

Text B

'The Woman Who Almost Made It To The Moon' by Jennifer Harrison was published in *The Australian Poetry Journal* in 2018. Harrison is an Australian poet living in Melbourne, Victoria.

I wanted to see that strange light those scalloped rocks
and pristine human footprints I wanted to stand below
not above all others to feel the humble dream of space

in Moscow in 1960 the Russians were training women
and the NASA Life Sciences Committee was happy enough
to take us on for the Lovelace training¹ 75 tests in the first week

they injected my ear with iced water until the ceiling spun
I guess you'd call that torture now but it was nothing then
Compared to the tilt table how it spun you around around

Until nausea made a maze of the examiners' faces
I needed less oxygen per minute than the average astronaut
so maybe cost per pound we females should have been

the ones to go to fly that first silvery rocket
and in the isolation chamber well I floated
in a small dark swimming pool 10ft in diameter soundproofed

8-inch thick steel walls so many unbroken
hours I don't know if I woke or slept or if I outlasted the men
I was told I was top of the class and still my wings were token

¹ Lovelace's Woman in Space Program was a privately-funded but short-lived project to test female pilots for astronaut fitness in the early 1960s.

Text B – Poetry

Jennifer Harrison – ‘The Woman Who Almost Made it to the Moon’

Possible readings

There are many different readings that could be successfully presented of this poem. A candidate could construct a reading based around a theme or idea in the text or by applying a lens.

One strategy would be to apply a gendered lens to the poem. A gendered reading might discuss the different criteria by which society judged men and women or the oppositions suggested by ideas of humility and success, freedom and entrapment, the scientific and the emotional or the natural and constructed worlds. This gendered lens may also look at the feelings of resignation that the female persona appears to have towards her disappointment and lack of success despite being ‘top of the class’ and how this reflects the history of the place of women in society. Her feelings that her ‘wings were token’ could contribute to a reading that explores these ideas about the position of women in society. A feminist reading may focus more upon the way society or the patriarchy operates to oppress or suppress the aspirations of women.

Candidates might also read the poem as an exploration of the idea of space. This reading might note the contrast with the poet’s description of ‘the humble dream of space’ and ideas in society about space being unattainable or an extravagant dream. Other readings might look at the nostalgic elements of the poem, oppositions created between hope and despair, to be ‘top of the class’ while wanting ‘to stand below not above all others’ and the joy the persona found in the training despite it being ‘torture now’.

Close textual analysis

The title of a poem is often a good place to start in an analysis, it can be used to position a reader or a framing device. The title of this poem is significant in that it could position a reader to have a degree of sympathy for the persona at the outset, through the use of ‘almost’. The persona is not named, and the title refers to her by her gender; she is constructed as a representation of women rather than an individual. This could contribute to a gendered or feminist reading that explores ideas about women in society and their place in the technological or scientific world. The title also describes what the woman has failed to do rather than succeeded at. This could also be used to further a gendered or feminist reading.

The use of the first person and a persona could be read as a tool to encourage empathy in a reader or perhaps create a more personal story, ironic given the persona’s lack of identity. The poem begins with ‘I wanted’ and ends with ‘I was told’ – this could be read as a removal of agency and furthers the idea that a woman’s place in society is at odds with their aspirations or desires.

Candidates could analyse the reasons and justifications given by the persona about the need for women in the space program. The reasons are logical and reflect acumen: the ‘cost per pound’ of women would be more economical because they ‘use less oxygen’ than men. She

also succeeds at the trials or ‘torture’, further reinforcing the logical assumption that women should be in the space program. This logic, strength and reason could also be read as a rejection or resistance to the stereotypical representation of women as weak or emotional, as seen in the first stanza in the persona’s ‘dream of space’ and ‘strange light’ which are much more emotive terms.

The disjointed structure and lack of punctuation in the poem may suggest a resistance to the patriarchy and the dominant structure and presentation of the poetic form. It could also be seen as a representation of the spinning, ‘nausea’ and ‘tilt’ that the persona had to endure as a part of her training. The lack of clear structure may also be read as a representation of the lack of logic and reasoning behind her exclusion from the program, or perhaps as an expression of her stream of consciousness. This stream of consciousness may be something like the thoughts experienced by the persona in the isolation tank for ‘so many unbroken / hours’.

The descriptions of the gruelling tasks and the tests that the persona had to undergo are not in a negative way. She describes these events in a nostalgic and resigned manner, ‘I guess you’d call that torture now – but it was nothing then’. The resignation is further demonstrated by phrases such as ‘we...should have been / the ones to go’ and scepticism in ‘I was told I was top of the class’ rather than she *was* top of the class.

The last lines of the poem are significant in the exploration of the ideas foregrounded in the poem about the position of women in society and the space program. Despite being ‘top of the class’, she finds that her ‘wings were token’. This line might be read as a demonstration of the place of women in society and a voice for those that were oppressed or held back from achieving the dreams.

Linguistic, stylistic and critical terminology

The typographical gaps and ‘space’ in the poem could be interpreted as representative of space itself or the space left by the persona’s aspirations and ambition. They could also be interpreted as an ideological space or gap left by the position of women in the space program. When read aloud, as poetry is meant to be, it could lead to a disjointedness or a ‘stop start’ rhythm, a disruption in the natural order. Candidates could also explore these ideas.

Strong responses could discuss the use of enjambment and the ways in which it contributes to the disjointed structure. It is not enough to merely identify the enjambment used in the poem; a good response should discuss the ways it contributes to the meaning. For example, phrases such as ‘but it was nothing then / compared to the tilt table’ contribute to the theme or idea of a loss of equilibrium or internal confusion by being spread across two lines.

Candidates may also discuss language choices that the poet has made in order to explore ideas in the poem. Terms like ‘spun’, ‘tilt’ or ‘floated’ all allude to a loss of equilibrium, the feeling of being out of control or being in space. There is also a use of light and dark in the poem and candidates may note the poem begins by discussing the persona’s hope as a ‘strange light’ and ends with her floating in a ‘small dark swimming pool’ which could represent her aspirations becoming stagnant in contrast to her hope in the first stanza.

Contextual considerations

Candidates should consider closely the contextual information provided at the beginning of the extract. Harrison published this poem in 2018, very recently, whereas the temporal setting is in America during the 1960s. These two contexts have vastly different values and dominant ideas. Strong candidates should be able to discuss this in the context of their reading.

Candidates may mention the poet's gender and how that might contribute to the tacit criticism and resistance of the patriarchy and treatment of women in the space program. Many candidates were able to explore the idea of a revisionist expression of the 1960s experience. That is, the experience of women during that time through the eyes of a contemporary poet. Given that the poet is Australian and the space program was American, candidates may note that the poem is likely a contemporary commentary on the events of the setting and thus may represent an ideological comment on the position of women in American society at the time.

Question 1 Text B: Sample response one

Gendered or feminist readings are a popular choice in the Close Reading section of the exam but can be applied incorrectly. This candidate demonstrates a good understanding of a feminist lens and has applied it effectively to the poem. The structure of this response is appropriate and allows the candidate to develop a convincing interpretation of the poem. The candidate also has a sound understanding of poetic techniques and is able to explain the effect of these techniques on the ideas being conveyed. This response is a good example of a candidate that has clear expression that has not used excessive jargon and complicated terms.

The lens through which a text is read can influence the meaning found within it. Jennifer Harrison's monologue poem 'The Woman Who Almost Made it to The Moon' (2018), can be read through a feminist lens in order to highlight the plight of the female persona in her seemingly patriarchal world. The first person point of view enables an intimate insight into the experiences of women in the 1960s society, as the persona constructs a narrative recounting her treatment in the 'Lovelace Women in Space Program.' The retelling follows her from beginning where she is hopeful, to the end, where she realises that she has been objectified to create a façade of inclusiveness for the academic sphere in the 1960s. The feminist lens allows readers to embrace her femininity and sympathise with the female experience.

The choice of a female persona, when read through a feminist lens, can be interpreted to be a social statement as Harrison gives a voice to women who lived in the 1960s, particularly those who tried to establish themselves in the academic sphere. The poem begins with the unnamed persona stating "I wanted to see that strange light". In starting off the poem this way, Harrison gives power to the female persona by enabling her to express her hopes and dreams. The application of a feminist lens promotes the idea that her voice is a form of power, through which she can gain autonomy and control over the narrative. ~~This also gives voice to~~ This is reinforced when the persona states, 'I wanted to stand below not above all others'. The repetition of 'I wanted', when read through a feminist lens, expresses the power of the woman as she is afforded the choice in her decisions. Harrison gives power to women as she implies that ~~women~~ they should take on the responsibility of making decisions

This is a clear description of the lens being applied as well as the reading being made.

This introduction includes an acknowledgement of context.

The candidate gives an indication of the ideas that will be used to support the reading.

This is an insightful interpretation of the poem within its context and a correct application of the feminist lens.

Here is a good example of a candidate that understands a feminist lens can be about power, rather than merely discussing gender.

which serve their own hopes and dreams, a sentiment which disagrees with patriarchal values. The careful choice of persona by Harrison can be read as a feminist statement, when a reading feminist reading strategy is applied as she gives power to the female voice.

Furthermore, the feminist reading strategy shines light upon the subsequent objectification of the persona, as she is treated like a commodity. It becomes apparent that the persona is nothing but a test subject to the scientists around her as she realises, "I guess you'd call that torture now". Her treatment by the scientists in the program ultimately dehumanises her as they fail to treat her with dignity and instead 'torture' her in the name of science. The direct address to the reader in the word 'you'd' promotes a sympathetic reading of the persona as it creates a sense of intimacy. Again, she is objectified as she notes, "so maybe, cost per round, we females should have been the ones to go". This reasoning takes away from the fact that females women should have been the ones to go because of their personal traits, and instead, suggests that women are only considered as an economic factor. It also promotes the idea that there is a separation between men and women as either one or the other must be chosen. A feminist lens highlights the poor treatment of the persona in the name of science, as she is dehumanised to become an object to those around her.

Similarly, the feminist reading lens highlights the idea that there is a competition between men and women, and a consequential divide between them. This sentiment contradicts the feminist values of unity and equality between the sexes, which is why it becomes significant when a feminist lens is applied. This first comes to light when the persona states "I don't know... if I outlasted the men". The binary distinction between 'I', representing all the females in the program and 'men', indicates unrest between the two groups. The persona is concerned with outlasting all the men, rather than simply outlasting everyone. A feminist lens enables readers to have an understanding of why the persona feels this way. This reading strategy promotes the idea

This is a good discussion of the use of the poetic technique of persona.

Strong responses will include clear topic sentences that reinforce the reading/thesis and make the topic of the paragraph clear to a marker/reader.

This candidate has effectively incorporated the quote into their discussion rather than using a large chunk.

They have also explained the effect of the textual example they have included.

This response demonstrates good control of essay structure. The concluding sentences of each paragraph reinforces the reading.

The candidate has clear expression that includes appropriate vocabulary. The use of flowery and overly complex jargon is not always effective.

that she, in a male dominated sphere, feels inferior and, thus, feels the need to prove herself as equal, or better than, the men around her. This effort is to no avail as, although she "was told I was top of the class," her "wings were token." Here, it is clear that the 'competition' was never a fair fight as her standing at the top of the class was a 'token' used to promote a façade of inclusivity in the academic sphere in the 1960s. The personal account exposes this façade as the persona reveals the patriarchy that exists in her world, which is particularly evident through the application of a feminist reading strategy as it gives power to her experience as a woman.

Ultimately, Harrison writes this poem as a social statement about the treatment of women at the hands of the academic sphere. A feminist reading strategy empowers the idea as it shines light upon the way in which Harrison constructed the text to be a feminist text. The choice of persona gives power to the female voice as she retells her experiences of objectification in the 1960s, and enables an intimate depiction of the plight of women at the hands of the patriarchy.

Here the candidate shows an insightful understanding of the text by linking the ideas and techniques in the poem to the context of the setting.

In the conclusion, a strong response will restate the reading being made in a succinct and clear manner.

Question 1 Text B: Sample response two

This response focuses upon the impact the poem has on the candidate and its relevance to the contemporary context. The candidate has effectively identified that the poem is retrospective, with the context of production differing from the context of the setting. Multiple lenses have been applied to the poem, but the reading centres around a generic lens in the thesis and introduction. The gendered lens that is also applied expands upon many of the themes explored and builds upon some of the ideas presented through the generic reading.

'The Woman Who Almost Made it to The Moon', a poem written by Australian poet Jennifer Harrison, and published in 2018, is an insightful, captivating and thought provoking recount of a female persona's experience in a space training program. When I read this poem through a generic reading lens, paying close attention to key poetic devices I am able to see how such construction is crucial in developing and enhancing the meaning of the poem. I have interpreted the overarching theme of the poem to be the contrast between ones expectations and reality and the grit, strength and determination required to achieve one's dreams. I have also been able to read this poem with a gender focused reading to identify the gender discrimination evident in this time period of the 1960s and the persona's struggle as a woman in a male dominated profession. Overall I regard this poem to reveal important ideas about one's self, goals, reality and gender issues, being a truly captivating and influential read.

This is an interesting and effective lens to apply to this poem. A reading that focuses on genre allows for a detailed examination of techniques.

Here the candidate outlines the ideas that are going to be discussed in the body of their essay.

While your opinion on how captivating or influential a text is not required, it can add to the discussion if linked to the ideas being discussed.

By closely analysing this poem through with a generic reading practice I have been able to see how elements such as the structure, form, title and punctuation are influential in enhancing such themes. The title of the piece 'The Woman Who Almost Made It To the Moon' in itself sets up our expectation for the poem by informing us of the events to come. The focus on the woman draws our attention to her and the female dominated stance that pervades the poem, however the use of the word almost creates a sense of reality and almost evokes an empathetic response for the dream that never was. The poem is a free verse form written in the structure of small three line paragraphs. The word spacing within the lines is interesting and

This is a good example of first person point of view being used effectively.

An analysis and discussion of the title of a text is an effective, but often overlooked, analytical tool.

experimental as there are large gaps between the words, "compared to the tilt table

how it spun around
around".

This acts to create a sense of confusion and disrupt the natural flow of the words, causing the reader to feel a strain as they have to search for the words and work to find the answers, much like the strain the female persona endured in her intensive training to search out her dream and work for her goals.

The punctuation use throughout the poem features enjambment. While there is an absence of any formal or typical punctuation marks, the words are all enjambed throughout causing the words to flow together and run into one another, consequently creating an elongated sense of time. The purpose of this is to emphasise the tiresome, drawn out and strenuous battle of the persona as she fights through the bitter reality to reach her goals. It may also be seen to mirror the sense of time in space, endlessly floating on and on for eternity. It is by analysing such aspects of the poem under close examination that may otherwise be overlooked, that I am able to see how they are significant to contributing to the meaning about the strength and determination required to achieve your goals.

The overarching theme that I have deduced from this poem is about the strength and determination required to achieve one's dreams, and that such aspirations can often be cloaked by deception and turn out to be completely different reality. The poem begins with the persona enthusiastically expressing her goals and ultimate desires of being an astronaut and experiencing the wonders and beauties of space. "I wanted to see that strange light those scaphopod rocks and the pristine human footprints ... to feel the humble dream of space." The imagery used as she describes the space landscape paints a picture of beauty almost like a painting or a piece of art. The word choice of pristine has connotations of clean, tidy and well organised, something presented up to expectations, as is her goal, however when juxtaposed with the word dream,

The candidate has effectively discussed the way the structure impacts on the ideas being conveyed in the poem.

The effect of the structure on the reader is also clearly explained.

Enjambment is a popular poetic technique that candidates can easily identify. It is not enough to simply identify; you need to explain the effect of the technique, like this response has done.

It is important to link ideas back to the thesis and here we can see this has been effectively done.

Here the candidate includes a thoughtful discussion of imagery and connotative language and the way it contributes to the ideas being expressed.

this contrasts her expectations with the reality that her goal is unattainable and merely a figment of her imagination. This proves the conflicting nature between dreams and expectations with reality which is not always as we hope.

However we also see the great strength and determination that the woman exhibits in her fight to achieve her goals. She undergoes gruelling and physically taxing endurance training that pushes her to her limits "they injected my ear with iced water until the ceiling spun. I guess you'd call that torture now but it was nothing then compared to the tilt table how it spun you around around until nausea made a maze of the examiners' faces." This very vivid and graphic imagery depicts a very life like scenario that is easy to imagine as the reader, thus we are able to engage with the persona's struggle though such horrendous tasks. The word choice of torture has connotations of hell, evil and the devil, using such hellish imagery to liken her experience to torture itself, really emphasising the pain. The repetition of around again emphasises the extreme nature of these activities and the personification of nausea shows the overwhelming sense of illness that has taken over the persona. Despite all of this, the persona shows strength, courage and dedication and gets through this inhumane training, motivated by the prospects of reaching her dreams, which is an admirable quality that I personally can relate to and appreciate.

I have also read this poem through a gender reading lens to identify the gender discrimination and inequalities in this poem as well as the personas admirable strength to overcome these gender expectations. Knowing that the poem was written from a modern context as a reflection upon 1960s society, we can assume that gender equality in the world of this poem is not as far progressed as it is in our 21st century world today. There is evidently a male favoured bias in this male dominated professional field of space exploration as shown when the persona states that "the NASA Life Sciences Committee was happy enough to take us on

Here we can see a very clear link between the points being made and the original thesis.

It is better to include smaller quotations embedded into your expression and discussion. This longer quote is relevant but could have been broken down into smaller parts for greater effect.

Here we can see a good discussion of the language employed by the poet and its relevance to the themes.

This candidate has framed their discussion within their personal response. This is not always encouraged but, in this case, does support the ideas being discussed.

The candidate has chosen to include a second lens through which to interpret the text.

Context is an important consideration in this text and the separation between the context of production and the setting has been identified and discussed.

for the Lovelace training." This statement with the word choice of happy enough suggests that there was a degree of reluctance and hesitation to take on a female space program, assumably due to the conservative gender ideologies of the time.

This is a perceptive comment to make and demonstrates a sophisticated engagement with the text.

However to rebutt this idea the persona makes reference to the ways in which they as women were beneficial in that field, as to show their strength and elevate them. "I needed less oxygen per minute than the average astronaut so maybe cost per pound we females should have been the ones to go". Here the persona uses experimental evidence to back up the fact that as women it would have been a smarter and more economical choice for them to be the first astronauts, subsequently in doing so she draws our attention to the misinformed and hypocritical gender discrimination. In addition the persona shows her strength and feminist attitude again at the end of the poem stating "I don't know if I woke or slept or if I outlasted the men I was told I was top of the class." This shows her preoccupation with beating the men and becoming the best, as to rise above and shatter gender stereotypes. ~~There is an~~ When read with a gender lens we can see that there is an evident power struggle between the men and women in the poem, which we despise as a modern day audience who value gender equality. However the continuous strength and dedication that the female persona shows in her fight for equality is to be admired and is truely inspirational to all women who are still today fighting for gender equality in male dominated professions.

The candidate is drifting away from a close analysis and deconstruction of the text to a discussion of the themes. This discussion is supported effectively by textual references.

Here the candidate links the themes and ideas being explored to the contemporary context.

This poem has opened my eyes to many new ideas and possibilities that I would have not previously considered if not for my deep analysis of such literature. It has helped me see, through multiple reading practises, that we should never allow ourselves be blindsighted by our expectations or false realities or settle for less than we deserve. We all have strength within us and if you fight for what you believe in and what you wish to achieve in life then you deserve to have all of your dreams fullfilled.

The conclusion states the relevance and impact of the poem on the candidate and makes links to the contemporary context.