

# Political and social protest writing: exemplar student response band 3

An exemplar student response to a Section C question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Paper 2B, Section C

'Political and social protest writing often focuses on rebellion against those in power.'

Explore the significance of rebellion as it is presented in two political and social protest texts you have studied.

### Band 3 response

Both *The Kite Runner* and *The Handmaid's Tale* do indeed focus on rebellion but not to the same extent. The whole story that Atwood's narrator Offred tells is itself a form of rebellion and within it she documents many other rebellions of those who protest against those in power. *The Kite Runner* is different. Although it is also a first person narrative – Amir's coming of age story, his story of becoming a writer so that he can tell the truth of Afghanistan – the novel 'itself' is not a rebellion though it does tell of incidents when characters rebel.

Offred's story apparently survives because she escapes Gilead and records her thoughts on tape. These tapes are later transcribed which accounts for the fragmented nature of the narrative. The story she tells is of her rebellion in thinking about the horrors of the oppression of Gilead, of not believing in the rightness of the regime and the power of men. Her apparent escape is also evidence of her rebellion.

The Gileadean authorities have enforced rules to restrict the people's freedom while preserving their power. There are particular restrictions imposed on women. Offred breaks the rules in small ways to make life more bearable. She saves butter to use as a moisturiser. Serena Joy smokes and rebels by using the black market. The Commander too rebels against his own regime – he arranges for Offred to visit him alone at night, something that is strictly forbidden. Women 'are for breeding purposes', only they aren't 'concubines, geisha girls, and courtesans'.

When Offred lies alone in her room at night she rebels by thinking and being imaginative, things which Gilead is trying to suppress. By thinking in her language instead of the 'amputated speech' of the regime she is showing defiance. 'I know where I am, and who I am, and what day it is...sanity is a valuable possession'. In her room she finds the words 'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum' written by the previous Offred; she savours these words and connects with the other Offred, suggesting that rebellion is a shared delight. The rebellion against the restrictions of language use is a central part of the novel, best shown in the game of Scrabble. When Offred meets the Commander in his 'oasis of the forbidden', they play Scrabble. Because the game is forbidden, it becomes desirable. Offred delights in being subversive – 'to be asked to play Scrabble...seemed kinky in the extreme'.

Offred also rebels by telling the stories of other silenced women, contradicting Gilead's command of the completely submissive female. Moira is the most rebellious and politically sharp woman of them all. In some ways she is an example of true rebellious heroism. Perhaps her most rebellious act is when she escapes disguised as an Aunt. The effect of Moira's rebellion is inspirational to Offred: 'Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life'. The warmth of the language here and the power of the imagery suggest how important Moira is to Offred's own rebellion. Moira's rebellion, however, ends tragically with her in a brothel having been tortured and silenced. Perhaps her end suggests that Atwood is being pessimistic in where rebellion ends – that there are no ultimate winners. This idea is supported when we read the historical notes and realise that Offred herself is long dead and to some extent overlooked by the new 21st century historians.

In *The Kite Runner* all kinds of different power regimes operate – the ruling Pushtun elite during Amir's childhood, the Russians during the Soviet invasion and the Taliban and Hosseini shows rebellion in all situations. The story of

Sanaubar tells of a rebellion that can be judged in different ways. She rebels against the rules that outlaw female sexual desire and independence and she could be seen therefore as brave. It seems that she was also more or less forced into marriage with Ali (he was her first cousin and 'a natural choice') so her affair with Baba could be a form of empowerment. Sanaubar also flaunts her sexuality. Amir says 'I have heard that Sanaubar's suggestive stride and oscillating hips sent men to reveries of infidelity' and in some ways does seem attractive. However, Ali as a Hazara is hardly powerful and he is not characterised as being disrespectful or oppressive towards women. Given his gentleness, he does not deserve her cruelty. She also abandons Hassan when he is a baby and the idea of mothers abandoning their children is not something that readers can sympathise with.

Under the Soviet occupation, Baba offers a form of rebellion against the Russian who demands that he has half an hour with a young Afghan woman in the back of a truck as the price for safe passage out of the country. Baba stands up in her defence and says 'I'll take a thousand of his bullets before I let this indecency take place'. This act of rebellion by Baba is presented positively by Hosseini even though Amir is personally critical. Amir wonders why his father always has to be the hero and he also sees that his father is endangering both their lives. This is a point in the novel when the narrator is not a guide for our feelings and Amir is seen to be cowardly and spoilt rather than an accurate judge of his father.

Amir's rebellion that happens in the final section of the novel, when he finds some backbone can also be viewed in different ways. Although Amir doesn't present himself as a hero exactly, there is some satisfaction that he stands up to Assef, who represents the terrifying power of the Taliban. Amir is happy to take the beating because it makes him feel healed for his earlier failure to defend Hassan when Assef rapes him. In this sense the rebellion is significant because it is part of Amir's journey to redemption and is important if the novel is seen as a confessional or growth novel. However, it is Sohrab's rebellion when he fires the slingshot at Assef, that leads to Assef's defeat, 'The slingshot made a thwiiiiit sound when Sohrab released the cup. Then Assef was screaming'. Here the novel is more of a thriller. Hosseini's focus on sounds and actions make this section exciting.

Overall, rebellion is important in both of these political texts in showing that human beings do not want to be suppressed. It is also significant because the writers show it can be judged in many different ways.

## Examiner commentary

This is a straightforward and consistent response and the candidate makes a number of relevant points in a clear way. There is clear focus and two texts are covered in an appropriate way. The candidate has used the texts appropriately in selecting some relevant detail as befits an Open book exam.

### A01

The response is structured clearly and ideas are sensibly ordered. The task is always in mind. The candidate uses terminology in an appropriate way. The writing is clearly expressed and mainly accurate.

### A02

There is some sense of the author's shaping meanings and the candidate integrates relevant comment on the structures of the two texts to show how the writers have shaped meanings. There is also some appropriate comment on the narrators and on some language features.

### A03

There is some clear engagement with social and gender contexts. These contexts are connected to the political context in an appropriate way through the candidate's focusing on rebellion and power. There is no sense given of the historical contexts which the two writers use in their stories and this is a limiting factor.

### A04

There is straightforward understanding of how the texts connect with the political and social protest writing genre. Relevant comments are made about how writers represent the rebellion of individuals against those in power.

### A05

There is a relevant debate here in that the candidate thinks about how readers might judge the acts of rebellion that

the writers document. Sometimes the candidate's approach is a little descriptive though just showing what the rebellious acts are. There is however an attempt to give an overall judgement and the candidate is clear in saying that *The Kite Runner* and *The Handmaid's Tale* elicit different responses from readers in terms of attitudes to rebellion.

This response seems consistent with the Band 3 descriptors, and is likely to be placed towards the top of the band.

This resource is part of the [Elements of political and social protest writing resource package](https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b/teach/elements-of-political-and-social-protest-writing) (<https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b/teach/elements-of-political-and-social-protest-writing>).

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