Developing Your Personal Response: Emily Dickinson

Improving Your Grade

When studying Emily Dickinson’s work, the student must consider the poet’s themes and demonstrate an awareness of her characteristic language use. The underlying nature of the examination question is the ‘invitation to the candidates to engage with the poems themselves’.

Sample Question

‘Dickinson’s poetry can be simultaneously inventive and demanding both in style and content.’
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement?
Support your answer with reference to the poetry of Emily Dickinson on your course.

MARKING SCHEME GUIDELINES

Candidates are free to agree and/or disagree wholly or in part with the statement, but they should engage with all aspects of the question, although not necessarily equally. Answers should be supported by reference to the poems of Emily Dickinson on the Leaving Certificate course.

- Code S/ ID for style ‘simultaneously inventive and demanding’.
- Code C/ ID for content ‘simultaneously inventive and demanding’

Indicative Material:

- Style of Dickinson’s poetry: rich metaphor, vivid imagery, unsettling personification, innovative punctuation, fragmentary syntax, dashes, capitals, ambiguity, contrasts, subversive humour, varied tones and rhythms, etc.
- Her style of poetry can be simultaneously inventive and demanding: witty, playful, accessible/inaccessible, complex, philosophical, reflective, unsettling, etc.
- Content of Dickinson’s poetry: central themes, e.g. relationship with God, nature, man, mediation on loss and death, explorations of consciousness, depression, etc.
- The content of her poetry can be simultaneously inventive and demanding: surprising, amusing, shocking, challenging, dramatic, confusing, etc.
Sample Opening Paragraph 1

I liked Dickinson’s funny poem, ‘I taste’. I thought she used very good description language to show how the beer glasses overflowed with drink, ‘frothing pearl’. I liked the way in which she was describing herself as drinking, she ‘reels’. She definitely causes a fuss in heaven getting all the angels to throw about their white hats. I didn’t think the poem was demanding. But her style is all dashes and capital letters and also words left out. She is a very distinctive woman poet, a recluse who did not publish her 2,000 poems until after he death.

EXAMINER’S COMMENT

This basic response shows little depth or real engagement with either the question or the poetry of Boland. No quotation or reference of note is used to support the haphazard points made. Expression is flawed and the ending drifts into unfocused biographical details.

Sample Opening Paragraph 2

I found Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘I taste a liquor never brewed’ to be both amusing and subtle. She uses the surprising metaphor of intoxication to portray the joy of summer. A surreal cartoon-like description of the natural world, where ‘Landlords’ evict the ‘drunken Bee/ out of the Foxglove’s door’, depicts the season’s carefree delights. The poem begins with an intriguing riddle. How can one ‘taste a liquor never brewed’? The poet has immediately plunged readers into a world of fantasy. She slyly uses the language of strict temperance, ‘Debauchee’, ‘Inebriate’, to describe the upbeat mood. Her playful verbs, ‘Reeling’, ‘swing’, ‘Leaning’, propel the breathless pace of this witty poem. Dickinson even uses the rhythm of a hymn for her appreciation of nature in all its glory. I enjoyed not only her celebration of the delirious summer weather, but also her rebellious taunts at people who are prim and proper.

EXAMINER’S COMMENT

This confident and detailed opening paragraph shows a real personal engagement with both the tasks in the question. The coherent organised overview of what will be addressed in the developed essay is impressive. Dickinson’s demanding style is also acknowledged as ‘subtle’, ‘surprising’ and ‘intriguing’. Apt quotes and excellent expression make this a highly successful opening paragraph. A top-grade standard.