



Sample essay 2

To gain the most from this exercise, read Sample Essay 1, the C-grade answer, before you read this essay. Think about how the candidate's work could be improved. Read the examiner's detailed comments (in the margin) and general comments. Do you agree with them? Finally, read this A-grade answer, and try to work out why the examiner scored this much higher. Read the comments. Do you agree with them?

Read the opening of Chapter XLVII as far as 'revolving wire cage'.

Comment on and analyse how the writer's choices of structure, form and language shape meaning.

Grade A answer

This is an important passage in the novel because it follows Alec's latest and most persuasive assault on the integrity of Tess and, through its focus on the physical demands of the threshing machine, emphasises the harshness of the forces that are arranged against her.¹

The immediacy of the present tense places the reader in the scene on this early March morning.² Hardy is exact in positioning the reader's point of view as this 'singularly inexpressive' dawn breaks: we, with the women-workers are stood 'waiting and shivering' observing the 'forlorn' trapezoidal top of the hay stack.³ The sun is low, almost twilight — reminding us of the moral ambivalence of such imagery throughout the novel. In the half light, the women are cold shivering forms, their 'whitey-brown pinners' reflecting the ambivalence of the world around them. The men are transformed into menacing 'silhouettes' — an image which will be picked up in the description of the engineer; later, however, the rising sun will bring illumination but little comfort as it beats down on Tess as she works on the machine.⁴

In this passage the suffering of Tess is placed in the context of the suffering of the entire agricultural community, especially women, with the increasing mechanisation

1 It is always important to contextualise the passage. Why is this a pivotal point in the novel? If nothing else, you are congratulating the examiner on a good choice of text, which cannot be bad. Therefore, highlight events preceding the action that you are about to analyse.

2 Good analysis of tense (AO2).

3 Good analysis of narrative perspective (AO2).

4 From the opening the candidate is beginning to explore some of the symbols of the passage, contextualising them within the novel (AO2).



that took place in the mid-century.⁵ The text mixes realist observations concerning contemporary working practices with a symbolism that explores further the Classical and Edenic references that have been made to characterise the tragic fall of Tess.⁶ Central to the chapter and, indeed, Hardy observes archly 'the primum mobile of this little world' is the threshing machine, which is to be the instrument upon which Tess is tortured. This is the semi-anthropomorphised 'red tyrant' that Tess will serve, the parenthetical description of the 'timber-framed construction, with straps' reminding us of the blood red reaping machine of Chapter 14, which was shaped like the gallows and therefore a proleptic marker foreshadowing Tess' eventual end.⁷ Introduced into agricultural practice in the mid-century, they were unpopular with workers because they upset the natural rhythms of work and led to unemployment.⁸ This machine is 'inexorable,' Hardy carefully detailing the mechanical actions of the wheels of the machine and echoing them in the mechanical movements of the women who feed it, their 'muscles and nerves' strained to endurance by its 'despotic demand.' Tess, because Angel once knocked Groby down in a particularly egotistical display of manly valour, is selected for special punishment, her position inside the 'wire cage' of the machinery reminding us of the caged birds with which she has been aligned throughout the text.⁹ Hardy develops this imagery later in the chapter, transforming a defiant Tess, who has just struck Alec with one of her work gauntlets, into a defiant sparrow before a captor: an image full of 'hopeless defiance.'

The narrative's negative portrayal of the machine also extends to the 'engineer' (a title he wields with evident pride), who tends it, and is presented as dislocated from those who work in the fields: 'What he looked he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it.' He is not exotic, but sinister and other-worldly, speaking in a 'strange northern accent' and serving 'fire and smoke' in contrast to the field workers who 'served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun.' He is, in effect, the diametric opposite to Tess, the 'daughter of Nature'. The repetitive nature of his mechanised universe is reflected in the paratactically connected clauses that describe his movements 'from farm to farm, from county to county' — a form of linguistic mechanisation. Only in a negation of the existence of the outside world 'and caring for them not at all' does this more organic universe intrude in the complex syntactical inversion.¹⁰ His contempt for the 'natives' is apparent from his refusal to talk to them (in the pompous reference to 'autochthonous idlers' it is his voice we hear), and his refusal to participate in the preparatory work.¹¹ He remains entirely insular and subservient to the machine which has the power to change the consistency of the air around it.

This transformative capacity is picked up and amplified through the symbolism with which the narrative describes both machine and engineer. In Talbothays dairy, Hardy's nostalgia for the natural rhythms of the agricultural world was made clear

5 Clear topic sentence (AO1).

6 Candidate effectively draws attention to the use of realist and symbolic modes within the passage.

7 The passage is linked to other symbolic tropes in the novel, using appropriate critical terminology (AO1, AO2).

8 Historical context (AO4).

9 A sophisticated reading which links elements of the passage to the wider themes and symbolic structures of the novel.

10 Sophisticated language analysis (AO2).

11 Sophisticated analysis of drifting narrative perspective (AO2).



in his evocation of the Garden of Eden motif. In this new Edenic vision God has been replaced by the red threshing machine, the black chimney of the accompanying steam engine becoming the 'hiss[ing]' snake that 'runs up beside an ash-tree.'¹² The serpent is in charge and field work is hell, the narrative making it clear through the description of the machine as a 'Plutonic master' (Pluto being the Roman god of hell), and the engineer as a 'creature from Tophet' — a biblical location where children were sacrificed to the god Moloch, therefore offering another proleptic marker pointing to the eventual death of Tess.¹³ Blackness becomes pervasive, whether through the sooty machine, the 'sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness' that is the engineer and the morning quivering with 'hot blackness.' Blackness, with its obvious connotations of evil, becomes dominant in the latter half of the novel. It will later be picked up by Alec, who is continually associated with black and will become the devil himself, but is also a quality shared by the men in the novel. The silhouetted men on top of the rick will later be transformed into another group of men silhouetted against the dawn: the policemen who converge on the sleeping Tess at Stonehenge.

This passage stands at the turning point in the novel. The machines introduced here foreshadow the gallows that will eventually kill her, while the colours of black and red are combined to ensnare Tess in a web of determinism. Thus when Alec, 'the blood-red-ray of her existence,' enters later in the novel, Tess is both physically exhausted and helpless.¹⁴

12 Contextualisation of passage within the novel (AO2).

13 Excellent understanding of the symbolism of the novel (AO2).

14 Conclusion once again amplifies the importance of the passage by focussing on consequences.