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Practice exam question

Relationships under strain

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Guidance for the question on p. 11 of the magazine.

The opening of an answer

Break-ups are present in most of the love poems in *Skirrid Hill*, so in a broad sense, the viewpoint is right. There is an engagingly ambiguous quality about the presentation of romantic relationships in most of them, as, even at the height of love or passion, Sheers suggests that such idyllic situations will not last. Yet 'threat' seems overstated, since most of the love poems seem to accept that love won't last forever. Furthermore, to suggest that romantic relationships in Sheers 'always' end is an over-generalisation. Some of the love poems express hope and optimism: rather than being 'shadowed by the threat of break-up', they celebrate love and suggest it will last. This essay aims to show that the viewpoint is an over-simplification, first by focusing on the complex ways in which Sheers presents love, even in poems where loss of love is evident such as 'Keyways', then by exploring how shadows of the threat of break-up are absent entirely in poems such as 'Song'.

We can see that the viewpoint is an over-simplification by considering the complex and varied nature of romantic relationships expressed in *Skirrid Hill*. On one end of the scale are the relationships suggested in 'Joseph Jones': casual sexual experiences that are far from idealised, but seem to be a form of entertainment on a par with hard drinking and fast driving. Sex is less a part of loving relationships than something for young men to brag about to their friends. As such, there is no sense of an emotional connection that a lover fears is going to end. The titular character, who is given the most common Welsh surname, is a kind of small-town Wales stereotype, a composite figure who reflects the laddish lifestyle of the 1990s, when magazines like *Loaded* reflected a culture of drinking and casual sexism. The image at the centre of the poem – the unnamed woman with her skirt like 'an umbrella blown inside out' and her 'white tights shed to high heels' – is like a debased version of the iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe. But the action of Jones getting his 'red wings' with this woman lacks any sense of glamour or romance. With tawdry and ephemeral relationships like these there is no 'threat of a break-up...shadowing', since there is not much of a relationship in the first place.

At the other end of the scale are relationships of emotional and physical closeness where there is sadness, though also acceptance, at the thought of a break-up. In 'Keyways', the break-up is more than threatened: it has already come. We see this from the very first line: 'Strange then, that this should be our last time together' as they wait for keys to be cut to enable the speaker to enter his former lover's flat when she is out and 'take back all that's [his]'. What is perhaps most poignant is a sense of wasted potential, since, at times, the couple seemed so close and well matched. There is a spiritual, almost holy, union, suggested by their shared experience of *Messiah* in church as they are connected by body and breath: 'touching at elbow, shoulder and hip/ like a pair of Siamese twins sharing one lung.'

The familiar metaphor for a couple of key and lock is extended throughout the poem, giving the reader the pleasure of a satisfyingly harmonious romantic relationship, albeit one shadowed by the threat of break-up, since the poem opens with the scene of them parting. At first it expresses how the speaker feels, 'an uncut cut' waiting for her 'impression', then, after the holy music at the chapel, he 'was sure we were keyed alike'. The sense of hope for the relationship culminates in an image of bodily closeness as the pair sleep together and their bodies make 'a master key fit'. Yet, after this climax, the tone shifts as the speaker returns to the more questioning, reflective mood, asking 'So when did the bolt slip? The blade break in the mouth?'

The kind of uncertainty that arises in romantic relationships is probably the flip side of sexual liberation which, as Jonny Patrick notes in his article, was 'mainstream' and 'pre-marital cohabitation the norm' during the time when Sheers was a young adult. In 'Keyways', Sheers doesn't just show the threat of break-up; he shows it taking place in both the practical realm of the speaker moving out of the shared home and in the emotional realm of the soul-searching that accompanies it. He continues the extended metaphor of the lock and key, using internal rhyme and half-rhyme subtly to suggest the disappointment of something almost but not quite going right. The painful experience of rationalising where things went wrong is dramatised as the speaker tries to 'unpick the months back' to the first time, when 'one of us made a turn that failed to dock' and they waited for a 'click that never came'. Poignantly, the poem culminates in a physical image of moving on – a 'changing of the locks' – which, paradoxically, suggests the difficulty of moving on emotionally.

Poems such as 'Keyways' show how the viewpoint is true in spirit if not to the letter, but there are other examples where love seems so pure and optimistic that there is no sense of threat of break-up shadowing it. A case might be made for hope and optimism to be found in 'Winter Swans', but the poem that is perhaps purest in its celebration of love – a love free from the threat of break-up – is 'Song'...

Commentary

This is a cogent and assured argument. It engages perceptively with the task, using keywords from the question and scrutinising them closely. This close scrutiny of the wording of the task informs the argument, keeping the material fully relevant. Even when exploring a poem that is not usually seen to be primarily about relationships, the close consideration of the viewpoint ensures that every point remains tightly relevant to the task. As the essay progresses, the paragraphs on 'Keyways' proceed fluently from the one on 'Joseph Jones'.

There is a perceptive understanding of authorial methods. Methods are selected according to the needs of the argument, and the comments contribute to the line of argument, lending it weight and complexity. The use of fluently integrated quotations is masterful and there is a strong understanding of how authorial methods relate to meaning and create effects. A broad range of methods are explored, from the significance of the title 'Joseph Jones' to a perceptive appreciation of the extended metaphor and the use of half- and internal rhyme in 'Keyways'.

The student makes assured use of context, which is often done in a subtle manner, with, for example, the contextual information about lad culture in the 1990s illuminating the discussion on 'Joseph Jones'. In a similar way, the student uses critical material expertly by quoting directly from the article by Jonny Patrick in *English Review*. Applying the contextual information used by Patrick to the poem 'Keyways' adds depth and strength to the student's argument, in a way that shows they are doing more than

simply quoting a critic: they are using that critic actively to inform their own response, which is more credible and impressive as a result.

Throughout, the student writes with assurance and maturity, using critical terminology and concepts – ‘extended metaphor’, ‘half-rhyme’, ‘climax’ and ‘tone’ – fluently and appropriately. The answer is consistently perceptive and assured.

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