Response to *Slavery Today*: Specimen paper for IB English A: Language and Literature for first examinations in 2021

The text, an appeal from the *Free the Slaves* website, is a contemporary (2017) text that intends to provide information on the nature and extent of slavery in the modern world, and in turn petitions readers to take action to bring slavery to an end. The text aims to persuade readers to act to end slavery, suggesting that slavery practices are globally widespread, if often hidden, illegal and unethical. The text appeals to the moral sensibility of the reader whose action, particularly if they proselytize to others in their communities, can bring an end to slavery. The text is intended for a broad demographic, although the relative complexity of some of the language suggests that the text is mainly intended for an English language reader.

The appeal to persuade readers to act to fight slavery is constructed through the sequential structure of the text. Interestingly, the text, from a website, is hypertextual, and contains judiciously situated hyperlinks such as ‘trafficking and slavery fact sheet’, ‘take action’, and ‘free the slaves info kit’. Assuming readers have the digital literacy to recognize these hyperlinks for what they are, it is possible that the text can be read in a range of semi-autonomous ways in which readers have agency to determine how to interact with the text in non-linear ways. However, such reading practices depend on a digital platform which is not reproduced in the physical ‘hard’ text presented for examination. This notwithstanding, the text has a logically developed structure, intended for sequential reading, initially providing information on slavery, expanding readers’ understanding, and then using this to persuade them to act to end slavery.

Following conventional reading practices, the reader may first notice the ‘free the slaves’ icon situated in the upper left of the website’s banner. The icon has a resemblance to an unlocked padlock which is constructed by interlocking fists apparently squeezing together. The fists, often historically and symbolically associated with challenges to authority, grip one another, unlocking the padlock, and suggest that by working together there is the possibility to free those who are currently enslaved. Immediately underneath the icon, the orange or sepia coloured text, ‘our model for freedom’, suggests that the rest of the text will provide a solution to the problem of slavery. In case the reader is inclined to think slavery is a problem of the past, the text that follows, ‘slavery today’, in bold and enlarged font, has the prosodic effect of ‘shouting out’ to the reader and makes clear that the issue is contemporary and urgent.

Arguably the key visual text in this multimodal text is the photograph of what one can infer to be slaves engaged in monotonous physical labour. The low angle shot of the camera reveals a cloudless sky, in which slaves are working with little protection from (readers may interpolate) a hot sun. In contrast to the ‘free the slaves’ icon, with its interlocking fists, the hands of the slaves are foregrounded in the shot as they pass bricks to one another. The photograph anchors the parallel written text in which readers are told that ‘slaves are forced to work, without pay, under the threat of violence. They cannot walk away.’ Slaves, generally, have no agency, and thus the slaves in the juxtaposed photograph, readers may assume, are compelled to labour.

Whilst the text is, ultimately, persuasive, this persuasion in built on information. The text is clearly organised with bold sub-headings such as ‘slavery is everywhere’, ‘the rise of modern slavery’, and by bullet points. These paralinguistic features guide readers, developing an understanding of the global issue before inciting readers to act to fight against it.

In the section, ‘slavery is everywhere’, the reader is told about the extent of slavery in the world and is given examples of the different kinds of slavery such as ‘sex slavery’ and ‘child slavery’. The words ‘slavery’ ‘forced’ and ‘trapped’ establish a semantic field and are frequently repeated in this section to emphasize that slaves are compelled to work and are unable to free themselves. The problem of slavery is ‘everywhere’ and the use of large numbers such as ’40 million’ and ‘$150 billion’ seems authoritative and lends logos to the text. Such large numbers are notoriously difficult to comprehend, but readers understand that slavery is a problem of significant magnitude. Careful, critical readers may notice that statistical information comes from an apparently reliable source, the U.N. International Labor Organization. Nevertheless, readers are told that slavery is a ‘hidden crime’ and that statistics are ‘estimate(s)’. Thus, whilst it seems unlikely that the data is significantly erroneous, it may be sensible to exercise some scepticism.

The next section of text, ‘the rise of modern slavery’ builds on the previous section to underscore the idea that slaves are often exploited. The adjective ‘vulnerable’ is repeated in this section and readers learn, perhaps contrary to who one might think, that slavery is increasing. According to the text, global forces such as population growth, increased migration, corruption, and discrimination that is ‘widespread’ establish a sense that slaves are powerless. This idea is represented through the ways in which slaves are exploited. Readers learn in the alliterative ‘(slaves) have no police protection from predatory traffickers’ of how exploited and vulnerable slaves are. ‘Traffickers’ is repeated in this section, and the pre-modifying adjective ‘predatory’ in the noun phrase ‘predatory traffickers’ connotes a sense of slaves as prey to callous individuals and groups who intend to harm them. The idea is reinforced in the pre and post modified noun phrase ‘ruthless moneylenders who enslave them’. The section, then, characterises slaves as defenceless victims of brutal, indiscriminate others.

Following a further informative section that returns to understanding slavery in historical perspective in which slaves are described as (increasingly) ‘cheap and disposable’, the final section directly addresses readers, suggesting that they somehow share responsibility for the continuance of slavery, but arguing that their action can help ‘freeing those still trapped in bondage’. Readers are told that they are ‘connected to slavery’ but that they can ‘cure it’. Here, slavery is reified as a disease. Readers are also told that ‘slavery flows into our homes, offices, and schools through many of the products we buy’. Here, the verb ‘flows’ connotes a rapid, continual movement in which readers are, perhaps unwittingly, complicit in slavery through their consumption habits. Readers are invited to see themselves as part of the problem, assuming guilt, through synthetic personalization evidenced by the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’. Indeed, it is suggested that readers apparently embody guilt through consumption of commodities such as ‘tomatoes, tuna, shrimp, cotton, diamonds, iron, sugar, and gold’. The ethos of this section encourages readers to assume culpability for modern slavery, a problem that is represented through the semantic field of war, in which slavery is described hyperbolically in terms of a (metaphorical) ‘battle’ that we can ‘fight’. Throughout the text, there is a sense of high modality where many of the sentences are declarative. This is somewhat offset by almost demotic expressions such as ‘they cannot walk away’ and ‘call for help’, expressions that establish a sense of cosy familiarity between text and reader, buttressing the text’s persuasive function. However, in the final section, where the emphasis is on persuasion – a movement from thought (developing a concern about slavery) to action (doing something to reduce slavery) – the sentences are increasingly imperative; readers are told that they ‘need to take action’, and that they should ‘mobilize (…) family, friends, classmates, co-workers, and faith (communities)’. The text, in effect, obliges readers to act, and to encourage others to do likewise.

The reader who assumes a dominant reading position may well be persuaded by this text. It is, ultimately, important that readers are persuaded to act. Thinking that slavery is criminal, but doing nothing to counter it is, to a considerable extent, useless. Other readers, taking a negotiated or oppositional reading, may be less persuaded. It is possible, for example, to regard sex work not as slavery but as a choice. Other readers may be persuaded by the text but, suffering from compassion fatigue, may choose to do nothing. And, without political engagement, a change in attitudes and behaviour, slavery will continue, however persuasive the text may be.

*Please note, the sample paper cannot be reproduced for copyright reasons. We would draw you attention to the Free the Slaves website (*[*www.freetheslaves.net*](http://www.freetheslaves.net)*), but at the time of writing this website is unavailable.*

*A note on length: The response is 1369 words long. Clearly, there is no absolute correlation between length of response and quality. However, a good or excellent response will generally approximate to 1200 words, give or take. Although this is an estimation, it can be difficult to write a fully developed commentary where students write appreciably less than this.*