

Sample Section B response: *New and Selected Poems*

Poet: Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Genre: 20th-century and 21st-century poetry

Passages:

- Passage 1: 'The Swing' (p.61)
- Passage 2: 'Reality' (p.139)
- Passage 3: 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place' (pp.162–3)

(Page numbers refer to *New and Selected Poems* published in 2013 by Carcanet.)

Task: Use two or more of the set passages as the basis for a discussion of *New and Selected Poems*.

The image of the swing oscillating between light and dark, moving ceaselessly but 'only, as ever, to return', sets up tensions between movement and stasis, seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing. **1** The persona is questing, searching for answers, but 'uncertain' about whether enlightenment is even a possibility. In the end, the persona has to settle for being in the moment – 'swinging again tonight in the park' – with a sense of resignation. The tone is pensive, yet also accepting; **2** offsetting the disappointment about a clarity that 'never arrives' is the complex web of existence, signalled by 'the fugal elaboration of leaves'. As this phrase suggests, the complexity of life is partly attributed to the natural world (poplars, she-oaks, flowers) and partly created by human culture. While 'fugal' suggests music, references to the visual arts also run through Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, such as the painter who is asked to 'brush over heaven' in 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place'. Above all, there is the attempt of poetry itself to capture something 'perfect'. It might only be a 'dreaming of capture', as 'Reality' suggests is all that might be possible, but these poems suggest that it is the dream itself (or poem, or memory, or image) that we must value and hold on to. **3**

In 'The Swing', unusually in Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, the form of the prose poem is used to grapple with the challenge of capturing a moment in time, as if the aligned edges of the poem might serve as the 'outline', or the sides of a container, to secure meaning. However, language is more fluid than this, and the aim to 'write a sentence as perfect as the letter o' is not achievable, just as the desire in 'The Thing Itself' to create a sentence 'unlike any such creature in creation' is destined to be unfulfilled. Yet the claim that 'things exist supremely' is subtly

- 1** Begins by discussing the central image in the first passage, working with specific textual detail rather than setting up a more abstract or theme-based approach.
- 2** Describes the poet's use of tone and links this to the overall view being presented by the poem.
- 3** Makes brief connections with the other two set passages and establishes some of the wider concerns to be addressed by the response.

- 4 Shows understanding of the poem's complexity, leading to a sophisticated interpretation.
- 5 Transitions smoothly to a discussion of passage 2 through noting a textual connection.
- 6 Continues to make connections between the passages.
- 7 Engages closely with and 'unpacks' the metaphor. The adverb 'whimsically' incorporates the poet's use of tone into the analysis.
- 8 Draws back from the close textual detail of the previous paragraph to make a wider comment on the poet's view and values, developing the interpretation.



undercut in this poem, which is itself a piece of 'austere prose' and which, self-reflexively, meditates on the acts of thinking and writing. 4 The poet's mind here turns in on itself, inhabiting an in-between time (neither one day nor the next) and space ('between poplars ... and inky she-oaks') to reflect not so much on 'things' as on the acts of perceiving and creating.

Characteristically for Wallace-Crabbe, even a serious poem such as 'The Swing' has its element of playfulness, in this case created by the juxtaposition of the childlike activity of being on a swing in a park with the very adult time of midnight and the abstract deliberations on 'imperfect syntax', 'a physicist's clarity' and 'fugal elaboration'. A child's innocence and an adult's worldly scepticism are delicately balanced. A similar fusion of the child and the adult is found in 'Reality', 5 in which the persona is 'a lost boy in another body': simultaneously the young boy looking across the boat at his father, and the mature poet (at a similar age at the time of the poem's publication – 'fifty-odd' – to that of his father in the poem) recollecting the scene. This poem, too, dwells on the desire to capture a moment and ends with a sense of loss and inadequacy. In this case, the moment is a remembered one, and memory's fragile nature is as much the subject of the poem as 'reality' is.

Indeed, as in 'The Swing', what are felt and imagined are, in many ways, more 'real' than solid 'things'. 6 The metaphor 'the dumb tides of memory' likens memory to the water, a formless medium that shifts back and forth, escaping human control. Metaphorically, the flathead are fragments of experience that lie within memory and that we seek to 'capture' in our conscious minds. 7 Whimsically, the poet suggests that the fish are 'dreaming of capture', whereas it is those in the boat who dream of capturing the fish, just as the poet 'dreams' of writing a poem that can capture a memory. The poem ends as 'memory / let[s] you go'; a sense that something has evaded capture, like a fish slipping out of a fisherman's clutches, leaves the reader with a feeling of loss. Yet, the poem creates a compelling childhood image, full of the sights and sounds of being on the water and the fine, often painterly details that bring the scene to life – the boat named 'La Mouette' (the seagull) 'bobbing lightly', the father 'peering' from under a 'tennis eyeshade', the town of Mt Martha in the distance appearing to rest 'on the shallow amber' of the beach.

There is a paradox, then, that runs through Wallace-Crabbe's poetry: a disavowal of poetry's capacity to represent experience, alongside the poems' frequently rich sensory imagery that speaks to a life lived both sensually and imaginatively. 8

The scepticism of the early poem 'The Swing' never quite goes away, but in the middle and later poems there is a stronger sense of the pleasure that can be found in simple existence. 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place' begins with a searching question – 'what do we live for?' – and at times hints elegiacally at the hopelessness of even asking about 'something which is / slipping away beneath us': 'the answer being there is plainly no / solution after all'. As a counterweight, though, the poem's imagery invokes the sensual, rejecting the elegiac for the blissfully serene:

A Wednesday, then, sunbeatenly soft
and otherwise erotic as peaches or
Indian turtledoves ...

As the next line suggests, this imagery has an 'undercurrent of muddlement': 'sunbeaten' usually connotes harshness, not softness; the combination of peaches and Indian turtledoves is incongruous. **9** This, the poem suggests, is simply the muddle of life; there might not be a 'solution' but there is humour (an 'unravelling which I could not ravel') and desire ('we eke them out warmly, / ardently'). And, perhaps above all, there is art, that human need to 'brush over heaven ... and call it art'. The tone here is partly flippant, as if art is no more than a superficial 'brush over', a mere diversion with no real substance. In other poems, though, the love of art comes through more strongly. In 'Now That April's Here', for instance, the abundance of the 'pastelled, peagreen, purplish-pink' flowers of spring is characterised as 'Vivaldiesque agitation'; the allusion to the baroque composer Vivaldi, most famous perhaps for the Spring concerto in the *Four Seasons*, suggests that, at least in Italy, cultural profusion matches that of the natural world. **10** Even in 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place', the structure of the poem, beginning with 'what do we live for?' and ending with 'call it art', suggests that art is more significant than a simple decoration or a means of keeping spiritual truths at a distance.

In Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, art might not provide an 'answer' or 'outline the world with a physicist's clarity', but at the very least it provides a means to make an enquiry. **11** And poetry, like memory, creates the possibility of representing a moment in time, if not with scientific exactness, then at least with something of the sensual qualities of lived experience: of things seen and heard, felt and apprehended, like a shoal of flathead lying just beneath the surface. As time advances and the sense that 'everything slips away too soon' (in 'At the Clothesline') intensifies, **12** these seemingly isolated acts of

- 9** Works with the language of passage 3 in detail.
- 10** Shows knowledge of the poet's wider body of work through detailed reference to another set poem, making a connection with passage 3 and illustrating a different aspect of the treatment of art.
- 11** Makes a broader statement about the poet's concerns and presents an interpretation of the poetry that follows logically from the discussion.
- 12** A brief reference to another of the set poems and an effective short quote helps to ground these concluding comments on the views and values presented in the poetry.



13 The conclusion draws together the evidence considered and points made in the body paragraphs, without presenting a simple summary.



stasis and reflection, of passing 'from dark to light' and back again on the threshold of midnight, or of 'dreaming', take on more weight and importance. 13 In Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, these are moments when language, for all its slipperiness, holds still, and something elusive is 'captured'.

Other approaches and ideas

The notes below identify further connections between the three poems, as well as some other possible approaches to writing on them.

- This response focuses on the idea of 'capture' and the question (often explored in Wallace-Crabbe's poetry) of whether a poem, or art more generally, can truthfully represent human experience. An alternative response could refer in more detail to a number of the other poems set for study, including 'In Light and Darkness', 'The Thing Itself' and 'At the Clothesline'. Although the set passages should be used as the basis for the response, the response can (and should) 'flip out' to other poems set for study to show knowledge of the author's work as a whole.
- The poet's use of language is not a close focus of this response but would be another useful area to explore. Wallace-Crabbe often uses a mix of high and low language registers, and his use of the vernacular (e.g. 'we sort of know' in 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place') juxtaposed with more formal or specialised language is a feature of his work. The use of humour in Wallace-Crabbe's poetry is often closely linked to the shifts between language registers.
- This response essentially works through the three set poems in turn, making brief connections between them. A different approach could be to move back and forth between the first two poems, considering how they deal with the concept of capturing experience (one in the present, the other in the past) through form, language and memory.
- The most recent poem, 'The Rescue Will Not Take Place', could be read as a negative summing up – 'the answer being there is plainly no / solution' – of what has gone before. The quest for 'solutions', in other words, is hopeless. Alternatively, its affirmation that 'we eke [our lives] out warmly' could be read as a positive conclusion: despite all the loss in life, we continue to hope, and to make art.