AH English: Textual Analysis
27th March 2018

Please read the following poem and non-fiction text from the SQA 2017 Advanced Higher Examination. Please make notes based on the question following each text in preparation for the online session on 27th March.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS — 20 marks

Your answer should take the form of a CRITICAL ANALYSIS appropriately structured to meet the demands of your selected question.

Attempt ONLY Part A OR Part B OR Part C OR Part D.

PART A — POETRY

Read carefully *Sestina* by Elizabeth Bishop (1956) and then answer the question that follows it.

Sestina[1]

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
5 reading the jokes from the almanac[2],
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
10 but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
15 dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
20 hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

25 *It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
30 and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

[1]*Sestina*: a particular poetic form of which the printed poem is an example
[2]*almanac*: an annual reference book containing a wide range of information and articles, including important dates, astronomical data and predictions for the year to come

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
35 into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Question

Discuss the features of the poem that you found interesting and the ways in which they helped to shape your understanding and appreciation of it.

PART C — PROSE NON-FICTION

Read carefully this extract from *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) by Robert Macfarlane and then answer the question that follows it.

Mountains of the Mind

The book which undoubtedly made the deepest impression on me was Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna*, dictated by Herzog from a hospital bed in 1951. He couldn't write it himself because he had no fingers left. Herzog was the leader of a team of French mountaineers which, in the spring of 1950, travelled to the Nepal Himalaya with the aim of being the first group to summit
5 one of the world's fourteen 8,000-metre peaks.

After an arduous month of reconnaissance, and with time running out before the arrival of the monsoon, the French team made their way into the heart of the Annapurna range, a lost world of ice and rock locked off by a ring of the highest mountains on earth. "*We were in a savage and desolate cirque of mountains never before seen by man*," wrote Herzog.

10 *No animal or plant could exist here. In the pure morning light this absence of all life, this utter destitution of nature, seemed only to intensify our own strength. How could we expect anyone else to understand the peculiar exhilaration that we drew from this barrenness, when man's natural tendency is to turn towards everything in nature that is rich and generous?*

15 Gradually, the team moved up the mountain, establishing successively higher camps. The altitude, the extreme cold and the load-bearing began to take their toll. But as Herzog grew physically weaker, so his conviction strengthened that the summit was attainable. Eventually, on 3 June, he and a climber called Louis Lachenal left Camp V, the highest camp, in a bid for the top of Annapurna.

20 This final stage of the mountain involved the ascent of a long, curving ramp of ice the team had nicknamed the Sickle glacier, and then of a steep band of rock which protected the summit itself. Aside from this band, the route offered nothing serious in the way of technical obstacles and, keen to save weight, Lachenal and Herzog left their rope behind them.

The weather was immaculate when they departed Camp V, with a pristine sky. Clear skies bring
25 the lowest temperatures, though, and the air was so cold that both men felt their feet freezing inside their boots as they climbed higher. Quite soon it became apparent that they would have to turn back or run the risk of severe frostbite. They carried on.

In his account of the climb, Herzog describes becoming progressively more detached from what was happening to him. The clarity and thinness of the air, the crystalline beauty of the mountains
30 and the strange painlessness of frostbite conspired to send him into a state of numbed serenity, which made him insensitive to his worsening injuries:

There was something unusual in the way I saw Lachenal and everything around us. I smiled to myself at the paltriness of our efforts. But all sense of exertion was gone, as though there were no longer any gravity. This diaphanous landscape, this quintessence
35 *of purity—these were not the mountains I knew; they were the mountains of my dreams.*

Still in this trance — still immune to pain — he and Lachenal forced a way through the final rock band, and reached the summit:

> *I felt my feet freezing, but paid little attention. The highest mountain to be climbed by* 40 *man lay under our feet! The names of our predecessors on these heights chased each other through my mind: Mummery, Mallory and Irvine, Bauer, Welzenbach, Tilman, Shipton. How many of them were dead — how many had found on these mountains what, to them, was the finest end of all . . . I knew the end was near, but it was the end that all mountaineers wish for — an end in keeping with their ruling passion. I was* 45 *consciously grateful to the mountains for being so beautiful for me that day, and as awed by their silence as if I had been in church. I was in no pain, and had no worry.*

The pain and the worry came later. While descending the rock-band, Herzog dropped his gloves and, by the time he reached Camp IV, he was barely able to walk. Both his feet and his hands were severely frostbitten. During the desperate retreat down steep ground to Base Camp, he fell 50 and smashed several bones in his already devastated feet. When he was forced to abseil, the ropes ripped away the flesh of his hands in thick strips.

Once the terrain became less precipitous, it was possible for Herzog to be carried, and he was portaged off the mountain first by piggy-back, then in a basket, then on a sledge and finally on a stretcher. During the retreat, his feet and hands were wrapped and bagged in plastic to save them 55 from further harm. When they reached camp each night, Oudot, the expedition doctor, injected novocaine, spartocamphor and penicillin into Herzog's femoral and brachial arteries, pushing the long needle in through the left and right flanks of his groin, and the bends of his elbows: an experience so painful that Herzog begged for death in preference. By the time he was off the mountain, Herzog's feet had turned black and brown; by the time they reached the safety of 60 Gorakpur, Oudot had amputated almost all of his toes and fingers.

I read *Annapurna* three times that summer. It was obvious to me that Herzog had chosen wisely in going for the top, despite the subsequent costs. For what, he and I were agreed, were toes and fingers compared to having stood on those few square yards of snow? If he had died it would still have been worth it. This was the lesson I took away from Herzog's book: that the finest end of all 65 was to be had on a mountain-top — from death in valleys preserve me, O Lord.

***

Twelve years after I first read *Annapurna* — twelve years during which I had spent most of my holidays in the mountains — running my finger along the spines in a second-hand bookshop in Scotland, I came across another copy. That night I sat up late and read it through again, and again fell under its spell. Soon afterwards, I booked flights and a climbing partner — an Army friend of 70 mine called Toby Till — for a week in the Alps.

We arrived in Zermatt in early June, hoping to climb the Matterhorn before the summer crowds clogged it up. But the mountain was still thickly armoured with ice: too dangerous for us to attempt. So we drove round to the next valley, where the thaw was supposed to be a little more advanced. Our plan was to camp high overnight, and then the following morning ascend a 75 mountain called the Lagginhorn by its easy south-east ridge. At 4,010 metres, I reflected briefly, the Lagginhorn was almost exactly half the height of Annapurna.

It snowed that night, and I lay awake listening to the heavy flakes falling on to the flysheet of our tent. They clumped together to make dark continents of shadow on the fabric, until the drifts became too heavy for the slope of the tent and slid with a soft hiss down to the ground. In the 80 small hours the snow stopped, but when we unzipped the tent door at 6 a.m. there was an ominous yellowish storm light drizzling through the clouds. We set off apprehensively towards the ridge.

Once we were on it, the ridge turned out to be harder than it looked from below. The difficulty came from the old, rotten snow which was cloaking the ridge to a depth of several feet, together with six inches of fresh fall lying on top of it, uncompacted and sticky. Rotten snow is either granular, like sugar, or forms a crunchy matrix of longer, thinner crystals which have been hollowed out and separated from one another. Either way, it is unstable.

Instead of picking our way cleanly from rock to rock, we had to clamber along the snow, never sure if there was a rock beneath each foot placement, or air. There was no path broken to guide us, either: evidently nobody had been up the ridge since the previous summer. And it was cold, too, violently cold. Where my nose ran, the liquid froze to my face in plump trails. The wind made my eyes water, and the eyelashes on my right eye froze together. I had to separate them by pulling my eyelids apart.

After two hours of work we were nearing the summit, but the angle of the ridge was becoming more severe and our progress had become even slower. I could feel the cold chilling me deep inside. My brain, too, felt slower, more slurred, as though the temperature had congealed my thought processes, turned them viscous. We could have turned back, of course. We carried on.

The final fifty feet of the mountain were very steep indeed, and deep in old, unsound snow. I stopped and assessed the situation. It looked as though the mountain could shuck all the snow off at any moment, like shrugging off a coat. Now and again little avalanches scurried past me. I heard the clatter of a rock-fall on the east face of the mountain.

I was jammed into the snow with the toes of my boots, the slope rearing up in front of my face. I tilted my head right backwards and looked up to the skyline. Clouds were hurtling over the summit, and for a moment it felt as though the mountain was toppling slowly on to me.

I turned back and called down to Toby, twenty feet below me, “Do we go on? I don’t like the look of this stuff at all. I reckon the whole lot could go at any time.”

Below Toby, the slope narrowed down to a chute which funnelled out over the precipices on the south face of the ridge. If I slipped, or the snow gave way, I’d slide past Toby, pull him off, and we’d free-fall hundreds of feet down to the glacier.

“Of course we do, Rob, of course we do,” Toby called up.

“Right.”

I had only one ice-axe with me, but the slope was severe enough to need two. Some improvisation was necessary. I transferred the axe to my left hand and made the fingers of my right hand as rigid as possible. I would try to stab them into the snow, using them as an axe-head to give myself purchase. Nervously, I started to climb.

The snow held, the ad hoc axe worked, and suddenly we were there, on a summit the size of a kitchen table, clasping the iron-piping cross which peeked out of the thick snow on the summit, terrified and elated at once. To every side of us the mountain fell away. It felt as though we were balanced on the pinnacle of the Eiffel Tower. The clouds had cleared and a glossy white light had replaced the murk of the early morning. I spotted the yellow dot of our tent thousands of feet below. Seen from this height, the glacier which we had crossed the previous day to reach the base of the ridge resolved itself into a pattern of shallow pale billows. I could see dozens of tiny meltwater lakes which had formed in the hollows between the billows, winking at me like shields in the sun. Their blueness was startling. To our west, the light of the rising sun poured down the mountain faces of the Mischabel range. The wind was fierce, drumming against the skin of my cheeks until it was numb, and pushing coldly through the gaps in my clothing.

I looked down at my hands. I had been wearing thin gloves all the way up and, from jabbing them into the ice slope, three fingertips on the right-hand glove had been ripped off. I couldn’t feel those fingers. In fact, I realised with a strange lack of alarm, I couldn’t feel the hand at all. I held it up close to my streaming eyes. The fingertips which were exposed to the freezing air had turned a waxy yellow colour and become translucent, like old cheese.

I didn't have any spare gloves. But there wasn't time to worry about it anyway, because the rotten snow which had just about tolerated our weight during the ascent would already be melting in the morning sun. We needed to get down as fast as possible.

135 We moved quickly and efficiently during the descent, until we reached what looked like our final obstacle. It was a snow bridge, a thin, sagging ridge of snow maybe thirty feet long suspended between two rock pinnacles — like a sheet pegged up at either end. It was far too sharp and fragile to walk along the top of, and there was no way to climb down and round it. We'd have to climb out along its side, as we had done on the way up, with even less guarantee that the whole 140 structure wouldn't collapse and send us plummeting down to the glacier.

Toby began to kick himself a little bucket seat in the soft snow.

"I take it from your behaviour that you'd like me to go first?" I asked.

"Yes, please, that'd be grand."

I edged out along the near-vertical side of the ridge, kicking my feet into its side, the rope bowing 145 horizontally between me and Toby. Where I kicked my feet in, the snow slid away like wet sugar, with a hiss. Here I am, I thought, standing on a more or less vertical wall of slushy snow, edging crabwise across its face, with frostnip in three fingers and only one axe. I cursed Maurice Herzog. Then I glanced down.

Between my legs I could see a whole lot of nothing. I kicked another crampon in, and a big slab of 150 rotten snow lurched off from beneath my foot and cart-wheeled away towards the glacier, disintegrating as it went. I hung there, my arms raised above me, watching the snow tumble. A tingling began in my buttocks and then scampered to my groin and my thighs, and soon my whole midriff was encased in a humming, jostling swarm of fear. The space felt vast and malevolently active, as though it were inhaling me; pulling me off into its emptiness.

155 One axe only — why did I bring only one? Again, I used my right hand, the hand with the waxy fingers, to stab into the snow. The fingers didn't hurt, which helped. And so I carried on, keeping up a rhythm. Kick, kick, stab, stab, swear. Kick, kick, stab, stab, swear.

We made it, of course — I wouldn't be writing this otherwise — and as we sledged down the remaining slopes to our tent on our rucksacks, we whooped with joy and relief at having got the 160 summit and made it back.

Sitting on a boulder outside the tent two hours later, I stared at my fingers with a fatigued disinterest. It had turned into a bright day, warm and windless, and the landscape was illuminated with the exact, egalitarian sunlight of high places. Sound carried precisely through the thin air, and I could hear the clanking and talking of climbers descending the Weissmies, half a mile or so 165 away. My right hand didn't particularly feel like part of me. But, I was vaguely relieved to notice, only the pads of three fingers were affected, and those not to any serious depth. When I tapped them against the rock they made a hard, hollow sound, like wood knocking on metal. I got out my penknife and started to whittle at them. On the flat grey rock between my knees grew a pile of little iotas of skin. Eventually, when I had whittled down to pink skin, and my fingers had started 170 to hurt at each scrape of the knife, I cremated the pyre of shavings in the orange flame of a lighter. They went with a crackle and the scent of charred flesh.

Question

Discuss the effectiveness of Macfarlane's description of and reflection upon the experience of climbing.