable emotional closeness between them. Thus, the realisation that 'there was something inside Fern I didn't know' (p. 270) implies that Rosemary also feared her inability to understand what was inside herself.

Furthermore, Rosemary's parents inadvertently cultivate a sense of detachment within their family unit. Readers are warned that 'antagonism' in the Cooke household 'comes wrapped in layers of code, sideways feints, full deniability' (p. 20), which augments our understanding of the passive-aggressive tensions and lack of communication that loom over each family member. Rosemary also repeatedly makes reference to the 'things not talked about', most notably: 'missing family members. Gone was gone' (p. 21). From her laconic phrasing, we can infer that her family's attitudes still affect her capacity to be forthcoming about the past, and that perhaps on some level these learned behaviours are inescapable. She even sardonically remarks that refusing to speak about things was 'the family tradition' (p. 26),

as though they are paradoxically bonded by their emotional distancing and lack of openness. This unspoken rule predates the events surrounding Fern; Rosemary's father would enquire about his daughter's day, to which she would reply 'it was ebullient. Or limpid. Or dodecahedron' (p. 69) knowing that her father prioritised intellectualism over genuine investment in his children's emotional states. Only Rosemary's mother expresses a willingness to overcome the unspoken divides that exist, and her presence in Rosemary's life in South Dakota at the end of the novel seems to signal a positive reconciliation, and the beginning of Rosemary reforging her sense of self.

Ultimately, the Cooke family have an undeniable impact on Rosemary's development. Lowell's 'stropping his stories into knives' (p. 58) to wield upon his younger sister, as well as the loss of Fern as Rosemary's 'mirror' (p. 308) exacerbate Rosemary's fractured identity, and the 'exacting ghost of [her] father' (p. 302) continues to haunt her thoughts. However, Fowler ends the novel with an optimistic reunion between Rosemary, Fern and their mother, highlighting how even seemingly permanent familial rifts can be healed if one is prepared to confront the past.

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