



Sample Essays

From IB SL Lang Lit Specimen Paper “From the essay “What is poverty?” Jo Goodwin Parker 1971”

“You ask me what poverty is.” This opening line of the essay ‘What is poverty’ by Jo Goodwin Parker captures its spirit and purpose. Through her use of language she engages the reader directly with this abstract idea of poverty, making it very real and concrete. She wants the reader to understand poverty so that they feel motivated to do something about it.

Parker has written her essay for a wealthy audience, targeting ‘clean’, middle-class Americans, calling on them to recognize her struggle. She seems to know how the middle class think, as she puts words in their mouths and responds to them. For example, she writes, “You can say in your clean clothes coming from your clean house, ‘Anybody can be clean.’ Let me explain about housekeeping with no money.” Her purpose is to defend herself against these kinds of accusations. Furthermore she describes how humiliating it is to ask for money, by explaining to the reader, “Think about asking for a loan from a relative, if this is the only way you can imagine asking for help.” Interestingly, she puts herself in her reader’s shoes, asking them to do the same.

Parker’s message is very clear. She wants the reader to become angered by her poverty and eventually help her. She says she does not want the reader’s pity. “I cannot use your pity,” she says. Instead she asks the reader to “listen with understanding.” She wants to make the reader more aware of her despair and the despair of others around her. In the last lines she says, “Others like me are all around you. Look at us with an angry heart, anger that will help you help me.” After sketching an image of poverty throughout the essay she closes with this very clear call to action.

Parker achieves her purpose and conveys her message through a very direct tone, placing the audience in a very sombre, uncomfortable mood. As a reader, you feel lectured, because she uses imperative verbs, such as, “put yourself in my dirty, worn out, ill fitting shoes, and hear me.” Her use of the pronoun ‘you’ is two-fold. Firstly she uses the second person to speak directly to the reader, such as, “Have you ever had to ask for help?” Secondly, she uses the second person as a general subject, as in ‘one in general’. For example sketches a scenario, describing how one goes about asking for help. “You find out where the office is that you are supposed to visit. You circle that block four of five times.” Mixing the general ‘you’ with direct, second-person narration makes the reader feel very much a part of the story that she is telling, creating both a sense of empathy and frustration.

The author achieves her purpose further through her use of stylistic devices such as imagery. She constantly uses concrete images to portray the abstract idea of poverty. For example she explains that “poverty is staying up all night on cold nights to watch the fire, knowing one spark on the newspapers covering the walls means your sleeping child dies in flames.” This horrific image of a child burning to death, together with the newspaper-covered walls of a make-shift house add to the reader’s understanding of this abstract idea of poverty. There are many more nouns, such as diapers, runny noses and grits with no oleo that paint a picture of poverty in the reader’s mind. What’s more you can smell poverty through phrases that describe the “stench of rotting teeth,” “urine,” and “sour milk.” You can feel poverty through hands that are “so cracked and red,” because the author cannot afford Vaseline. The effect of this use of imagery on its audience is that you become more conscious of the effects of poverty.

Structurally speaking, the essay is written in a very persuasive way. There are parallel structures that start each body paragraph, such as “Poverty is getting up in the morning...” in paragraph 2, “Poverty is

dirt” in paragraph 3, “Poverty is staying up all night” in paragraph 4, and “Poverty is asking for help” in paragraph 5. This use of repetition, or anaphora, reinforces Parker’s ideas. Furthermore she continually asks questions such as, “You ask me what poverty is?” which she answers throughout the essay with simple sentences such as, “I will tell you how it feels.” Finally she concludes that she has come out of her despair to tell us this. Again, we feel that we, as the readers have been spoken to.

To conclude, Jo Goodwin Parker’s essay is very effective in creating empathy for the poor. As she claims, it is not her goal to create pity but understanding. She achieves this through imagery, direct tone and other structural devices, such as anaphora. Their effect on the reader is that we care more about poverty.

From Paper 1 (SL) May 2013 Text 1

Sample 1

The text is from an appeal published in ‘The Guardian’ in 2011. Arguably, the text is a representation of the published appeal which could potentially have been published in color. This (exam) text is published in black and white, and this could impact on the analysis. The text targets a British audience, perhaps typically middle class people, to persuade them to make donations to create a more pleasurable Christmas experience for homeless people in Britain. This is achieved through the reference to contextual factors, polyvocality, synthetic personalization, establishing ‘Crisis’ as a successful charity, and the graphosemantics of the text.

There are many contextual factors that contribute to the reader’s understanding and response to the text. Firstly, we should note the importance of Christmas in certain Western cultures and its connotation of togetherness and family. The idea is deeply entrenched in many Western countries, including Britain. It is with this understanding and preconception that the target audience of the appeal will read the appeal. The association of cold weather in a northern hemisphere winter is significant contextual knowledge that is ‘naturally’ acquired from living in Britain. With this contextual knowledge, the reader will know that living through this cold period can be difficult and unpleasant, particularly for vulnerable people and groups. Reference is made to the economic downturn more than once in the appeal, and to ‘rising unemployment and living costs’. This suggests that Crisis cares for the general population, not only homeless people, and this may stimulate a kind of empathy in the target reader who, in turn, may be more inclined to contribute money. The appeal was published in 2011, and this makes specific temporal contextual references extremely relevant.

The text is polyvocal, containing two distinct voices, one of which is a persuasive voice. This persuasive voice is achieved through the use of several stylistic devices. The first word encountered in the text is the inclusive pronoun ‘we’re’, immediately drawing in and embracing the target reader who first encounters the headline/title. This title ends with the rhetorical question ‘will you?’, establishing an invitation to the reader to join the central ideological position of the text, which is to give to and care for the homeless. This strategy of synthetic personalization is used throughout the text by writing from a second person perspective, and using inclusive pronoun constructions such as ‘you’re’, ‘you’, ‘your’, ‘we’, and ‘our’. Synthetic personalization aims to work to **effectively encourage the reader** to feel that she is being spoken to on an individual basis, thus evoking personal and emotional responses to donate. Furthermore, the foot-in-the-door technique is employed. This compliance technique is characterized by a small request followed by a real and larger request. This text uses this to persuade readers to give, not only a little, but as much as they can – ‘one place costs £23.39; two places costs £46.78; and if you were able, £233.90 would pay for a whole table’. The adverb ‘just’ is essentially redundant, as is 39 pence in £23.39. However, the triviality of this may persuade the largely middle class, educated reader to make a small effort that may have a potentially large and significant impact on the lives of homeless people.

The persuasive voice is further established by presenting Crisis in a positive light. Having been in operation since ‘1972’, Crisis at Christmas is now celebrating its ‘40th anniversary’. Such deictic references to time

instil confidence in the reader that their effort and donation will be professionally dealt with and that the homeless will be directly benefitted.

The second voice in the text is personal and somewhat dramatic. This is expressed through the anecdote 'A Place for John'. Here, a real life testimony of a homeless person – John as a victim of circumstance - is included to trigger an emotional response. Although mostly not written in first person – with the exception of one quote – John's voice is expressed through a third person 'surrogate'. This exemplifies the helplessness and vulnerability of homeless people, conveying the idea that their voice will only be heard through someone else higher up the social hierarchy. This anecdote contains traumatic and tragic life events that escalate as the anecdote progresses, including the harm imagery and connotations of 'leukaemia', John's mother drowning herself, and John 'grasping his most precious possession to his chest.' These graphic images no doubt evoke an authentic emotional response in the reader and may persuade the reader to donate from a sense of sympathy.

The graphosemantics contribute significantly to the persuasive tone of the text. The prosodic effect of the title, displayed in the large font draws the reader's attention to it immediately. The use of the different font style in 'cold weather alert' together with the representation of snowflakes around it create a powerful intertextual effect, emphasizing the cold weather (at Christmas). Bold headings and the compartmentalization of the text into text boxes organizes and condenses information, enhancing the visual appeal and enabling readers to more readily access the text. The inclusion of the image of John – a benign 'grandfatherly' figure – creates an intertextual relationship to his anecdote, making his story more personal, and enabling readers to identify the human aspect of John's narrative. Lastly, the apparently handwritten 'Thank you' that concludes the text evokes a sense of a personal voice, since handwriting is unique and personal, and adds to the synthetic personalization of the text.

The text is probably effective in the ways it enables it to persuade its target audience. Of course, this does not mean it will successfully attract donations. The text requires a particular contextual awareness on the part of the reader for it to make sense. This textual awareness may also lead readers to oppose or reject the text's effort to persuade. Readers may be tired of responding to such emotive appeals, they may regard homeless people, not as victims, but as agents of their own fate, or in 2011 readers may be simply too distracted by their own economic circumstances to help others.

Sample 2

The 'Crisis at Christmas' text is an appeal that ran in 'The Guardian' asking readers for donations to help provide meals and support single homeless people in Britain. The appeal is run on behalf of the charity 'Crisis'. Through the visual and written text, by utilizing both an emotive and authoritative voice the purpose of asking for a donation is achieved.

The context needed to understand this text is that the appeal ran during Christmas time. Christmas, especially in Britain, is a large occasion, originally a religious festival, although now many other people celebrate it. It is a time to spend with family. As part of the festivities, the exchange of gifts is also widely practiced. This appeal urges the reader to give a 'single' homeless person the gift of 'a good meal' and 'good company'. The reader, in this case, is the reader of the British newspaper, 'The Guardian'. To be a reader of a newspaper, it can be said that they would have a certain level of intellect. It is also assumed that the average reader is relatively affluent to consider £23.39 a 'few' pounds. Due to the nature of the appeal being of money, it can be said that the primary audience would be those of more money as they may be willing to donate a larger sum. This is highlighted in 'and if you were able, £233.90' to pay for a table of 'ten people'. However, that is not to say that smaller donations are not welcome, as each gift is crucial. This is reiterated by the attachment of a payment coupon.

The appeal, which ran in a newspaper amongst many other articles and advertisements, it is crucial that the visual text attracts readers, and therefore, potential donors. This is firstly achieved by the visuals. This

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includes the use of large headings. The opening heading 'we're planning to take on homelessness this Christmas. Will you?' is a large typeface that is easy to read. This would immediately catch the eye of the reader. Originally this appeal would have been printed in colour. This is crucial, as it stands out from the other text. The dark band would suggest that it is a bright colour. This is then contrasted with the lack of colour of the text to create more prosody. The juxtaposition of the styling of the heading and the rest of the newspaper allows it to stand out. Another visual that is important is the photograph of 'John' accompanying the case study. The elderly man appears to be friendly and approachable, perhaps countering the general stereotype of 'homeless people' being dirty and scary. This reinforces the emotive tone of the appeal. The use of clip art of the snowflakes and gift tag also help to create a better and more appealing visual appearance. Lastly, the design at the end resembling a castle wall could maybe be symbolic of the reader's role as 'the knight in shining armour', again an emotive device.

The font used in the appeal is significant. Firstly, the sans font is friendly, and easy to read'. Perhaps, it may contrast to the font that is used for articles in the newspaper – which is normally a serif font. If this is the case, then it can also be used to draw attention to the appeal. Secondly, the utilisation of bolding certain phrases allows the reader to 'notice' the important information. Lastly, there is also the use of other typefaces. The typeface used in 'cold weather alert' is in capitals: the prosodic features reiterate the phrase. The font is similar to those used on warnings: it also appears to be 'worn out' in a way that parts of the letters are missing. This helps to provide an image of the harsh conditions faced by the homeless people. There is also a fourth font used for 'Thank you' which imitates hand writing. It appears to be more friendly and appreciative of the future donations – if the appeal was successful.

The last formal feature utilised is the layout of the appeal. The paragraphs are generally very small – with only a few lines. This makes reading much easier. If the reader does not have time to read the entire appeal, or perhaps is only flicking through, the bold and use of boxes to highlight important information becomes even more crucial. This is very likely because newspapers are rarely read from cover to cover, and on top of this are filled with a large amount of information that the texts must fight for the attention of the reader.

Once the text has achieved to gain the attention of the reader, it is then the written text that is used to convey the important message. The tone of the text is authoritative and informative. It uses high modality such as 'will change a life' to assure the reader that the cause is worthwhile. It also uses numerical values to give quantifiable data to the reader. Examples of this is the use of currency and '1 place – 3 hot meals...' This again is a reassuring device to the reader. As well as informative and authoritative, the text employs an emotive tone. It uses dramatic devices to convey the urgency and importance of the cause. This is achieved through short, high modality sentences such 'night time temperatures are falling'. This creates a vivid, highly emotive image that encourages sympathy. Another example is 'where Christmas should be, there's just an empty space'. Another dramatic device is the use of caesura – 'for just a few pounds – for £23.39 in fact' and 'we need your help – and we need it urgently'. The dramatic pause is also similar to the one that would be used in spoken language. This 'personal appeal' seems to be more convincing. A list of three is also used in 'cold, hungry and alone'. This again adds drama.

The use of the case study 'a place for John' is important because it makes the problem more personal as well as relatable. The retelling of John's life in chronological order is written in a way to convey countless tragedies of 'war', 'suicide', 'violence', 'death', one after another. Furthermore, the quote only helps to strengthen the connection between the reader and the cause.

This appeal would perhaps not work so well if it were not for Christmas. Christmas, repeated many times in the text, evokes a certain amount of sentimentality among the population. This is to the extent that people who are not as religious feel that they must re-connect with the religion, even if it is only for a short amount of time. This appeal plays to this. Christmas is a time for thinking of others and giving back to the community, and welcoming others in. Furthermore, Christmas can also be a time of over-indulgence and over-spending. This appeal utilises this guilt, by suggesting that 'a little' donation of a 'few pounds' could perhaps compensate for this over-indulgence.

In conclusion, this appeal from Crisis for donations to help the homeless in Britain is aimed at readers of 'The Guardian'. It uses visual modes to draw attention to the text, and utilises an authoritative but emotive tone to reiterate – and perhaps exploit – the Christmas sentiment of the reader to give homeless people a chance at a new life.