

ANSWER LIKE A PRO! ENGLISH

ENGLISH: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In this resource, we have chosen eight past-interview questions, and asked an English graduate, James, to explain how he would go about answering each of these tricky subject-specific questions.

6 truly tricky questions... how would YOU answer?

The best way to practise these is to get a friend, sibling or parent to ask you them before you've read them through. That way you can practise your interview manner, as well as your way of answering.

1. How can a work of literature be beautiful?
2. If language is 'the house of being' (Martin Heidegger) what might that make literature?
3. Could the sentence 'Tom failed to catch the train on time again' be said to be poetry?
4. Is it necessary to see the text of a play performed on stage to understand it?
5. Can a reader ever know a writer's 'intention'?
6. Can you justify the imbalanced ratio of male to female writers in the canon of English literature?

We asked James, our graduate English expert and top tutor, how he would approach these questions...

1. How can a work of literature be beautiful?

This depends on what we consider to be beautiful. One way to look at it might be through Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry. He wrote that "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done." The way he sees it, literature (more specifically poetry) achieves beauty by representing the world as idealised. What was ideal in the Renaissance and what would have been beauty for Sidney may very well be different from our own current conception. However, if we consider beauty as something that excites pleasure or satisfaction, and if we think that being pleased or satisfied is an ideal state to be in, then the logic still stands to a certain degree. If we think of Juliet's line:

Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night

This is a line (admittedly about beauty itself) that is hard not to consider beautiful. Its metaphor lifts Romeo's earthly life to a cosmic legacy, granting him immortality in the 'face of heaven' which he himself makes beautiful through his presence 'cut...out in little stars'. This is certainly an ideal state of affairs. The assonance of 'die...fine...night' in the line endings, as well as the persistent alliteration within each line makes

the verse ring with an aural satisfaction that might be said to contribute to its beauty. The difficulty is that Shakespeare is a writer that has become almost synonymous with 'the beautiful' in literature. His work itself has become a sort of ideal and his language permeates our idea of life as 'idealised' ('shall I compare thee to a summer's day' as an ideal Valentine's phrase, Verona as a good place to propose to your loved one). In fact literature has a lot to answer for when it comes to our ideas about beauty so to answer the question how can 'literature be beautiful' is to first ask the question 'how can life be beautiful?'

2. If language is 'the house of being' (Martin Heidegger) what might that make literature?

One way to think about this might be to extend the metaphor. If we think that language is the material from which Literature is made then might not literature be 'the town of being' or perhaps 'the city' of being? We could imagine a work of literature as a vast metropolis of houses each one containing the essential life blood that is 'being', rather like seeing a city as being only as alive as its inhabitants.

To go any further we need to think about how we might define 'being' and consider what its relationship to literature might be. If we think of being as 'existence' possibly defining it here as 'human existence', the metaphor suggests that language is 'inhabited' by it and by extension that literature also has 'existence' or 'human existence' at its heart. This might be something that we could agree on; that at the heart of a work of literature is 'human existence', something both necessary for its creation and often, at least indirectly, a common theme. The more interesting question that this idea of 'language as the house of being' prompts in me is whether it can be the writer that imbues literature with a feeling of this 'existence' or whether such a thing is already written into language itself. If language is 'the house of being' we might wonder what has a greater effect on the finished product; the craftsman or the material?

3. Could the sentence 'Tom failed to catch the train on time again' be said to be poetry?

To approach this question we would need to decide how to best define 'poetry'. The standard publisher's definition of poetry is roughly 'text that is not justified to the margins'. This means that where a line ends on the page is significant. Whereas with prose, traditionally, you can narrow and widen the printed page so that the ends of the lines change without affecting the meaning, supposedly with poetry this is not possible. For example if we read Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of The Metro' as "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; petals of a wet, black bough." it would be arguably a different experience to

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

With this in mind we would have to put the sentence 'Tom ran to catch the train on time again' in some kind of context in order to say whether it was poetry or not. This does not just mean the context of the printed page. If 'Tom ran to catch the train on time again' was an untitled line on a scrap of paper in Emily Dickinson's trunk it might achieve the status of poetry but if it was a line found on a post-it note on a posthumous Carol Ann Duffy's kitchen table and she happened to have a nephew named Tom it might not. In defining forms of literature context is key. It might be possible, however, to point out that the sentence 'Tom ran to catch the train on time again' exhibits devices often seen in poetry: alliteration (Tom...train...time), rhyme, (train...again) and can even be scanned as iambic pentameter having 10 syllables that can be split into 5 feet of unstressed/stressed syllables like so:

Tom ran | to catch | the train | on time | again

(unstressed: regular, stressed: bold, | denotes a foot)

But, admittedly, even that is a matter of context.

4. Is it necessary to see the text of a play performed on stage to understand it?

The fact that texts of plays exist suggests that some understanding of them can be had from the text alone. Ibsen's later plays like 'Emperor and Galilean' have been understood by some critics as not written for performance at all. It could, however, be argued that never seeing a play in performance may cause us to miss some elements of its 'intended' expression and the potential range of its interpretation.

A good example of this is 'Krapp's Last Tape' by Samuel Beckett. If we watch the video recording of its performance at the San Quentin Drama Workshop, a prison drama society with which Beckett got personally involved, we can see in Rick Cluchey's performance a clownish, and importantly rhythmic quality that might not be possible to read into an engagement with the text alone. It is almost like a musical score. As this is one of the only performances actually directed by Beckett himself, seeing the text in performance here might be a rare glimpse of its intended expression. When compared to performances such as Harold Pinter's at the Royal Court or John Hurt's for Beckett on Film we can see that when Beckett was involved in the staging the naturalism brought to those other very effective interpretations was almost completely evacuated.

Plays are an odd form of literature as they often have to go through multiple layers of interpretation before they reach their intended audience. An understanding of a play is almost certainly best informed through continued and committed interpretation and re-interpretation so although not 'necessary' for understanding, it is hard to see how watching a text in performance would be detrimental.

5. Can a reader ever know a writers 'intention'?

The quick answer is probably not. The problem, however, is that this may be because, as readers, we are a bit in the shadow of Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author'. His dictat that a text is 'not a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the message of the author-god)' but rather 'a tissue of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture.' is very persuasive but potentially problematic for literary criticism. How is the reader meant to excavate the 'thousand sources of culture?' Is there anything left to hold on to?

The problem here isn't really with the inaccessibility of the author's 'intention' but rather the inaccessibility of 'knowing'. Did Shakespeare intend King Lear to be a comment on the union of English and Scottish crowns that occurred 2 years before its first performance in 1605? Is the division of Lear's kingdom a warning to the relatively new monarch King James or congratulations for his successful handling of the dispersed kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland? We can surmise but we cannot say for sure. The surmise, however, is certainly interesting and might open up new avenues for interpretations of the play.

The idea of an author's intention is only really useful when trying to come to a convincing interpretation and so if we swap that idea for 'the thousand sources of culture' of Roland Barthes we are still probably doing a similar thing but just placing the credit for the meaning in a different location. In conclusion, it is probably impossible to 'know' an author's intention but it may still remain something interesting to think about when we are trying to find our way into a text.

6. Can you justify the imbalanced ratio of male to female writers in the canon of English literature?

It is difficult to justify a representational imbalance in any catalogue with claims to objectivity or consensus and so initially it is hard to see how the gender imbalance in the canon could be justified. The fact that the 'classics' of English literature contain very few female voices is a constant source of embarrassment for contemporary attempts at literary history.

It cannot be claimed that women were not writing in many periods of literary production: Mary Cavendish and Aphra Behn are good examples in the early modern period. Yet even in these periods they are side lined, or distinguished as 'women writers'. There are arguments about historical conditions, cultural forces that make claims that the roles or conditions of women were incompatible with support for female literary production but this can seem like an apologist stance. Virginia Wolfe in 'Room of One's Own' creates an interesting example for this argument, however, in a fictional sister to Shakespeare named 'Judith Shakespeare' who despite her comparable talents is not given the opportunities for literary expression or education, in the end killing herself. Certainly not an apology.

If such examples can be seen as 'justifying the imbalance' then we might want to reconsider what we think of as 'justice'. It might be better to wonder how to 'explain' the imbalance in the lists of writers we consider to represent the best literary achievements of our culture and think about how to support literary production by any gender in the future.