Long poems

One option for the poetry text for Part 2 is to choose a longer poem. The IB syllabus describes this as a poem that has at least 600 lines. An excellent, if challenging, choice of poem which fulfils this brief is any of the 12 books of John Milton's 1667 epic *Paradise Lost*. We have chosen extracts from Book One, which would qualify as a text in its own right.

Activity 2.2

Over the next few pages, you will find several examples of sample student commentaries in response to the extracts. You should have a go at the following activities:

- Read the transcripts of the commentaries out loud and time them. How long do they take? Is this about right for the IOC?
- Have a go at assessing the commentaries yourself. Get hold of the assessment criteria and see what mark you would give these students for each of the criteria. Compare your marks with those of other students in the class and discuss how you could make them better, or use some of the good ideas in your own commentaries.

John Milton (1608–74) is one of the most famous poets to have written in the English language. He was a puritan and a republican who lived during the English Civil War and under the rule of Oliver Cromwell. He is most famous for his long, religious epic poem *Paradise Lost*. When he wrote it he was blind and had to dictate the whole poem (all 12 books of it) to a scribe.

Text 2.3 *Paradise Lost: Book One* (lines 192–224), John Milton

This extract, which comes from near the start of Book One, describes the enormous bulk of Satan chained to a burning lake in hell and then him rising from the lake. The extract is followed by guiding questions, a transcript of a sample student commentary, answers to the teacher's questions and questions for discussion in response to reading the passage and the commentary.

Thus Satan talking to his nearest mate
With head uplift above the wave, and eyes
That sparkling blazed, his other parts besides
195 Prone on the flood, extended long and large
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian, or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,
Briareos or Typhon, whom the den
200 By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim the ocean stream:
Him haply slumbering on the Norway foam
The pilot of some small night-foundered skiff,
205 Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,
With fixed anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the lee, while night
Invests the sea, and wished morn delays:
So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay
210 Chained on the burning lake, nor ever thence
Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will
And high permission of all-ruling heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs,
That with reiterated crimes he might
215 Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enraged might see
How all his malice served but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shown
On man by him seduced, but on himself
220 Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance poured.
Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool
His mighty stature; on each hand the flames
Driven backward slope their pointing spires, and rolled
In billows, leave i' the midst a horrid vale.

Guiding questions

1 How does Milton depict the landscape of hell in this extract?
2 How does Milton portray conflict in this extract?

Sample student response: transcript of sample student commentary

This passage is from *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. It comes towards the beginning of Book One. The passage is describing Satan, who is chained to the burning lake in hell. At the end of the passage he rises off of that lake for the first time. Immediately prior to this extract Satan is responding to Beelzebub, one of his archangels, and reminds him that for the devils in hell 'ever to do ill' is their 'sole delight'. I am going to answer both of the guiding questions; the first is 'How does Milton create a sense of the landscape of hell?' The second, 'How does Milton present conflict in this extract?' And then I am also going to go on to look at some of Milton's interesting uses of language in this poem.

The first question asks about how Milton creates a sense of the landscape of hell and the first point I want to make is about the idea of size and in some ways this anticipates the scene later on in this poem when the devils fly into Pandemonium and Milton creates a sense of their vastness. That sense of vastness is introduced at the start of the passage when Milton describes in line 195 how Satan 'extended long and large' and he 'lay floating many a rood in bulk as huge as whom the fables name of monstrous size' and he goes on to list from fables or from stories or myths of the past characters such as Titanian, Briareos or Typhon but then he goes on to use a very interesting technique, in essence an heroic simile, and what he does here is he invites the reader to make an extended comparison between Satan in hell and another scene which he describes for us.

That simile starts in line 196–197 when Milton is describing Satan as being 'as huge as' but then continues in line 200–201: 'or that sea-beast Leviathan'. Leviathan is a whale and Milton reminds us that God 'of all his works' created the whale as the 'hugest' so he is taking a figure from the natural world which is massive but then he actually tells us a little story. He describes a pilot of a little boat and he gives a sense of the fragility, the smallness of that boat by the use of the word 'skiff' and 'slumbering'; he gives us a sense of the potential danger that it might find itself in. Anyway this is a story as seen and told and the pilot, the captain of the little boat, sees what he thinks is an island and he fixes his anchor in the 'scaly rind' which is an incredibly powerful description of the island – 'scaly rind' is obviously a whale, not an island – it is describing the whale – but it is also anticipating Satan's transformation into the serpent in the key part in Book Nine when of course he tempts Adam and Eve and therefore creates the fall. The simile finishes in line 209: 'So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay' so Milton uses that literary feature in order to convey a sense of just how massive Satan is within the landscape of hell. That sense of his enormous impact on the landscape is also drawn attention to in the last couple of lines of the extract where Satan for the first time comes up from the lake and in the final line of the passage leaves 'in the midst a horrid vale' as if when he rises from the lake he leaves in his place a huge gap as if he is affecting the landscape; he is almost a part of that landscape.

Having looked at how Milton conveys the landscape of hell I now want to have a look at how he portrays conflict and I think that conflict starts at the very beginning of the passage where Satan is described as talking to his 'nearest mate'. Now his mate is obviously Beelzebub, but there is a sense of humanity conveyed in the language here and I think that humanity is continued in the way in which his eyes are described as 'sparkling blazed' almost as if the other parts of his body which lay 'prone on the flood' are the evil parts, they are like the serpent, but the eyes have that aspect of humanity. There is a conflict here within Satan himself but the more important conflict is the conflict between good and evil, and we see that in lines 212 and 213, where we note the contrast between 'all-ruling heaven' and Satan's 'dark designs' and that alliterative coupling – the repetition of the 'd' sound in 'dark' and 'designs' – gives us a very powerful sense of Satan's manipulative nature in contrast with heaven. This is stressed again in lines 217 and 218 when Milton describes how all Satan's malice is serving 'but to bring forth infinite goodness, grace and mercy' and obviously those are the qualities that Milton is applying to God and to heaven. It is interesting that this threefold repetition, a tricolon, anticipates a similar tricolon 'treble confusion, raft and vengeance' describing Satan so the poem creates a conflict of equally powerful forces between God and Satan although it does constantly remind us, for example in line 212, that nothing happens without the go-ahead of 'all-ruling heaven'.

Finally, I want to look at a couple of points about the language. In lines 195–196, a sense of the ongoing length, the vastness, of Satan in hell is suggested by the alliteration of 'long', 'large' and 'lay', suggesting the extent of his size. The alliterative coupling in 'dark designs' has that same effect. Finally, at the end of the passage, we have these powerful verbs 'poured', 'driven', 'rolled' and 'reared' to give a sense of the enormity of Satan moving off of that lake in the concluding passage.

After you've given your commentary, your teacher will ask you further questions. Here is an example of the sort of question your teacher might ask you following your commentary and the sort of answer you might give.

Teacher: Do you think Milton wants us to feel sympathetic towards the character of Satan in this extract?

Student: I would say both yes and no. As I said in my commentary, he gives him certain human characteristics which do make us more sympathetic towards him. However, Milton is doing this so that we can understand that he is making moral decisions (which humans do). It is important to remember that even when Satan appears at his most sympathetic, he is still making morally bad decisions. Even in this passage, however, Milton keeps reminding us of the constant presence and goodness of God. We see this in the epic simile when the leviathan is described as 'which God of all his works/ Created hugest'. Milton wants to remind us who's in charge. Similarly, he makes continual reference to 'all-ruling heaven'. Milton makes Satan sympathetic to the extent that he doesn't want the reader to think of him as a sort of pantomime devil – we have to believe in him as someone who is making moral choices. However, Milton also keeps reminding us that he is the rebel angel and the cause of all the problems in the first place.

Text 2.4 *Paradise Lost: Book One* (lines 242–70), John Milton

This next passage comes from a few lines further on in Book One. Having raised himself off the lake, Satan is now in a position to speak to his fellow rebel angels and to persuade them to back him in his plans. Satan is speaking throughout this extract. The passage is followed by guiding questions and a transcript of a sample student commentary.

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,
Said then the lost archangel, this the seat
That we must change for heaven, this mournful gloom
245 For that celestial light? Be it so, since he
Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
What shall be right: furthest from him is best
Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made supreme
Above his equals. Farewell, happy fields
250 Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
255 Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; the almighty hath not built
260 Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in hell:
Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.
But wherefore let we then our faithful friends,
265 The associates and copartners of our loss
Lie thus astonished on the oblivious pool,
And call them not to share with us their part
In this unhappy mansion, or once more
With rallied arms to try what may be yet
270 Regained in heaven, or what more lost in hell?

Guiding questions

1 How does Milton present the contrast between heaven and hell, and God and Satan in this extract?
2 How does Milton present Satan's character in this extract?

Sample student response: transcript of sample student commentary

This commentary has been marked up to show you how the student addresses some of the assessment criteria.

This passage comes from Book One of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Immediately prior to this extract Satan, who had been chained to the burning lake, has risen off of that lake and this is his first speech without his shackles on.[1] This is Satan speaking to the cast of devils in hell as a slightly freer individual and it marks the start of his capacity to plot which eventually reaches its manifestation in Book Nine with the temptation of Adam and Eve. In answer to the two guiding questions, I am going to look at[2] how Milton creates a very powerful contrast between heaven and hell and between God and Satan. I am then going to go on and look at the presentation of Satan's character and I am going to argue that Milton gives him a strangely human presence as well as making him a rhetorically confident orator and therefore creating a sense that he is almost like a man who will be a leader and who will be able to manipulate the other devils to get his own way.

I want to start by looking at the contrast between heaven and hell, between God and Satan, and that contrast starts in lines 245 and 246 of the extract. Indeed, hell is described as having a 'mournful gloom' in comparison with heaven's 'celestial light' and it is interesting the way in which the consecutive lines include these two-word phrases, a noun with a qualifying adjective,[3] the qualifying adjective drawing attention to either the amount of or lack of light to give a very powerful sense of light as being representative of goodness, and darkness as being representative of evil. This fits in very powerfully with the idea, mentioned elsewhere in Book One, of hell being full of 'darkness visible'. It is a conflict, a contrast. That conflict or contrast is continued in lines 244, 250 and 251 where a strangely human phrase, 'farewell happy fields (249)', is then followed by the use of alliteration[4] to introduce the new world: 'hail horrors, hail infernal world'. This expresses the realities of the hell in which he has found himself so the language shifts from almost colloquial comfort to harsh biting reality and indeed the adjective that Milton uses in line 251 to describe hell as 'profoundest' has both a literal sense of depth and therefore distance from heaven which accentuates that sense of a contrast, and also picks up on the ambiguity of 'profound' which can also mean 'deeply' in terms of thinking. One of the things we are going to go on and look at is how Satan is presented as a deep thinker, almost as a human character. The final point about the contrast is at the end of the passage where the 'faithful friends,/ The associates and copartners' are lying in an astonishing 'oblivious pool' and Satan says no, let's not live in this 'unhappy mansion' any longer, let us try to regain where we have come from, and he issues a clear rallying call to his troops to reject the environment in which they find themselves.

I want to move on now and look at the presentation of Satan's character.[5] Firstly I want to look at his humanity. Now clearly Satan is not a human character but one of the ways in which Milton makes him sympathetic is to present him as having human characteristics and we see some of those in terms of his thoughts on philosophy. We find that in line 253, for instance, when Satan talks about one who brings in minds 'not to be changed by place o time' and he says 'the mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven', and what he is putting his finger on there is an idea that Shakespeare explores in *Hamlet* when he says 'for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so'; however, the way in which the pattern o the words is mirrored – 'heaven of hell, hell of heaven' – shows Satan's interna conflict and how he is conflicted and troubled by the various pressures on him and his various desires. That sense of humanity is also demonstrated when h talks about the almighty in line 259 as having not built here for his 'envy'. He recognises, I think, that God hasn't created hell and put the devils into hell motivated by the sort of emotion that Satan is implicitly acknowledging that he has himself, which is envy. Again this is his philosophical musing. It's almoe as if he is convincing himself that 'to reign is worth ambition thought in hell:/ Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.' It's a contestable view but the poetic power of the lines and the sheer rhetorical weight of Satan's assertio make it almost undeniable and that rhetoric which comes up throughout the passage also marks Satan out as being a leader and a powerfully convincing figure. Indeed, the passage starts 'this region, this soil, the climb'; he speaks naturally in the rhetorical patterns of great orators, he is using tricolon here or the repetition of three.[6] He uses rhetorical questions in line 245 and in line 258, asking or demanding of the audience to consider for themselves what the situation is like and this finds its ultimate manifestation in the final lines of the poem where he asks questions of what are two audiences really: firstly, the crew of demons in hell but, secondly, us as the reader. He calls us with 'rallied arms to try what may be yet? Regained in heaven, or what more lost in hell', finishing the speech with the powerful rhetoric of an orator. Indeed, that rhetorical insistence on his humanity, his 'faithful friende and the repetition of 'associates and copartners' and 'our loss' sees Satan using emotive language and this again stresses the dual quality that Milton presents him as having, of both a great rhetorical orator and a character that is infused with humanity.[7]