Barbara Bleiman, co-editor emagazine

We chose the opening of The Rainbow thinking that it was a wonderfully rich piece of narrative, with complexities that we hoped A Level students would enjoy teasing out. Our hopes proved to be very well-founded. There was a larger than ever entry, and the thinking and writing about the text was of a very high standard. It was probably, overall, the best set of entries from A Level students that we have ever seen.

Why do I say this? Well, one interesting aspect was the willingness of students to come up with a sustained interpretation that allowed for subtlety. There was no 'it could be this…it could be that…it could be something else' but rather a serious attempt to understand what was at stake in the extract with a degree of thoughtful tentativeness in probing the text and coming to these conclusions. Students also recognised that this was the opening of a narrative text and explored the writing in relation to that - something that we haven't always seen in the past.

Another important aspect was the quality of the writing. For the first time in many competitions, it was quite rare for me to see students throwing in terminology for its own sake, or spotting literary features and writing about them without any sense of their significance. Students this year generally wrote about things that were genuinely interesting and important in the text. They were addressing the key issues in the narrative opening and coming up with an authentic and plausible set of responses. It was particularly pleasing to see how well students grappled with the contrasts between the representation of the men and women and the significance of such details as the men looking down at the land and the women looking outwards towards a world beyond, or the way Lawrence suggested the men's intimate relationship with farming and with the natural world.

Where students used terminology, it was generally used appropriately and was well-judged, and there were only rare examples of students over-using signposting words like 'thus…therefore…in addition…moreover…on the other hand…' and so on. These, if over-used, can make the writing feel a bit formulaic and dull. The writing was impressively controlled, lively and expressive.

So, many congratulations to all of you who entered – we could have happily shortlisted many more of you. And thank you for making the job of sifting through the entry to come up with a shortlist for Nicolas Tredell such a great pleasure!

Professor Nicolas Tredell

It was both enjoyable and instructive to read, and re-read, the fourteen shortlisted entries. All of them were impressive, giving every indication that hard work and thought had been put into them. They are a tribute to the students who wrote them and to their teachers. It may be helpful here to offer some more general observations derived from them that may serve as guidance for future exercises of this kind.

All the entries showed a capacity to move between the particular and the general, between analysis of a significant stylistic or thematic feature and the broader implications of the passage. It is important, of course, to keep those broader implications anchored to the specific details of a passage and not to allow one's interpretation to become too abstract and broad.

It is also important to keep the focus on the passage under discussion; with this passage it is appropriate, given its style, to refer to the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, but in some cases quotations from and mentions of other texts, by Lawrence or others, were introduced. This is usually interesting and can be effective, but it requires circumspection, since it may not always be easy to establish the relevance of the quote or text and it can take up space and time that could be bestowed on discussion of the passage itself. It may be useful here to bear in mind the distinction between a close reading analysis and an essay; in an essay, it is possible and permissible to range more widely and reference a range of other texts; in a close reading analysis it can be a distraction.

It can also be effective to draw on the technical vocabulary of literary criticism to discuss stylistic and structural features in a close reading analysis, but again it requires circumspection. There is a rich repertoire of such terms available; in many instances, the ancient Greeks had a word for it – for instance, anagnorisis [ἀναγνώρισις], meaning a sudden recognition such as Pip experiences in Dickens's Great Expectations (1861) when he realizes that his benefactor is not Miss Havisham but the convict Abel Magwitch; there are also terms drawn from other languages that have entered into English – "sonnet" from the Italian sonneto [little song], Bildungsroman [formation novel] from the German for a novel that traces its protagonist's education by life. In using them, however, it is important to be sure that one has fully grasped their meaning, which is not always a straightforward process, and that they are the most concise and fitting words for the stylistic or structural feature in question.

The entries were generally well-written but occasionally there was some awkward phrasing. One way to improve this (which you may already use) is to read it aloud to some sympathetic ear or to record it on a mobile phone or PC and then listen to it yourself. In the acts of reading aloud and listening, awkward locutions can become more apparent, and one can devise ways to remedy them. Obviously, this would not be possible in a silent examination room but it could help to hone one's style for exam use.

Close reading is both intellectually exciting and useful. The law, politics, medicine and many other professions are likely to demand, at times, close reading skills. Such skills also remain the basis of the study, teaching and enjoyment of literature.

The Winner

Toby Phelps, Eton College

DH Lawrence uses sexualised, biblical and philosophical ideas to explain the differences between the men and the women. The men are seen as primal creatures who feel a natural tie to the land on which they work. However, the women want to 'discover what was beyond'. They are dissatisfied with the comfort of the land and want to embrace the change happening in the world around them.

As Lawrence describes the men's relationship with the land, he uses sexual imagery to characterise the deep connection, the most pertinent example being the description of the 'body of the men' being 'impregnated with the day'. Through this gender inversion, Lawrence challenges the misogynistic idea that men can exert dominance over women sexually and instead gives this gender role to the land to demonstrate its power over the men. The men also share a strong 'blood intimacy' with the land which draws them to it. There is a symbiotic relationship between the men and the land where men are given comfort and peace while the land flourishes from the hard work provided by the men. The men are comforted by this and for them, 'it was enough'. However, at the end of the day, 'the brains were inert'. The land exercises such dominance over the men that they are left in a state of unconsciousness, ignorant to the changing world around them.

The opening to Lawrence's The Rainbow is often described as biblical in its style, however it is also relevant to how Lawrence portrays his characters; namely the men as Adam and the women as Eve, although even the Marsh farm with its 'meadows' and 'alder trees' mirrors the Garden of Eden. In the Old Testament before the fall, Adam and Eve could be argued to be unconscious beings, acting perfectly in a perfect world and showered in comfort. However, just like Eve, the women search for something more and look to push the boundaries of their perfect world. Eve eats the apple due to wanting to be something more than what she currently is and similarly the women in this passage look to something 'unknown' and 'far off' which draws them and becomes their 'deepest desire'.

The women are not overcome by this 'blood intimacy' and (metaphorical) sexual dominance which the land exerts. Their self-consciousness prevails over their unconscious bond with nature. Lawrence explains that the women are not blinded by the 'intercourse of farm-life' and are instead 'aware' of the 'world speaking'. The personification of the world not only demonstrates its power, but also the nature of the men and women. The men's sexual relationship with nature shows their simplicity while the women are 'awake' and listen to what the world is telling them. This sensibility and ambition sets them apart from the men and, partially through the semblance to the story of original sin, creates tension as to whether this ambition for a 'far-off world' will prove to be brave or reckless.

Judge's Comment

This richly packed entry explores, with relevant example and quotation, the range of perspectives - sexual, biblical, philosophical – in the Lawrence passage. Its special strength is its incorporation and development of two key aspects of the passage – its "gender inversion" and its biblical resonances. It registers the reversal of the conventional relations of dominance and submission, activity and passiveness, between men and women, but argues for a further "gender inversion" between the men and the land; it is the land, partly feminized but potent, which has "power over the men", giving them "comfort and peace while [it] flourishes from [their] hard work". The entry acknowledges that the style of the passage is often called "biblical" but contends that the characterizations of the men and women also have biblical resonances, though of a heterodox kind; they imply that Eve is an agent of impending liberation rather than catastrophe, who becomes aware before Adam does of a wider world beyond the Garden of Eden, just as the Brangwen women are aware of a wider world beyond Marsh Farm. The entry then concludes by identifying the narrative "tension" the end of the passage creates as to the possible results of the women's aspiration.

Runner-up

Cassia Stuttard, St Paul's Girls' School

From the outset of DH Lawrence's extract, the Brangwens are inseparable from the physical landscape of Marsh Farm. Whilst the landscape is at first presented as timelessly unchanged, the 'different' men and women point to the widening divide between traditional labour and modernisation.

Initially, Lawrence presents the existence of both the landscape and Brangwen men as stable. Just as the men are 'slow-speaking', the landscape operates with a similarly steadied pace of movement as the river 'twisted sluggishly' and the houses 'climbed assiduously'. Even when 'the weather is changing', the process happens in 'stages' with a seemingly plannable predictability, just as the men's eyes remain the same colour 'blue' whether angry or laughing. This 'kind of surety' is dependably trustworthy and ensures that the landscape can be described in the past continuous tense using the construct of 'there were always children'. There is an assertive confidence in the traditional way-of-life; the family's farming legacy appears secure in the safety of 'ample' produce (both of crops and offspring).

The Brangwens' most distinctive feature is their dedication to 'working hard'. The men appear united with the landscape through shared struggle and toil, as their 'heaving of their horses' mirrors when the earth itself also 'heaved'. Lawrence values the men's labour; their sweat is glorified as 'lustre' and compared to the shine of a precious metal. The men benefit from their animals in an 'interrelat[ed]' dependent relationship; their work is as essential as a 'pulse', and similarly rhythmic and repetitive. The men become associated with this baseness of existence, as they deal with the primal and simplistic extremes of 'pain and death' and are concerned only with the pillars of agriculture. These fundamentals are described in the easily comprehensible monosyllabic nouns of 'earth and sky and beast and green plants'. Lawrence uses the simple grammatical construction to slow the pace of the sentence so we have to read with the same dogged determination as the men, leaning into the repetition of words that take on the rhythmic 'pulse' of ploughing

Although the men's work is repetitive and laborious, it is vital because it cultivates fertility. Copulation is implied through descriptions of the cows' reproductive organs of 'udder[s]' and 'teats'; the 'breasts and bowels' of the soil; and the 'nakedness' of Autumn. The land takes on the presence of a body bearing new life and the offspring of 'young corn' as its cycle revolves around seasons and celestial 'intercourse between heaven and Earth'. However, whilst the men look backwards to a traditional agricultural society constituted of 'farm-buildings and fields', the women in their houses instead look towards features of an aspirational modern civilisation. In the women's outlook, the urban trademarks of the 'road', 'Church' and 'hall' complete with 'cities and governments' replace the outdated 'farm-buildings. The Brangwens' society shifts towards modernity as imperceptibly as the slow changes to the landscape (and 'sluggish' progress of the river Erewash). Whereas the men look to the inward sensuality of their 'pulse' and 'blood', the women begin to look 'outwards' (a word which Lawrence emphatically repeats) to the changing 'world at large'.

Judge's Comment

This entry identifies the "shared struggle and toil" of the men's farm work the passage evokes and its importance because "it cultivates fertility." Style is fruitfully discussed, for example with the suggestion that the pace of a sentence may mimic the action it describes so that the reader is "leaning into the repetition of words that take on the rhythmic 'pulse' of ploughing". The entry encapsulates a crucial distinction between the men "look[ing] backwards to a traditional agricultural society" and the women "look[ing] towards features of an aspirational modern civilization" and suggests how the latter embody a movement towards modernity.

Runner-up

Oriana Hardingham, St Paul's Girls' School

Lawrence's introduction of the Brangwen family, and their occupying of a myopic microcosm of rural life, localises the universally significant fundamentals of man and woman, which Lawrence explores and ironises through his self-conscious parallels to the Book of Genesis.

Having 'lived for generations on the Marsh Farm', on 'their own land', the deep-rootedness and entrenchment of the Brangwen family within their natural landscape is immediately established; indeed, they become inseparable from their environment through the reflections of the natural world in their physicality: the 'change in their eyes from… blue, lit-up laughter, to a hard blue-staring anger' can be traced 'through all the irresolute stages of the sky'. This deep affinity with the natural world lends itself to the prelapsarian, almost Edenic vision Lawrence creates of the 'little country town', one which the Brangwen men are profoundly immersed in as they 'mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees' and 'drew the heaving of the horses after their will'. And yet, despite their communion with nature, there is a sense of the masculine scope being parochial, even limited: they are described as having 'brains [that] were inert, as their blood flowed heavy' depriving them of intellectual capacity and constricting them to the solely physical realm. Indeed, the idea of men as purely physical is reflected in the overt sensuality of his depiction of farm-life, through their 'feeling the pulse and body of the soil' and 'the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men', where Lawrence's poetic richness and incantatory repetition of 'pulse' gives the prose itself a throbbing, rhythmic drive, furthering the sexualisation of the nature.

The women, conversely, display a desire for intellectual expansion, as seen in the disruption of the flowing lusciousness of the prose with the frank assertion that 'The women were different' (this oppositional relationship between male and female is mirrored in other dialectics of the natural world, such as 'heaven and earth', and the 'rich land' and 'empty sky'). The depiction of farm life becomes restrictive, even claustrophobic, through their 'looking out from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life to the spoken world beyond' as they 'heard the sound in the distance, and they strained to listen.' Progressive and visionary, yet stripped of personal identity, (Lawrence first refers to 'the women', then hones in on one specific, but still unnamed 'woman') they appear mythical figures, paralleled with the Eve archetype in their desire 'to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom'. They suggest a departure from the setting's prelapsarian idyll, yet limited parochialism, through the universal scope of the 'far-off world of cities and governments' and 'the activity of man in the world at large', and indeed the whole passage feels energised with an anticipation of social change and movement through the sense of pregnancy, expectancy and regeneration of their 'expecting something unknown' and their 'air of readiness for what would come to them'; much like the 'empty sky' which seems to anticipate the arrival of the rainbow itself.

Judge's Comment

This entry starts with a bold and well-expressed claim that corresponds to the ambition implicit in the Lawrence passage and catches the mixture of exploration and irony in its biblical parallels. It identifies the "entrenchment" of the Brangwen men in the landscape and suggests the prelapsarian elements of their world. Key elements of style are noted, such as "the incantatory repetition of 'pulse'". The entry explores the men's limitations when contrasted with the women who are linked with "the Eve archetype" and registers the expectancy and anticipation of regeneration that energizes the passage and emerges most strongly at the end.

Highly commended

Zen Nishida, King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford

The Erewash twisting "sluggishly" through "meadows" and "alder trees"; a charming backdrop of country houses "climbing assiduously" up to a hilltop church-tower; idyllic rural beauty, frozen in time and untouched by urban expansion, serves as the introduction to the Marsh Farm and its residents. Referred to as one collective unit, "The Brangwens" are given a myth-like status: a long dynasty of "fresh, blond, slow-speaking people", simple yet vigorous, prospering on their ancestral fiefdom. "The pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men" employs monosyllables and anaphora, mimicking the gentle rhythm of nature to which the Brangwens are synchronised. Abundant sexual imagery, referring to various natural phenomena as "breast and bowels", "nakedness" and "intercourse", further establishes the Brangwens as vibrant people with intimate knowledge of the natural world.

There are, however, clues of discomfort; their "hard blue-staring anger" seems fierce and predator-like; the soil, which at first "clung to their feet" with "desire", later lies "hard and unresponsive", evoking a strained relationship. Tension more clearly reveals itself when the initially homogeneous Brangwens divide into men, sitting down, "inert" and "impregnated" by the day's work, and women, who "moved about with surety". The notable reversal of traditional gender roles could signal growing social decay and disparity, which becomes clearer as the men and women's descriptions split into separate paragraphs. The men display domineering, violent tendencies, such as maiming rabbits with a "sharp knock of the hand". They live "full and surcharged", forever "turned to the heat", being presented as daring and passionate. But they are also passive and subordinate, "dazed" by and "unable to turn round" from the sun and juxtaposed to the more "dominant and creative" men in the "active scope of man" beyond.

The women possess a 'masculine' quality, yearning for the greater "spoken world" of ideas and innovation beyond the mere physicality of life at the Marsh. Yet the daily "heated, blind intercourse of farm-life", indicating violence and submission, suggests that their bold, forward-looking desires may in fact emerge from a reality of strict oppression.

The final image, man and woman standing back-to-back, is symbolic of division. The man, though a strong and diligent provider, is emasculated by the men in "battle" on "the edge of the unknown". The woman, "strain[ing] her eyes" to watch, could conform to degrading stereotypes of female infidelity; but she is also empowered, for she seeks to actively join "the fighting host" of this battle, determined to escape from perpetual taedium vitae. This summarises the curious ambiguity of the subversion of gender roles: although it conveys strong unease, both the men and women are neither entirely shamed nor praised for turning towards their respective, and opposite, ambitions. Returning to the beginning, the sluggish river now seems more symbolic of stagnant rural habituality. The church-tower looming over the men in the field, now associated with the "far-off world of cities and governments", perhaps foreshadows an impending transformation of the Brangwens' way of life.

Judge's Comment

This entry offers a perceptive analysis of how the passage initially presents the Brangwens as "one collective unit" but increasingly reveals the tension between the "inert" men and active women that culminates in the "man and woman standing back-to-back", "symbolic of division". It identifies the "ambiguity of the reversal of gender roles", in that neither the man not the woman is wholly "shamed nor praised". The term "anaphora" is used accurately and appositely.

Commended

Daniel Porritt, Bristol Grammar School

In this passage the beauty of family farm-life is married and contrasted with its frustratingly restrictive nature for those desiring a more active role in the shaping of society. While descriptions of men's work convey an almost spiritual connection between these labourers and their landscape, a suspenseful longing is depicted in women's ambitions as they look to the symbolic horizon and another level of human experience beyond the farm.

Lawrence establishes the extract's somewhat circular structure in the initial description of the church-tower on the farm's horizon; while the men remain merely "aware" that "something" stands beyond them, the women of the Marsh Farm will later link the landmark to the "magic land" of "cities and governments and the active scope of man". The paragraph's syndetic listing and semantic field of enchantment highlight the vastness of the woman's ambitions to break free from the less stimulating world of farming, but vivid descriptions are not saved for urban life—rather, Lawrence depicts the Brangwen males' contentment with this existence as the result of their understandably life-affirming symbiotic relationship with the land. Corporeal imagery in relation to the sky and earth ("sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels") is mirrored in the particularly striking metaphor of cows' "pulse of blood of the teats" beating into the "pulse of the hands of the men", a phrase in turn connecting the animals and men through parataxis.

The introduction of the Brangwen women's ambition marks its significance, halting the flow of multi-clausal descriptions with the short sentence "The women were different" in the second half of the passage; the shift in pace brought by the statement reflects the incongruity of the women's thirst for enrichment, going against the norm of acceptance on the farm. The narrative voice's narrowing down from "women" to "woman" near the end of the extract adds a level of intimacy to the focalisation, furthering our understanding and ability to emphasise with the specified character's dream. This woman tries to see what "man had done in fighting outwards to knowledge", the verb connoting struggle and pointing to the battle against restrictive ways of life already fought by those beyond the farm. The encapsulation of previous humanity in a singular male noun could allude to the patriarchal frame of mind the character has internalised in a likely imbalanced society; a society enforcing passivity on women naturally fuels the character's desire for independent exploration and achievement.

In balancing intensely engaging descriptions of the farm's landscape and animals with depictions of the rural environment's shortcomings, Lawrence makes clear that it is not this way of life that is inherently restrictive, but rather the inability of the Brangwen men to cast their minds beyond it.

"Blood-intimacy" provides a level of connection with the planet and our origins perhaps unavailable to the society beyond the farm—to whom the women "strain to listen"—but as long as the men "face inwards", their short-sightedness will not allow them to notice, let alone reach, the possibility of furthering and fulfilling the growing human potential of their society.

Judge's Comment

This well-argued entry is closely attentive to details of language and to relevant rhetorical devices and the meanings they support and is especially valuable for its stress on the balance the passage holds "between intensely engaging descriptions of the farm's landscape and animals" and "depictions of the rural environment's shortcomings".

The following entries were also shortlisted by the emag editors and sent to Nicolas Tredell

Jasmine Benham, The British School of Brussels

Rafferty Blake, Marlborough

Juliette Berry, Colchester Royal Grammar School

Coroico Bottomley, Waldegrave School

Olivia Church, Queens' School, Watford

Eve Cumming, Barton Peveril Sixth Form College

Paola Hagen-Zanker, Godalming College

Chloe Joyce, Harris Westminster Sixth Form

Luke Roberts, Waldegrave School