

# Paper 1 – Example Poetry Commentary

## Standard Level

### May 2006

This poem is about the inescapable nature of culture, no matter how cruel the tradition may be. The poet describes to us the lives of the young Persian carpet weaver girls within the confines of a room 'bare but for blackened pots and jars.'

**Comment [KH1]:** Good confident summary of the main message of the poem – considerable insight is required in order to achieve this in the very first line

Written in five stanzas, the poet conveys here feelings about the child weavers methodically, bringing each aspect to focus one at a time. In the first stanza, the poet sets the scene: one of a room filled by 'rough timber gallows.' In this stanza we are told what is taking place within the room – it is where 'the carpets are woven' yet we do not know much about the weavers except for that they are a 'silent, sallow, dark-eyed Persian family.' The poet also creates atmosphere through descriptions of light and the reference to 'jeweled arabesques shadowing ...' It is the contrast between light and dark in this stanza that builds a visual picture in our mind. The room is presented to the reader almost as though it is a cave with diction such as: 'bare', 'blackened', 'cavernous' and 'flickering fire' aiding in the establishment of a cave-like atmosphere.

**Comment [KH2]:** Concise summary of the story of the poem

**Comment [KH3]:** The quotation to end is effective

**Comment [KH4]:** Ordered chronologically, although this makes sense in the context of the poem

**Comment [KH5]:** Smoothly included quotations

**Comment [KH6]:** A specific description of the atmosphere would have been good here

**Comment [KH7]:** Again, exactly what kind of picture would have helped

**Comment [KH8]:** Smooth, confident use of terminology

**Comment [KH9]:** Grouping together of quotations that do the same job for concision

The second stanza in contrast, brings to focus the 'makers of the webs' introduced to us in line 6. These are 'Eight-year-old girls.' Immediately the readers is taken aback and a sense of cruelty is conveyed. The sibilance 'sit sparrows' portrays the position of the girls on the plank with compound words such as 'rope-rising' and 'bird-bones' also creating a wider semantic field. These too are alliterative, reinforcing the rhythm of the poem, which to me seems to echo the weaving of the carpets. The poet has used alliteration in line 3 'bare but for blackened pots' generating plosive sounds to initiate this rhythm.

**Comment [KH10]:** Clear focus on the effect on the reader – a sensitive appreciation of our response

**Comment [KH11]:** Nice feature, although it is not particularly clear what 'wider semantic field' means

**Comment [KH12]:** Lovely, personal, tentative interpretation of the effect of one of the more subtle literary features

**Comment [KH13]:** Smooth, unpretentious use of literary features throughout

**Comment [KH14]:** Again, good, subtle understanding of the multiple effects on the reader

**Comment [KH15]:** Effortlessly appropriate and sophisticated language

The fact that the eight-year-old girls are 'bent like old women' further moves the reader to feel somewhat helpless but moreover, angered by the injustice. One understands the 'unsupported bird-bones' to be the crouched shoulder blades of the young girls. The animal reference is very appropriate in conveying the torturous result of the 'sparrowed' position they take on the plank.

This second stanza informs the reader of the girls' inheritance of this role in their Persian society. It is a tradition, or so we infer, for young girls with 'such little fingers' to 'tie such exquisitely minute knots' just as their 'aunts and sisters' before them. 'One hundred [knots] to the square centimeter' sounds like such a painfully difficult task and reiterates the poet's displeasure with this custom. This stanza leaves the reader with a strong impression, yet the insight into the inescapable lives of these young girls only subtly suggests the speaker's feelings about the child weavers – it is only in the penultimate stanza that the reader is presented with the message of the poem.

**Comment [KH16]:** Good sense of personal response to the poem

**Comment [KH17]:** Again, sensitive appreciation of the effect on the reader

**Comment [KH18]:** Good sense of organisation and coherence to the essay

**Comment [KH19]:** Nice subtle feature picked out – note how appropriate it is without the need for complex jargon

Lines 15 to 17 are a turning point in the poem as they seem to be almost like a bridge in a song. The repetition of 'one hundred ...' intensifies the painful and trapped feeling built up in the first two stanzas. It is in this stanza that the speaker speaks of him / herself 'my thumb-nail.' The beautiful melancholic phrases 'heart-beats of a young child's growing' and 'the space a foot will crush down' bring out the idea that child labour is a form of robbery – the stealing of 'a young child's growing' and all for the want of a carpet – the 'space that a foot will crush down.' This stanza truly saddens the reader and prepares one's mind for the significant three line stanza that follows.

**Comment [KH20]:** Again, lovely sense of personal involvement

**Comment [KH21]:** Once again, clear structure

Lines 18 to 20 are a plea to 'the makers of the webs' or the 'eyes whose whole horizon is the carpet ...' These words have an imperative tone and

**Comment [KH22]:** Smooth, confident use of features

the long 'O' sound further heightens the melancholy in the plea. Then, however, the speaker poses an open question, causing the reader to pause and digest the meaning and the significance of the question: 'Who can unravel the world's weaving?'

It is these words that carry much of the weight of the underlying message that Elizabeth Burge appears to be trying to convey. 'The world's weaving' refers to the way the world of the world, the cyclical nature in which traditions are continued and followed. The way of the word world is woven so tightly it seems inescapable and the speaker leaves us with food for thought – is there a way in which 'the makers of the web' can escape their culture-bound lives?

**Comment [KH23]:** Good detailed exploration of this key idea

The ultimate couplet brings out the human element of touch – the speaker lays his / her 'swollen hand' gently on the 'greenstick shoulder.' The reader ponders why the hand is swollen – perhaps it is due to the speaker having once been a carpet weaver and the swollen hand is a nasty remnant of those many 'one hundreds' the speaker has had to endure.

**Comment [KH24]:** A better phrase could be used here

**Comment [KH25]:** The introduction to this idea is lovely – a great sense of the role of ambiguity here – although it is doubtful that the persona was actually once a weaver as they seem more like a tourist

The unusual structure of the poem is highly effective in contributing to our understanding, with the first two stanzas forming a sonnet of 14 lines. The sextet and octet split the two different matters trying to be conveyed by the poet: the first 'matter' being tone and atmosphere, the second being to convey the cruelty of the human situation within this atmosphere.

**Comment [KH26]:** Lovely smooth inclusion of this quotation

**Comment [KH27]:** Slightly odd phrase

Finally, the two triplet stanzas and the final couplet which follow, bring out the underlying message and the speaker's feelings are made clearer. The poem ends with eyes 'speaking darkness' – this synaesthetic element poignantly imprints the image of soul-less eyes in the reader's mind.

**Comment [KH28]:** Good identification of this subtle feature – although the exact effect of the sonnet like nature of this part of the poem could be brought out more

**Comment [KH29]:** Repetition

**Comment [KH30]:** Good feature in combination with a clear effect on the reader

It is through this final image that we see the picture of a culture-bound existence that is inescapable, no matter how cruel the tradition may be. We too ask, 'Who can unravel the world's weaving?'

**Comment [KH31]:** Good, concise, powerful ending

**Marks Awarded:**

Understanding of the Text	4	An excellent grasp of the overall message of the text – the comment regarding the 'swollen hand' seems unconvincing but the rest of the commentary displays such clear insight that this lapse does not deserve to be punished too harshly
Interpretation of the Extract	5	Very good understanding of the multiple and subtle effects on the reader
Appreciation of Literary Features	5	A wide range of literary features considered, from structure, to tone, to synaesthesia always with an accompanying consideration of the effect on the reader
Presentation	5	There is a clear progression of ideas as we move through the essay. Quotations are included well and ideas developed in depth within paragraphs
Language	4	Effortlessly clear and appropriate language throughout. The phrase 'bring out' is repeated unnecessarily but otherwise a lovely, concise style of writing
	<b>23</b>	<b>Level 7</b>