**Stage 2 English**

Assessment Type 1: Responding to Texts

*What are the factors that shape the character of Harrison Opoku's life in the novel Pigeon English by Stephen Kelman? What lessons does he learn about his society?*

Harrison Opuku, the main protagonist in Stephen Kelman's novel, *Pigeon English*, experiences a vast shift in his perception throughout the novel as he discovers that his naivety towards his family's dislocation, his racial difference, and the violence surrounding him put him in a dangerous position. Although he is aware of these events, his intention to belong to a new society and rebalance his life takes over. Harrison's youth shapes his life and provides him with innocence that he wishes to maintain by solving the murder. However, it is this entrapping responsibility that leads to his tragic death.

From the beginning of the novel, the first person narrative crafts the reader's awareness of how Harrison's youth affects his perception of the horrific world around him. This immediate sympathy is prolonged by Kelman's inclusion of Harrison's yearning for an education and real responsibility. Harrison obviously feels accountable for his learning, as he 'just want[s] [Connor] to shut up so the teacher can help [them]', because 'you learn the most interesting things in Science'. These moments normalize him and provide a sense of relief throughout the novel, by filtering out the dreadful world surrounding him.

The dislocation of Harrison's family creates an unspoken tension at home with his mother and sister. The incomplete family removes a source of security for Harrison, as he has been distanced from a male authority figure; his father. This puts pressure on his mother, as she must obtain a dual role as not only a comforting maternal figure, but also an economic provider. This is evidently challenging at Harrison's 400m race when 'there were lots of people watching', but not his mother, as 'she was at work again'. In place of the missing security that is not provided by his father, Harrison uses the pigeon on his balcony as a form of retreat. Kelman's effective use of the pigeon as a second narrator throughout the novel implies the pigeon is watching over Harrison as his protector. The pigeon is therefore representing his father's role: aware but impotent. Not only does Harrison turn to the pigeon for support, he relies on his older sister, Lydia. The comparison and contrast between the sibling relationships of Harrison and Agnes, and Harrison and Lydia demonstrates how Harrison protects his innocence. With Agnes, Harrison does not hesitate to express his adoration through his narrating, as he describes her laughing as 'like a wave in the sea, when it landed on you it made you laugh as well'. These loving comments illustrate how an older brother should feel about his younger sister, yet are absent in Harrison's stereotypical relationship with his older sister, Lydia. Many adolescent siblings can relate to Harrison and Lydia's relationship, as it evolves around their frustration towards each other, yet the younger sibling's admiration for the elder. One minute Harrison is telling Lydia that her 'nose is all snotty' from crying on her birthday and the next is trying to make her smile because he feels he must 'save the day'. This illustrates Harrison’s wish to guard his innocence and affection for his sister.

Harrison's 'new world' of south London provides him with opportunities of new friendships and a chance to adapt, but also the possibility of alienation and violence. Unfortunately for Harrison, his already corrupt elder sister has fallen in with a violent group of friends involved with the 'Dell Farm Crew'. Their ongoing criminal activity culminates in the death of the boy which influences Harrison and his fate is sealed. Kelman uses multiple images and calls on the reader's senses to epitomize the milieu of violence and poverty surrounding Harrison through petty crime, Terry Takeway's graffiti, the playground arson, the constant smell of urine and the police helicopters. This is reflected by the personal narrative detailing the escalating violence between Harrison and Killa, starting with Killa 'want[ing] [his] fingerprints back', implying that he is guilty of murdering the boy. However, the crew is not the only source of threat to Harrison: there is also the society around him with his older sister's best friend, Miquita, sexually harassing and bullying him. Harrison is aware that her behaviour is wrong, demonstrated by the fact that his 'skin was crawling'. Harrison only agrees to kiss in the first place due to his naive desire that if he knows 'how to kiss properly then Poppy will never cut [him] for another boy'. He finds solace whenever he is around Poppy and when he thinks about her. This is confirmed by the fact that as soon as Harrison and Poppy part for the holidays with a kiss, Harrison expresses pure happiness from the thought that 'Poppy won't forget [him] AND [he] solved the case'. This relief is then starkly juxtaposed with his subsequent tragic murder.

*Pigeon English* successfully demonstrates that environmental surroundings and herd behaviour shape Harrison's life. Kelman uses multiple corrupt characters to illustrate that Harrison's constant exposure to violence causes him to lose his innocence. No matter how hard Harrison tries to maintain his moral compass, his lack of security prompts him to find a source of comfort by solving the murder. Unfortunately, this quest results in him debasing himself and, ultimately, leads to his death. Kelman is prompting the realization that we have innate human values that are reinforced by our family and society. In the modern world, where there is displacement and disruption of normal family and social structure, the resulting hunger for rebalance distorts society with disastrous consequences. Kelman is warning us of what is facing us if we continue: Harrison is not an individual; he is all of us.

**Performance Standards for Stage 2 English**

| - | **Knowledge and Understanding** | **Analysis** | **Application** |
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| **A** | Comprehensive knowledge and understanding of ideas and perspectives in a range of texts.Thorough knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use a range of language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.Extensive knowledge and understanding of a wide range of ways in which texts are created for different purposes, audiences, and contexts. | Complex analysis of ideas, perspectives, and/or aspects of culture represented in texts.Perceptive analysis of language features, stylistic features, and conventions used in texts, and thoughtful evaluation of how these influence audiences.Critical analysis of similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Versatile and precise use of language and stylistic features to create a wide range of coherent texts that address the purpose, audience, and context.Fluently integrated use of evidence from texts to develop and support a response.Sophisticated use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| **B** | Knowledge and understanding of ideas and perspectives in a range of texts.Knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use a range of language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.Knowledge and understanding of a range of ways in which texts are created for different purposes, contexts, and audiences. | Detailed analysis of ideas, perspectives, and/or aspects of culture represented in texts.Detailed analysis of language features, stylistic features, and conventions, and evaluation of how these influence audiences.Clear analysis of similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Accurate use of language and stylistic features to create a range of coherent texts that address the purpose, context, and audience.Appropriate use of evidence from texts to develop and support a response.Consistent use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| **C** | Knowledge and understanding of some ideas and perspectives in texts.Knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use some language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.Knowledge and understanding of ways in which everyday texts are created for different purposes, contexts, and audiences. | Analysis of some ideas and perspectives represented in texts.Description and some analysis of different language features, stylistic features, and conventions, and/or some evaluation of how these influence audiences.Analysis of some similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Generally accurate use of language and stylistic features to create texts that address the purpose, context, and audience.Selection of some evidence from texts to develop and support a response.Appropriate use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| **D** | Knowledge and understanding of some ideas in a narrow range texts.Some knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use language features and conventions to make meaning.Knowledge and understanding of ways in which some everyday texts are created for different purposes and audiences. | Description of some ideas in texts.Description of some language features, stylistic features, and/or conventions.Description of some similarities and differences in texts. | Use of some language and stylistic features to create a narrow range of texts.Partial use of basic evidence from texts to develop a response.Inconsistent use of expression. |
| **E** | Identification of an idea in a text.Identification of a limited range of ways in which creators of texts use language techniques.Recognition of one or more ways in which a familiar text is created. | Reference to an idea in a text.Recognition of language or stylistic features.Recognition of a simple connection between texts. | Restricted use of language or stylistic features to create a text.Limited use of evidence from a text in a response.Limited use of clear expression. |