**Stage 2 English Literary Studies**

**Assessment Type 1: Responding to Texts**

**Critical Perspectives Task**

**Purpose**

* To consider factors that affect different readers’ interpretations of a text

**The Task**

Analyse the film ***Things Fall Apart*** through these two perspectives:

* Gender
* Post-colonial

**Assessment**

Your response should be up to 1000 words or equivalent in multi-modal form. Written responses may be in essay or short answer form. Multi-modal responses may be one of the following:

* PowerPoint
* Photo Story
* Oral presentation
* Dramatisation
* Other – see teacher before proceeding

**By adopting a gender perspective and a postcolonial perspective, write an analysis of the ideas and values in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.**

Tearing through the cultural barrier, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* explores the clash between the protagonist, Okonkwo, his son, Nwoye, and the European settlers and missionaries. Interrogating the text by adopting the critical viewpoints of both gender and the shifting power relations instigated by colonialism, allows the reader to understand how the more one rigidly subscribes to socio-cultural expectations, the greater the likelihood that ensuing conflict will result in tragic outcomes and an unravelling of identity. Okonkwo’s blinkered adherence to his hyper masculinity ultimately imprisons him—literally and metaphorically—as he himself and the Ibo culture is superseded in power by the new ideology propagated by Christian Europe.

The Ibo culture is dominated by the status of men, and readers observe the passively patriarchal world of Okonkwo; from the first page of the novel, he is characterised as an exceptional wrestler, who, at eighteen, ended the seven-year reign of the former champion. Since that first auspicious fight, ‘Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bushfire.’ The effect of the hyperbolic simile highlights how physical strength is admired above all else. Okonkwo’s understanding of masculinity is very much a cultural construct that privileges the patriarchal basis of his society. For Okonkwo, ‘his whole life was dominated by a fear of failure and of weakness.’ Thus Okonkwo hated his father, who was called ‘agbala’ by some in the village, with ‘agbala’ being not just another name for a woman, but also a term to describe ‘a man who had taken no title.’ Okonkwo’s unremitting ‘fear of failure and of weakness’ led to him ruling ‘his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children.’ The use of adjectives in the preceding quotation emphasises how Okonkwo’s masculinist ideology effectively socialises women and children to cooperate in their own subordination. Okonkwo’s unthinking acceptance of what he understands to be his masculine identity sees him kill his adopted child, Ikemefuna. Even though Okonkwo’s aged and respected neighbour, Ezedu, cautions Okonkwo, ‘That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death,’ Okonkwo nonetheless kills Ikemefuna to fulfil the command spoken by the Oracle of the Hills as ‘He was afraid of being thought weak’ by others. Okonkwo’s stubborn adherence to his masculine identity is conveyed through an understated and unemotional rhetorical question in which he asks himself, ‘How can a man who has killed five men in a battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to the number?’

A gender reading of Okonkwo’s tragic flaw—his uncompromising masculinist persona—is evident in his deteriorating relationship with his son, Nwoye. Achebe emphasises Okonkwo’s dreams for Nwoye to grow into a strong, masculine member of the clan, but their relationship is strained by Okonkwo’s limited insight into masculine identity. Okonkwo frequently voices disappointment in Nwoye with comments such as ‘a bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match,’ a comedic understatement that heightens the viewpoint of what it is to be considered a successful male in Ibo society. Furthermore, as wrestling is a motif of masculine strength in the text, Okonkwo’s comment underscores the tragedy of events to come.

The rigid socio-cultural expectations of what it means to be a man in Ibo culture is seen to devastating effect when Achebe documents the impact of the arrival of Christianity within the Ibo society. In an irreversible act, Nwoye not only renounces his religion, but his father and family as well. Okonkwo’s pain is explored through the harsh language in the short, declarative sentence, ‘Now he is no longer my son.’ Okonkwo has only ever prospered within his own masculine-centric culture, and this new religion allows Nwoye to escape this society, which has cast him as a kind of *non-man*, in which he can never fulfil the gender role expected of him. The structural feature of withholding Nwoye from any subsequent narrative viewpoint foreshadows the imminent deterioration of the way of life of the Ibo, for ‘To abandon the gods of one’s father… was the very depth of abomination.’ Okonkwo attempts to resist the spread of Christianity, determined to unite his village and save their way of life. The conflict between cultural identity and imperialism is symbolically explored when a Christian kills the village python. Okonkwo shows disgust at his clansmen—who suggest ignoring the incident—exclaiming, ‘If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor… I take a stick and break his head. This is what a man does,’ and Okonkwo then continues to express opposition by concluding, ‘until the abominable gang [is] chased out of the village with whips there [will] be no peace.’ The use of harsh language, such as the verb ‘defecate,’ highlights the disdain Okonkwo feels for the Christians, and how their village needs to cleanse itself of such beliefs. Achebe depicts the impending tragedy of Okonkwo’s cause by explaining how ‘many others… saw the situation differently, and it was their counsel that prevailed,’ indicating that Okonkwo’s assertive demands are ignored. After himself killing a European messenger, Okonkwo ‘knew that Umofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messenger escape,’ revealing his final realisation of futility and the collapse in his fiery masculine identity. Okonkwo embodies traditional Ibo traits of masculine strength, and his subsequent suicide becomes a powerful symbol of his culture’s loss of power.

Achebe’s voice is controlled and measured; for all of Okonkwo’s representation of a once successful life, the District Commissioner thought Okonkwo’s story ‘would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph at any rate.’ With the use of such biting understatement, the trivialisation and marginalisation of traditional African culture is exposed. The title of the novel then becomes a damning critique of not only Okonkwo’s exaggerated gender role, but of the paucity of the European imagination that their colonial quest was little more than the ‘Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.’

Words: 1033

**This critical perspectives task is assessed as A**

**Knowledge and Understanding**

**Ku1** Detailedknowledge and understanding of ways in which ideas, perspectives, and values are represented in texts. From the introduction they identify the perspectives being explored and also the ideas that they serve to highlight. However, they are more confident in their discussion of gender than post-colonialism.

**Ku2** Gender and postcolonial perspectives are explored in depth through a range of characters and stylistic features, hyperbole, figurative language, characterisation, structural features, though some are dealt with in more depth than others.

**Analysis**

**An 1** Clear analysis of the ways in which texts represent ideas, perspectives, and values highlighting, at times, throughout the piece Achebe as the author and connecting characters and events to the perspectives that they are focusing on.

**An4** Clear analysis of ways in which different critical perspectives inform critical interpretation, and implied in their discussion that gender and postcolonial perspectives have similarities in their interpretation in regards to those who have power and those who do not.

**Application**

**App2** Appropriate use of evidence from texts which develops, supports, and justifies responses, with textual references incorporated fluently in discussion. Evidence is incorporated throughout the paragraph to support the many points made and reinforce the critical perspective being explored.

**App 3** Mostly accurate and fluent expression, which is appropriate for audience and purpose. The student uses sophisticated language and terminology but at times wrestles with this.

Performance Standards for Stage 2 English Literary Studies

|   | Knowledge and Understanding | Analysis | Application |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A | Detailed knowledge and understanding of ways in which ideas, perspectives, and values are represented in texts.Thorough knowledge and understanding of a range of ways in which authors use stylistic features to communicate ideas.Detailed knowledge and understanding of a range of stylistic features and conventions of different text types. | Perceptive analysis of the ways in which texts represent ideas, perspectives, and values.Perceptive analysis and evaluation of the complex ways in which stylistic features are used to influence the interpretation of texts.Perceptive analysis of similarities and differences between texts in comparative tasks.Perceptive analysis of ways in which different critical perspectives inform critical interpretation. | Sophisticated use of a wide range of conventions, and/or stylistic features to create coherent texts that address the meaning and intention of the task.Detailed and appropriate use of evidence from texts develop, support, and justify responses, with textual references incorporated fluently in discussion.Use of precise and fluent expression, which is appropriate for audience and purpose.  |
| B | Knowledge and understanding of a range of ways in which ideas, perspectives, and values are represented in most texts.Knowledge and understanding of a range of ways in which authors use stylistic features to communicate ideas.Knowledge and understanding of a range of stylistic features and conventions of different text types. | Clear analysis of the ways in which texts represent ideas, perspectives, and values.Clear analysis and evaluation of the complex ways in which stylistic features are used to influence the reading of texts.Clear analysis of similarities and differences between texts in comparative tasks.Clear analysis of ways in which different critical perspectives inform critical interpretation. | Use of a range of conventions, and/or stylistic features to create coherent texts that address the meaning and intention of the task.Appropriate use of evidence from texts to develop, support, and justify responses, with textual references incorporated in discussion.Mostly accurate and fluent expression, which is appropriate for audience and purpose. |
| C | Knowledge and understanding of some ways in which ideas, perspectives, and values are represented in texts.Knowledge and understanding of some ways in which authors use stylistic features to communicate ideas.Knowledge and understanding of some of the stylistic features and conventions of different text types. | Some analysis of ways in which texts represent ideas, perspectives, and values.Description, with some analysis and evaluation, of ways in which stylistic features are used to influence the reading of texts.Description, with some analysis, of similarities and differences between texts in comparative tasks.Some analysis of ways in which different critical perspectives inform critical interpretation. | Competent use of conventions, and/or stylistic features to create texts that address the meaning and intention of the task.Competent use of evidence from texts to develop, support, and justify responses, with some use of textual references in discussion.Generally fluent and clear expression, which is mostly appropriate for audience and purpose. |
| D | Some knowledge and restricted understanding of a narrow range of ways in which ideas and values are represented in texts.Some knowledge and restricted understanding of a narrow range of ways in which authors use stylistic features to communicate ideas.Some knowledge and restricted understanding of a few of the stylistic features and conventions of different text types. | Description of the ideas and values represented in texts.Description of some ways in which stylistic features are used to influence the reading of texts.Some description of similarities and differences between texts in comparative tasks.Recognition of some ways in which different critical perspectives inform critical interpretation. | Use of some language features to create texts that address the meaning and intention of the task in a limited way.Some use of evidence from texts to develop, support , and attempt to justify responses, with use of a narrow range of textual references.Occasionally clear expression, which is appropriate for some audiences and purposes. |
| E | Simplistic knowledge and very restricted understanding of the way in which an idea or a value is represented in a text.Limited knowledge and restricted understanding of a restricted range of stylistic features used by authors. Limited knowledge and restricted understanding of different text types and conventions. | Reference to an idea or value represented in a text.Limited description of a way in which a stylistic feature is used to influence the reading of a text.Simplistic description of a connection between texts in a comparative task.Reference to a critical perspective. | Attempted use of some language features to create texts that attempt to address the meaning and intention of the task in a limited way.Restricted use of evidence from texts to develop and support a simple response, with minimal textual references.Emerging development of control of expression. |