Measures of Student Learning
Performance Assessment

Grade 11 ELA
Pre-Assessment
Argument Essay: Life Stories

Context: Although India has undergone rapid economic growth in recent decades, large portions of the population remain impoverished. These people live in run-down areas that may not have proper shelter, sanitation, running water, or electricity.

Task: Read the excerpt from Katherine Boo’s article “Opening Night,” about life in the impoverished communities of Mumbai, India. Then, read the two poems by Imtiaz Dharker, which portray life in places similar to the community Boo describes. Using evidence from the texts to support your answer, write an argument essay responding to the prompt below.

Prompt

Which of the provided texts best conveys the struggles and/or triumphs of the human experience? Take into account the medium (informational text vs. poetry) and author’s craft of both texts in your response.

Guidelines

In your essay, be sure to

- establish a precise and credible position, grounded in evidence and reasoning.
- provide detailed explanations of the most important claim(s), reasons, and evidence that support and develop the position.
- analyze both explicit and inferred ideas/information from texts through interpretation of the author’s meaning and purpose.
- consistently refer to sources when appropriate.
- develop counterclaim(s) or alternate claim(s) fairly with relevant evidence.
- explain why counterclaim is less convincing than the claim.
- represent content from reading materials accurately.
- make note of gaps in information or areas where the texts leave matters uncertain when appropriate.
- order ideas and information within and across paragraphs and use appropriate transitional words/phrases in a way that clarifies the reasoning and logic of the argument.
- write a conclusion that clarifies and strengthens the position.
- use language and tone appropriate to the audience and purpose.
- demonstrate a command of standard English conventions.
from “Opening Night”

by Katherine Boo

Gautam Nagar is one of thirty-odd slums, comprising ninety thousand families, on land owned by the Airports Authority of India, in Mumbai. It is ten minutes by foot to the international terminal and is ringed by five of the city’s smartest hotels. The hotels charge two hundred to a thousand dollars a night and are enclosed by high walls and barbed-wire fences, so their interactions with Gautam Nagar are primarily airborne. Music from weddings and poolside parties drifts over. Ash from cow-dung and wood fires drifts back. And every evening at precisely six-thirty a Hyatt sign lights up red and white, its glow not quite reaching the dirty screens of two video-game consoles in a tin-roof shed.

Anna, an elderly Tamil resident of Gautam Nagar who wears his loincloths very short, opened the game parlor last year. He quickly regretted the endeavor. Profits have slipped owing to the global recession, and, like businessmen the world over, he is now repositioning: converting the front of the game room into a stall for hot fried snacks. Food hygiene is more difficult at Anna’s than it is at the Hyatt, since the air of Gautam Nagar is clotted with grit from a nearby concrete plant. So he covers his skillet with a sign, retrieved from a trash pile, that reads “Hotel InterContinental the Grand.”

The uncertain future of the games in this evolving establishment concerns Sunil, a thirteen-year-old boy who works at the airport. He supports their survival as reliably as he is able: one rupee nightly in exchange for thirty minutes of Metal Slug 3. At dusk on January 22nd, as a parade of Mumbai women visited the hotel spas to get manicured, exfoliated, and blown out for that night’s Indian première of Slumdog Millionaire, Sunil was deriving a poor return on his one-rupee entertainment outlay. “You’re dead now,” Sunil’s rival cried, banging the joystick, making the bombed-out virtual city shake. “Everyone, come and see!” Sunil attempted to rally his Metal Slug man, firing a rocket-propelled grenade at an abandoned tank that provided cover for his enemy, as boys pressed in to watch him fail.

slum (noun) a run-down area of a city that is in extremely poor condition
terminal (noun) a big building where people wait to get on planes
rupee (noun) the name of the currency used in India
joystick (noun) a handle used to control a video game
He didn’t take the crowd’s interest personally. Boys always crammed into Anna’s. One reason was Anna himself: bald on top with snarls of silver hair on the rest of his body, something the children found consistently funny. More compelling, though, were the amenities: the games, two light bulbs, and a short metal bench. Sunil’s home, in one of the many sumpy lanes behind the shop, lacked lights, water, and a place to sit, and every evening was enveloped in a stink so much worse than all the usual stinks at Gautam Nagar that people doubled over when they inhaled it. The cause was a truckload of rotting hotel food, dumped daily outside his home, which sustained three hundred feral pigs. He would have paid more than one rupee to breathe elsewhere.

Two older boys commandeered the second machine—sophisticates, with rusty bullet casings shoved into holes in their earlobes. This fashion caused infections, but was believed to be the American style.

“To kill me, you will have to do something bigger than this!”

“Take your rocket inside!”

“No, no—then they will throw that bomb.”

“Bombs? All my bombs are gone—”

“Lost. Lost.”

The sophisticates weren’t as loud as the gloater, but as they played they hogged the bench. Out of principle, Sunil rose to yank it back. This put him further behind in the scoring, but, mentally, he had already deserted the mission: a dwindling interest that had less to do with bench hogs or the gloater than with his changing relationship to Metal Slug 3. Reverberations of the crisis in the American economy had recently driven him from work he liked—collecting garbage and selling it to recyclers—into work he didn’t like. He had become a metal thief at the international airport, and now that he faced real daily dangers, without arms or armor, the rush of pretend dangers on video screens had diminished. He regretted not spending his rupee on Bomberman, the game selected by two younger boys who had taken his spot on the bench. The Bombermen had round heads and looked like toys, and circus music played when you exploded.
Worldly Indians like to call Mumbai, the financial capital, their country’s New York City. That would make the airport area, in the suburbs, its Queens. Mumbai’s Queens, though, has more glamour. Around the hotels, stands of sleek office buildings are multiplying rapidly; one of them is named simply More. Gautam Nagar is named after the eight-year-old son of a scavenger who succumbed to pneumonia after one of the periodic slum demolitions. The community consists of approximately a thousand human residents; seventeen water buffalo; goats, dogs, and pigs; and two white horses striped to look like zebras—the handiwork of a once fearsome slumlord, now gone batty. The primary industry here is the gathering of airport garbage for recycling—work made a little less miserable by expanded global markets and India’s surging GDP. Over the past five years, there were enough water bottles, earbuds, Diet Coke cans, batteries, and copies of Indian Vogue to lift the majority of families over the World Bank’s poverty line, which is currently twenty-two rupees a day in India’s cities.

Jobs at the hotels would have lifted residents far higher, but management wanted people who spoke English, not just Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Nepali, or any of the six or eight other languages spoken in the airport slums. Everyone knew that management also wanted people who were light-skinned; many Gautam Nagar residents are dark from work in the sun. Still, recycling had, over time, turned most of the slum’s tarp roofs into tin ones, under which some families had laid down ceramic-tile floors. But last fall, when bank lending slowed worldwide, construction projects stalled, and the demand for recycled materials plummeted, Gautam Nagar’s link to the global markets started pushing it backward.

“The banks in America went in a loss, then the big people went in a loss, then the scrap market in the slum areas came down, too” was how Anna, who read the Tamil-language newspapers, had explained the crisis to the residents. A kilo of empty water bottles, once worth twenty-five rupees, was now worth ten. This was how the crisis was understood.

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**Go On**

Queens (proper noun) one of the five boroughs in New York City, where two major airports are located

scavenger (noun) someone who searches through what others do not want looking for useful objects

slumlord (noun) someone who charges a lot of money to rent houses in poor condition

GDP (noun) gross domestic product; the total value of the goods and services that a country produces in one year
Sunil had entered the garbage business when he was seven or so, after his mother died of tuberculosis. His father did roadwork when it was available, then drank his wages. Sunil’s sister, Sunita, was two years younger; when he was small, he’d lost her for a week, but he had been careful not to misplace her after that. He’d shared with her the money he made roaming the airport roads with a sack, retrieving and examining the stuff that other people tossed away. An older boy, odd and constantly blinking, had been his preferred companion, and Sunil even now viewed the dustbins in the cargo area with a proprietary eye, as they had been the boys’ most profitable target.

Sunil still did not feel much like a thief. When he took a bath in an abandoned pit at the concrete-mixing plant, he pushed away the algae to inspect his reflection. The change in his profession didn’t yet show on his face: same big mouth, wide nose, problem torso. He was too small all over. Even Sunita was taller now, though he bested her in hair. While both of them got bitten by rats, and the rat bites sometimes turned into head boils, she’d recently become a baldie like Anna, because her boils had erupted with worms.

A genial sixteen-year-old neighbor, himself possessed of a worm-bald sister, had walked Sunil through his change in profession. Rather than waiting for stuff to get used up and tossed out a window, a profit-minded individual could get involved earlier in the consumption process. The older boy even offered the use of his bicycle, free, for the first burglary, if Sunil would sell to him what he obtained. “Bring me jhol” was what that boy had said: goods procured by indirect means. And so Sunil, once a lawful scavenger, became one of the new economy’s micro-saboteurs.

dustbin (noun) trash can
boil (noun) an infected, pus-filled swelling on the skin
saboteur (noun) someone who purposely damages another person’s property
“Living Space”

from *Postcards from God*

by Imtiaz Dharker

There are just not enough
straight lines. That
is the problem.
Nothing is flat
or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports
thrust off the vertical.
Nails clutch at open seams.
The whole structure leans dangerously
towards the miraculous.

Into this rough frame,
someone has squeezed
a living space

and even dared to place
these eggs in a wire basket,
fragile curves of white
hung out over the dark edge
of a slanted universe,
gathering the light
into themselves,
as if they were
the bright, thin walls of faith.

**seam** *(noun)* a line where two pieces of wood, cloth, etc. are joined together
“Blessing”

from *Postcards from God*

by Imtiaz Dharker

The skin cracks like a pod.
There never is enough water.

Imagine the drip of it,
the small splash, echo
in a tin mug,
the voice of a kindly god.

Sometimes, the sudden rush
of fortune. The municipal pipe bursts,
silver crashes to the ground
and the flow has found
a roar of tongues. From the huts,
a congregation: every man woman
child for streets around
butts in, with pots,
brass, copper, aluminium,
plastic buckets,
frantic hands,

and naked children
screaming in the liquid sun,
their highlights polished to perfection,
flashlight,
as the blessing sings
over their small bones.

**pod** *(noun)* an elongated seed, splitting open on both sides when ripe

**municipal** *(adjective)* belonging or related to the government of a town or city

**congregation** *(noun)* a group of people, usually referring to those who attend the same church