

Volume 36, Number 4, April 2026

Practice exam question

Emptiness in the suburbs

Luke McBratney

Guidance for the question on p. 25 of the magazine.

Compare these two opening paragraphs. Explain which is better.

Paragraph A

In both Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* and Owen Sheers' *Skirrid Hill*, dissatisfaction within romantic relationships is pervasive, yet it is perhaps more central to the novel than to the collection of poems. In *Revolutionary Road*, dissatisfaction is more than a recurring emotional state; it is a structuring force through which wider meanings are generated. The dissatisfaction that shapes the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler signifies more than personal incompatibility: it exposes the ideological tensions embedded in 1950s American suburban life and drives the narrative towards its tragic conclusion. Indeed, the ironic implications of the title and the circular resonance of the surname 'Wheeler' encourage readers to view the couple not just personally, but symbolically. They suggest that their relationship functions as an emblem of a culture that promises progress yet delivers only stasis. By contrast, while Sheers' love poems frequently register estrangement and loss, dissatisfaction in *Skirrid Hill* tends to signify the emotional evolution of individual relationships rather than a wholesale critique of contemporary society. Although the poems are rooted in the social and sexual freedoms of Britain in the 1990s, they often frame discontent within a lyric mode that allows for tenderness, memory and renewal. This essay compares how dissatisfaction functions in each text: in Yates as a sign of ideological constraint and existential disillusionment, and in Sheers as part of a more personal exploration of intimacy and separation.

Paragraph B

Dissatisfaction is an important idea in the poems of Owen Sheers. Relationships are not always bad but they end up in breakups, and the man is left wondering about the woman. Even in 'Winter Swans' the image of the swans and their wings looking like hands is not enough to suggest that there is no dissatisfaction. Even though the poem is showing an image of togetherness, you get the idea that things won't always be too good, or too good for too long. The mates for life phrase that the woman says is quite a nice, loving thing to say, but, when you have read a lot of these poems, where there is a sense of a breakup being around the next corner, 'they mate for life' may be ironic. No-one is really happy in *Revolutionary Road*. Even though their lives look glossy and like 50s adverts on the surface, there is something going on underneath and the sex that April and Frank have with other people is a bit cringy. Frank seems like a cliché as he has an affair with his secretary, and April doesn't even seem to really want to do it with Shep, but she does it anyway. This shows not just that they don't get satisfaction in sex but that their lives are sad and there is something deeper going on.

Commentary

Paragraph A is a confident and conceptually secure introduction that fulfils the demands of a comparative essay. It engages directly with the wording of the question and moves beyond treating the 'significance of dissatisfaction' as merely 'the importance of dissatisfaction', instead framing it as a 'structuring force' through which wider meanings are generated. This signals an understanding of significance in the semiotic sense: dissatisfaction is presented not simply as an emotion experienced by characters, but as something that produces ideological, narrative and symbolic meaning.

The paragraph integrates comparison throughout, rather than treating the two texts separately. Yates's novel is discussed in terms of dissatisfaction functioning symbolically and ideologically – linked to suburban culture, gender roles and tragic narrative direction – while Sheers' poems are positioned in contrast as exploring dissatisfaction within a lyric, personal mode. Context is embedded rather than bolted on: 1950s America and 1990s Britain are introduced as interpretative lenses rather than background information. The reference to the title and the surname 'Wheeler' demonstrates attention to authorial construction, while the acknowledgement of lyric form in *Skirrid Hill* demonstrates understanding of genre.

Overall, the paragraph functions like a 'mini answer' to the task, which the rest of the essay will develop. It establishes an assured and sophisticated comparative argument, signals conceptual control and provides a coherent framework for the essay. The writing is mature and makes assured use of literary critical concepts and terminology.

Paragraph B, by contrast, demonstrates some awareness of relevant moments in both texts but remains largely descriptive and underdeveloped. It begins with only one text and does not initially frame the task comparatively. The key term 'significance' is not fully addressed; instead, the paragraph tends to equate dissatisfaction with the existence of breakups, affairs or unhappiness. While references to 'Winter Swans' and to the sexual relationships in *Revolutionary Road* show knowledge of the texts, the discussion remains at the level of content, rather than analysing what dissatisfaction signifies in structural, ideological or generic terms.

The comparative link between the texts is abrupt and loosely organised, with little sense of a sustained line of argument. Expression is often informal and imprecise ('a bit cringy', 'something going on underneath'), which reduces authority and weakens the academic tone required at this level. There is little integration of context or consideration of narrative or poetic construction. As an introduction, the paragraph does not establish a clear thesis or indicate how the argument will develop. It reads more like a main body paragraph than a focused opening.

Overall, Paragraph B shows engagement and some relevant knowledge, but it lacks the conceptual clarity, comparative integration and analytical focus required for a high-level response.

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