Two named poems

**‘Piano’ and ‘Half-past Two’ portray two different experiences of childhood. Show how successful each poet has been in presenting an aspect of their childhood and explain which one you consider to be more effective.**

The following is a student’s response to the above question.

Student A

These are both very interesting poems that show a clear picture of childhood events. ‘Half-past Two’ is not really about the poet’s own childhood, but as she was a teacher it may have been a story about herself and one of her pupils. ‘Piano’ is definitely about D H Lawrence’s own childhood and his relationship with his own mother.

These poems make you think about childhood memories and how strong these can be even when one reaches adult life and looks back over many years. This is particularly true for Lawrence, because it seems that suddenly this memory flashed back to him while he was listening to a concert. He can picture the scene very clearly, as he even remembers how he used to sit under the piano holding on to his mother’s feet, ‘pressing the small,

poised feet. He remembers this scene vividly as one which was special to him and his mother, who had died. Her death had had a big effect on him. The memory of the scene in the ‘cosy parlour’ was enough to make him cry even though he was a grown man. It made him feel like a child again. He realises that this is because of the power of music ‘the insidious mastery of song’, which can stir up the emotions in a powerful way.

In ‘Half-past Two’, the poet also gives a very strong impression of a scene in a school for young children. It shows how being left alone in a classroom must have been a very strange experience for a young boy, and because he could not tell the time, he did not realise how long he had been there, as if he looked at the clock ‘he couldn’t click its language. U AFanthorpe gives a good impression of how while he was waiting he went into a world of his own, as he felt he had ‘escaped for ever’. Children often go into an imaginary world, and do not have a sense of time. The poem shows what a strong impact on him this incident had, because it says he ‘never forgot’ about this time when ‘he escaped’. The way U AFanthorpe has written this poem is really effective at letting the adult reader into the world of the child, because an adult would not have thought or spoken in this way. The use of the compound words for different times of the day shows how the child had his own sense of time, but it was quite different and much more personal than the movements of the clock’s hands.

I think both poems have a good way of making the event seem real and so the reader can imagine what is going on. But ‘Piano’ seems the more successful poem, because Lawrence’s strong emotions are shown and also you can actually feel the warmth of the scene in the Lawrences house on a Sunday evening and you know how much love there was between the mother and son.

Examiner’s comment:

**Level 3**

This is a high level 3 response, which demonstrates a clear grasp of the impact on the reader of the events, and also of how important these were for the children. Quotations are used in a relevant way, and the evidence is used to support points. To have been awarded a higher mark and move into Level 4, the points need to be made in a more developed way, and the language of the two writers should be analysed more fully.

**One named poem**

Here is another sample question where one poem is named but the candidate is able to choose which poem from the collection to put alongside it. Note that it is possible to choose any one of the other poems, but it should of course be one that relates well to the title.

**Compare how ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’ and any one other poem from the Collection deal with the subject of personal loss. Which do you think is more effective and why?**

Student B

In the Anthology collection, there are a number of poems where the writers focus on personal loss. Dylan Thomas does so in his famous villanelle, because he addresses his words to his elderly father, whom he fears losing, and offers him advice on how he should approach the end of life.

For me, the strongest example of a poem where actual or imminent loss is found in almost every line is ‘A Mother in a Refugee Camp’. So I propose to look at this poem and compare it with Dylan Thomas’s very different way of thinking and writing about the topic.

Thomas starts with a line which is the poem’s title and which then re-echoes through the villanelle structure: ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’. The ‘good night’ may be seen as a euphemism for death, rather like Rossetti’s ‘silent land’. However, it is also a phrase of farewell, used daily by millions of people. It also brings in the familiar idea of

night being the end of life and day representing life, and this is brilliantly woven into the text by the use of the two words as the basis of the villanelle’s intricate rhyming scheme, with the phrase ‘close of day’ again a euphemism. There is added poignancy in the fact that Thomas’s father had experienced a different sort of personal loss, that of his sight, as he had become blind, so the phrase ‘rage against the dying of the light’ (with the rhyme of night/light pointing up the contrast) has another level of significance.

The poem is filled with words of passion and energy. What disturbs Thomas is how his father, who had been such a passionate and energetic man, seemed to be in danger of giving up the struggle. This is why Thomas uses such strong language as ‘rage’, ‘burn and rave’ and ‘blaze like meteors’. Thomas wishes to rekindle the fire in his father’s life. He

reinforces this by an appeal to how men of very different types should react to the idea of losing their own lives: it does not matter if these are ‘wise men’, good men’, ‘wild men’ or ‘grave men’. The message is the same, that they have reasons, when looking back on their lives, to recapture the force that made them what they were. This is shown particularly well in the striking metaphor, involving also an element of personification, in the words ‘their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay’, where the frailty of the old man is contrasted with the brightness, colour and life of ‘dancing in a green bay’: green is the colour of new life and growth.

If ‘Do Not Go Gentle…’ is a poem of passion, anger and dramatic movement, then ‘A Mother in a Refugee Camp’ is a striking contrast in its silence and stillness, broken only by small, delicate or feeble movements as the mother ‘combed The rust-coloured hair left on his skull’ and as the desperately sick children were ‘waddling in labored steps’. This poem is deliberately presented as a portrait of the mother and child, as is underlined by the reference to the iconic image of the ‘Madonna and Child’, reproduced a million times and still of immense religious significance to many people. The beauty and peace of this reference stand in striking contrast to the descriptions from line 4 on, where the reader is invited to experience the sights and smells of the camp through vivid language, focusing especially on the terrible plight of the children.

What makes the poem so powerful is the way that the mother who is the centre of the ‘picture’ is so different from the others. All around, there is a sense of futility and hopelessness. The mothers no longer see any point in tending for their children, because they are doomed. But this inevitability does not stop this one mother from looking after her dying son as lovingly as she possibly can, even though she knows she must lose him. With her careful bathing of him and combing his hair, she maintains what was clearly a daily routine in better times, although she saw that could not prevent herself from losing him, as is shown by the simile ‘Like putting flowers on a tiny grave’.

It is hard to say that one poem is more effective than the other, since the purposes of the writers are so different and each of them succeeds powerfully in conveying the intentions of the poem. However, it seems to me that Achebe speaks with greater impact on readers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, who have been profoundly moved by the scenes of African suffering in war, famine or natural disaster. Also, the loss of a child always has particular pathos, and affects us more strongly because it seems unnatural, the snuffing out of a life of limitless potential, whereas we expect the personal loss of parents through old age.

*Edexcel Examiner’s comment*

***Level 5***

*This is a very assured response to the question, one which shows strong personal engagement with both poems and supports a perceptive interpretation with very good use of quotations and analysis of language. The candidate also shows the capacity to offer thoughtful comparative points.*