

Paper 1 – Example Poetry Commentary

Higher Level

November 2005

In Astronauts Robert Hayden explores the philosophical issues raised by moon exploration. Despite the proudly isolated and bravely independent title 'Astronauts' the first five lines of the poem actually reveal the lack of identity and personality of the astronauts, as they are 'faceless in [their] visors,' an idea accentuated in lines three to five where their 'mirror-masks / [reflect] the general glare and / shadow of moonscape.' The alliteration here emphasises the absence of any defining features on the moon which echoes the absence of specific details about the men.

Comment [KH1]: Concise start that jumps very quickly into analysis

Comment [KH2]: Ideas developed quickly

This absence of personality and identity seems initially to be broken at the end of the first stanza when the poet uses colloquial terms to reflect the astronauts' excitement as they exclaim 'wow' and 'oh boy,' and Hayden carries this tone over into the beginning of the next stanza where the word 'exulting' suggests their elation. However, the fact that Hayden employs a third person stance throughout the poem effectively distances us from the astronauts preventing us from sharing their emotion. This sense of distance is abruptly re-emphasised for the reader in stanza two by the parentheses which seem to include a direct address from the poet or persona to the reader reminding us of the 'train[ing]' that the astronauts have undergone encouraging them to 'be wary of emotion and philosophy'. This disturbance and warning ultimately undermine the excited singing of the astronauts, creating a sense of bathos which perhaps foreshadows the fact that we will be left 'troubled' at the end of the poem as if the moon-landing has left us only with questions and doubts instead of the answers that we perhaps sought.

Comment [KH3]: Good sensitivity to what seems to be the case in comparison to what actually is the case. This reveals that the candidate has a good overview of the text from the very start. Good awareness that the poem can be interpreted first one way and then another

Comment [KH4]: Good focus on the poet as in control of the text

Comment [KH5]: Good awareness of this more subtle literary feature

Comment [KH6]: Again, slightly more subtle literary feature

Comment [KH7]: Short, concise quotations smoothly included into the essay

Comment [KH8]: Good overview of the rest of the poem

The essential hollowness of this scene which should be filled with excitement is perhaps best indicated by the lines 'breaking / the calcined stillness / of once Absolute Otherwhere.' Initially, these lines may seem to suggest a break through as the poet could be using the contrast between 'the somewheres that we know on Earth and the 'Absolute Otherwhere' on the Moon to show that we have finally conquered this most distant of places. However, like the mood of jubilation at the end of stanza one, this heroic interpretation is undermined as 'Absolute Otherwhere' remains capitalized and its position just before the closing of the end-stopped line perhaps implies that the moon has not really been conquered at all. In reality, it seems that the astronauts on the screen remain small, 'poignantly human' and ultimately insignificant in contrast to the vast emptiness of space.

Comment [KH9]: Good sense of personal evaluation

Comment [KH10]: Once again a good ability to offer multiple interpretations

Comment [KH11]: Each individual paragraph is developed in depth - ideas explored with subtlety and insight

The idea of being at the very fringe of human exploration is emphasised at the beginning of the third stanza by the line 'Risking edges' and the vulnerability of the astronauts is further reinforced by the fact that it is only their 'machines' and perhaps 'God' who are 'friendly' to the them. The reference to God may reveal how the astronauts' equipment will not be enough to help them should something go wrong and the irony of relying on God in such a technologically advanced age may be used by Hayden to reveal how precarious the situation of these men really is, an idea accentuated by the question mark after the mildly comic image of God's 'radar-watching eye?' which suggests that even if he were needed, God would not actually be there to provide assistance.

Comment [KH12]: Clear development of a coherent argument that is following the development of ideas in the poem but with an overview of the total meaning of the text so that it is not just a line by line analysis

This perhaps encourages the reader to reinterpret the title and opening line of the poem, 'Armored in Oxygen,' which initially seemed heroically grand but in the light of stanza three perhaps suggests the fragility of the

Comment [KH13]: Good continued development of the argument and once again a good sensitivity to multiple readings and ambiguities

astronauts as, like the one word title, the astronauts are isolated and on their own and their only armor is a flimsy gas which now seems insubstantial in comparison to the 'general glare and shadow of the moonscape,' and the 'snowshine of sunlight [which is as] dangerous as Radium.' Here the sibilance suggests a cold harshness to the light rather than a comforting warmth and the lethal connotations of radiation contrast with the rather pathetic actions of the astronauts as they 'labor' and 'probe ... for clues' making them seem even more insignificant.

Comment [KH14]: Very quick, concise analysis with a clear reference to the literary feature and the effect that it has on the reader

The insignificance of the astronauts is, however, most powerfully emphasised by the description of them as 'anti heroes' who are 'smaller than myth'. By the end of the poem Hayden has undermined any sense of exultation created in stanza one and he seems to be suggesting that instead of pushing forward the boundaries of science all the moon landing has done is reveal to us something 'poignant' about the human condition. The image of two or three men fragilely 'floating [in] the lifeless dust of Taurus Littrow' could be taken as symbol of how precarious all human existence is and the repetition of 'we' in the last stanza coupled with the final reference to 'ourselves' suggests that this event has revealed greater truths about us than it has about the moon. Alternatively Hayden could be questioning the value of continued scientific exploration and technological development when any knowledge that we do managed to glean could only ever be inconsequential in comparison to the 'Absolute Otherwhere[ness]' of the universe. Indeed, the fact that the exact nature of what is being questioned is left ambiguous could suggest how humanity is so hopefully confused that we don't even really know what our questions are.

Comment [KH15]: Good continuation of the ideas from the previous paragraph creating a sense that there is a continuous development of this interpretation – there is also a nice personal evaluation here in the 'most powerfully emphasised'

Comment [KH16]: Good focus on the poet as the craftsman throughout

Comment [KH17]: Good use of square brackets to embed the quotation smoothly while retaining the grammatical flow of the sentence

Comment [KH18]: Once again multiple interpretations are explored here

Comment [KH19]: Good attempt to consider the role of ambiguity in the passage

The tone of the final stanza of the poem is 'troubled' and uncertain. The triad of questions implies that Hayden (and all of us) are uncertain about what we want from ourselves or perhaps from life. He seems to be implying that we have sent these men to the moon to 'find [something] for us' but that they will be unable to do this perhaps because, ultimately the answers, if they are discoverable at all, lie closer to home. Perhaps the absence of a regular rhyme scheme and the fractured appearance of the poem on the page reinforce this sense that there is no comforting answer or completeness to the questions that Hayden is asking.

Comment [KH20]: Clear movement into a conclusion but without repetition of the previous ideas. The final lines of the poem are used to sum up the main thrust of the argument.

Marks Awarded:

Understanding of the Text	5	Clear understanding of the basic story and an exploration of the more subtle sense of human insignificance. Almost all of the poem is covered.
Interpretation of the Extract	5	Good awareness of multiple readings and the role of ambiguity in the text. In particular the candidate has not forced Hayden to make one definite comment on the human condition but has left this open in the same way that it is left open in the text
Appreciation of Literary Features	5	Wide range of literary features considered, including narrative voice, rhyme and ambiguity as a feature
Presentation	5	Clear structure – although the text essentially works through the poem in order the comparisons to earlier / later on reveal a sound over view of the text and make the structure convincing.
Language	4	Generally good language. Nothing is overly sophisticated but there is a clear control of the construction of the essay. Some sentences are a little long.
	24	Level 7

