

Question 3

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

In literary works, cruelty often functions as a crucial motivation or a major social or political factor. Select a novel, play, or epic poem in which acts of cruelty are important to the theme. Then write a well-developed essay analyzing how cruelty functions in the work as a whole and what the cruelty reveals about the perpetrator and/or victim.

You may select a work from the list below or another work of equal literary merit. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Beloved
A Bend in the River
Billy Budd
Black Boy
Catch-22
Cat's Eye
The Crucible
Frankenstein
A Gesture Life
Great Expectations
Heart of Darkness
Invisible Man
The Kite Runner
The Last of the Mohicans
Lord of the Flies

Mansfield Park
Medea
The Merchant of Venice
Night
The Odyssey
Oliver Twist
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
Othello
The Red Badge of Courage
The Scarlet Letter
Sister Carrie
Sophie's Choice
Tess of the d'Urbervilles
To Kill a Mockingbird
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
Wuthering Heights

STOP

END OF EXAM

In the play Othello, the evil character Iago instigates the majority of the plot through his cruel ways. At the start of the work, Othello has recently married Desdemona and the couple ~~are~~^{is} perfectly content. Othello has also recently appointed Cassio to lieutenant - choosing him over the vengeful Iago. Through his manipulative ways, Iago is able to bring about the downfall of nearly every character in the play. In Shakespeare's Othello, Iago's surreptitious ~~act~~ and subtle cruelty fuels other characters to commit their own acts of cruelty which they may not have otherwise deemed possible.

Iago's acts of cruelty are not overt, but sneaky, so other characters barely even notice what is going on. Iago slithers in and out of people's minds, making them believe his cruel lies. He claims to help his pal Rodrigo in winning over Desdemona from Othello, while secretly using Rodrigo for his own personal gain. Iago's malicious intent at the start of the play is to take down Othello, ~~and Cassio~~^{for choosing} Cassio over himself for the position of lieutenant, and Cassio for beating him at for that role. He uses manipulation to frame Cassio ~~for~~ as sleeping with Desdemona as a way of



taking them both down at once. Through spreading 'news' and 'proof' of this ~~other~~ fictitious affair, he instigates a sense of jealousy and rage in Othello. Iago is cruel in his intentions, but also in his actions and words, for making Othello believe his wife is unfaithful drives him into a state of madness. Iago is cruel to nearly every character in the play, whether through spreading lies or planting fake evidence, but the ways in which the characters react to his cruelty tell more about them than him.

When Othello and Rodrigo are victims to Iago's cruelty, they themselves become cruel, but when Desdemona suffers under Iago's words, she remains pure. Iago takes advantage of poor Rodrigo in making him believe he is helping him win over Desdemona, but during this process, it becomes clear that Rodrigo himself possesses the ability to be cruel. When he learns of Cassio and Desdemona's affair, he becomes fueled by hate and jealousy and attempts to kill Cassio merely at Iago's suggestion. While it is Iago who fuels most of the drama in the play, it is the others ~~who~~ ^{who} carry it out. Othello also falls prey to this and winds up murdering his wife Desdemona in their bed, though she claims she did nothing



wrong, Othello is so violently fueled by his anger that he can not listen to her. Though he would never have killed her without Iago's cruel rumors, the fact that he did it demonstrates that he had it in him all along. Finally, despite all of Iago's cruel words in tainting Desdemona's reputation and turning him against her, she remains pure throughout it all, even to her death in bed. Though her life is ruined and ended ~~by Iago~~ indirectly by Iago's cruelty, ~~she~~ Desdemona does not turn sour herself. After she is nearly murdered by her husband, she refuses even then to taint his own reputation and claims it is her own fault that she is dying.

Iago's cruelty is the cause of everyone's, including his own, downfall, but he himself is not the only man responsible. His cruelty reveals more about his victims than it does about himself. It is shown through Desdemona that it is not necessary to become cruel when one has had cruelty done on himself, but many characters still fall prey to this. One cruel action fuels another, and the cyclical nature of evil prevails when one has at least a hint of evil in himself. Cruelty functions in many ways, but it is nearly always guaranteed to breed more cruelty.

#

AP[®] ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

2015 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 3

Overview

For the “open question” students were asked to select a novel, play, or epic poem in which acts of cruelty are important to the theme of the work and to write a well-organized essay analyzing how cruelty functions in the work as a whole and what the cruelty reveals about the perpetrator and/or victim.

This question presented students with a complex, multi-level task of identifying acts of cruelty, determining what the cruelty says about the perpetrator and/or victim, and then analyzing the deeper impact of cruelty on the work as a whole. For the “open question” students were offered a list of texts that would work well for the prompt. While many students made their selections for analysis from this recommended list, others chose from an impressive variety of other texts, ancient to contemporary, classic and noncanonical, for their analyses.

Sample: 3A — *Othello* **Score: 8**

This top-range essay confidently articulates two related claims: that Iago’s cruelty “fuels other characters to commit their own acts of cruelty which they may not have otherwise deemed possible” and that Iago’s “cruelty reveals more about his victims than about himself.” The essay makes apt and specific references to the play to develop a thorough and convincing analysis of the social, political, and personal motivation for Iago’s cruelty and its results. It argues that when Roderigo and Othello are victims of cruelty “they themselves become cruel”; Roderigo is “fueled by hate and jealousy,” and Othello’s murder of his wife as a result of Iago’s cruel lies “demonstrates that he had it in him all along.” Similarly, being the victim of cruelty brings out Desdemona’s defining characteristic: in contrast to the others, even under duress, “she remains pure.” The essay occasionally lapses into colloquialism (e.g., “Iago’s acts of cruelty are not overt, but sneaky, so other characters barely even notice what is going on”) and the statement of the theme could perhaps be articulated more gracefully, but this particularly well-focused essay clearly earned its score of 8.

Sample: 3B — *Wuthering Heights* **Score: 6**

This reasonable essay claims that Heathcliff is treated cruelly and that his own suffering leads him to perpetrate acts of cruelty on others: “Heathcliff is haunted by his past of childhood mistreatment and grows up with a mentality seeking revenge to those who he believes took so much from him.” Cruelty, this essay suggests, forms and reveals character. This claim is traced through several characters: Hindley is rejected by his father and so punishes Heathcliff; Heathcliff responds by becoming simultaneously mannerly and vengeful and “the long-term effects of his mistreatment, reveal a much darker side [of his character].” While the essay shows insight in identifying mental and physical cruelty, it does not use this distinction to great purpose. Its development of its claim is not thorough, and the supporting examples it offers from the novel are not fully analyzed for what they might contribute to the meaning of the novel as a whole. The writing shows a competent level of control over the elements of composition.