The Wasps' Nest
Two aerial tigers,
Striped in ebony and gold
And resonantly, savagely a-hum,
Have lately come
To my mail-box's metal hold
And thought
With paper and with mud
Therein to build
Their insubstantial and their only home.
Neither the sore displeasure
Of the U.S. Mail
Nor all my threats and warnings
Will avail
To turn them from their hummed devotions.
And I think
They know my strength,
Can gauge
The danger of their work:
And yet they seem
Too deeply and too fiercely occupied
To bother to attend.
Perhaps they sense
I'll never deal the blow,
For, though I am not in nor of them,
Still I think I know
What it is like to live
In an alien and gigantic universe, a stranger,
Building the fragile citadels of love
On the edge of danger.
James L. Rosenberg

Student answer

'The Wasps' Nest' by James L. Rosenberg initially appears to deal with an undesired nest of wasps located in the narrator's mailbox. The uneven syntax of the poem and the clipped line length convey a disjointed, broken rhythm as he explores the tension in his relationship with the insects. Power becomes a dominant concern, and along with simple diction and vivid imagery, the poem's free-verse structure provides a means for him to convey an intimate, sceptical tone. By the end of the poem, however, there is a dramatic development in the speaker's attitude; he comes to understand their mutual sense of being 'alien' in a 'gigantic universe'. As a result of this, in the final lines, Rosenberg is able to convey a message that we need empathy and understanding in order to survive in this unforgiving world. Throughout the poem Rosenberg describes a setting that seems characterised by danger and threat, in which human and animal creatures exist in a fraught relationship with each other. He uses the adverb 'savagely' to describe the arrival of the wasps in his mailbox and comments on the 'sore displeasure of the U.S. Mail'. The word 'mail' is
perhaps a play on the word ‘male’, hinting that the tension between human and animal is a largely masculine one. In this initial section of the poem rhyme and line length draw attention to the vulnerability of the wasps. In contrast to the ‘metal hold’ of the mailbox, their home is built ‘with paper and mud’ and is described as ‘insubstantial and their only home.’ This is one of the longest lines in the poem and coupled with the fact that it comes at the end of the poem’s first sentence, reinforces their precarious position. In spite of this sense of danger, the wasps are portrayed as focused and determined - oblivious to the position they are in. Rosenberg repeats the onomatopoeic word ‘hum’ in line 14 - this time to describe their ‘hummed devotions’, and the use of ‘devotions’ conveys an almost religious sense of commitment to their task. This stands in ironic contrast, of course, to the danger we know they are in. The speaker says that he suspects ‘they know my strength’ and reminds us that ‘one blow could crush them.’ And yet they continue regardless. At this point the poem seems concerned with the survival instinct and the determination that exists in nature to persist against the odds. Rosenberg emphasizes the mutual tension between the speaker and the wasps with the use of pronouns. He sets ‘my’, ‘I’ and ‘their’ or ‘they’re’ as a means to distinguish between them and reinforce their opposition. The sense of conflict is further emphasized through his comment that ‘one blow could crush them’ and ‘I am not their friend.’ The half rhyme in the couplet here accentuates the power he feels, and his sense of emotional distance from them - further reinforcing the danger in which the wasps are placed. In this respect the wasps’ actions seem almost futile as the speaker is clearly in a position of power and control, able to destroy them as and when he likes. However, at this point in the poem there is a transition. The speaker makes clear his distinction from the wasps with the statement ‘I am not in nor of them’, literally identifying the fact that they are of different species. And yet his sense of difference from them is precisely what causes him to ‘never deal the blow’. He expresses an understanding of them. This understanding is reflected in the change of tone; previously the narrator was concerned with ‘threats and warnings’, whereas towards the end of the poem he is far more understanding. He says that ‘I think I know what it is like to live / In an alien and gigantic universe.’ In some respects this shift has been foreshadowed in a subtle way from the beginning. Describing them with the metaphorical description ‘serial tigers’ in the first line conveys a degree of admiration, perhaps even awe, and this is exaggerated with the reference to ‘ebony and gold’ in his portrayal of their stripes. These colours suggest beauty more than they do evil. Rosenberg uses equally positive diction towards the end to indicate that the wasps’ existence is not futile; he describes their homes as ‘fragile citadels of love’. The metaphorical term ‘citadel’ lends them a kind of strength in contrast to their ‘insubstantial .. only home’ of line 9. In this way, although remaining ‘on the edge of danger’, the wasps’ determination reminds the speaker of his own attitude towards love as a kind of power.

The free verse structure of Rosenberg’s poem presents an informal speaking voice trying to make sense of issues to do with power, the relationship we have with nature and a sense of alienation from the world. In a way a common thread that runs throughout is one of paradox; the wasps are vulnerable and yet - like ‘tigers’ - powerful. In reverse, the speaker is able to ‘deal the blow’ but knows what it means to ‘live .. a stranger.’ As the lines are both ended stopped and run on, so the diction and imagery in the poem weaves through these contradictory ideas to conclude that fragility and strength are indivisible from each other, and essential components to our experience of love. I find this an intriguing and compelling idea.

Questions to guide your comments and marks:

1. **Focus on Criterion A: Understanding and interpretation**
   - Does the student demonstrate accurate understanding of the content of the poem?
   - Are points always supported with detailed reference back to the text?
   - Has s/he provided points of interpretation as well as points of analysis?
   - Do you find the interpretation put forward by the student persuasive?

2. **Focus on Criterion B: Appreciation of the writer’s choices**
   - Does the student display identify a range of features of language, form, and style?
   - Does s/he explore the way in which these techniques convey meaning and have an impact or effect?
   - Is there as much sensitivity to matters or technique and style as there is content?
3. **Focus on Criterion C: Organization**
   - Does the response show evidence of organization in the form of paragraphs?
   - Has the SL student answered the guiding questions?
   - Are ideas developed in a meaningful way e.g. through a central line of argument or thesis?

4. **Focus on Criterion D: Language**
   - Do you think the commentary is generally accurately written?
   - Do you think the commentary is written in an appropriate register?
   - Does the student employ a variety of sentence structures and vocabulary that suggests confidence with the task?
   - Are ideas connected - both between sentences and between paragraphs?
   - Is the language of the essay clear?

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**Examiner’s Marks**

**Standard Level guided literary analysis**

**Criterion A: Understanding and interpretation 4**
The candidate demonstrates good understanding of the extract, exploring aspects such as the presentation of character and setting, action and theme, and the relationships between them. Points of interpretation are generally convincing, although in places there is room for more detailed reference back to the text. Both the guiding questions, one on characterization and one on structure, are prominently addressed in the commentary.

**Criterion B: Appreciation of the writer’s choices 4**
The candidate demonstrates sensitivity to aspects such as word choice, syntax, imagery, and some aspects of metaphor, as well as some ways in which these features support the meaning. There is a need for more consideration of components such as narrative voice and tone. At times there is a tendency towards description in place of detailed analysis of the impact of literary features.

**Criterion C: Organization 4**
For the most part ideas are organized coherently in paragraphs and there is a sense of overall control. The candidate takes aspects of setting, character, and structure as focal topics for the paragraphs, although there are elements of repetition and the analysis does not perhaps develop as logically it might.

**Criterion D: Language 5**
The language is in places quite articulate, though not consistently so. The candidate employs a variety of diction and syntax and generally maintains an appropriate register.

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**Higher Level literary commentary**

**Criterion A: Understanding and interpretation 5**
The candidate explores a range of ideas in the poem, including the presentation of the speaker, the wasps, and setting as well as thematic concerns to do with power, security, and love. The reading is clear, consistent, and persuasive, reflective of confidence about the material and a sense of independent engagement.
Criterion B: Appreciation of the writer's choices 4
The candidate demonstrates very good understanding of a range of literary features and their effects. Diction, imagery, pronouns, metaphor and aspects of ironic voice are identified and explored. There is more to say about the significance of form and structure, although the candidate is alive to the shifts in tone and the development of the poem's language.

Criterion C: Organization 4
The commentary is effectively organized, each paragraph being devoted to one central idea. Although a line of argument is clearly declared, the structure doesn't quite do justice to it, and there are one or two moments of repetition, or where the logic goes slightly awry.

Criterion D: Language 5
The candidate writes clearly and effectively. Confidence in word choice and syntax is demonstrated consistently, and although the language is not overly sophisticated, the essay is accurate, concise, and cogent.