

## Exercise 1 - MCAT CARS

### Writing MCAT Questions

It's brave of Tate Britain to mount an exhibition called "Artist and Empire" when we are constantly mumbling apologies for Britain's imperial past—for wars and slavery, exploitation and looting, religious and cultural oppression. Not that this show is a celebration. By its own account it is rather an attempt to show how artists have responded to the history and ethos of empire over the last five centuries, and to address its legacy "not just in public monuments, but in social structures, culture and in the fault lines of contemporary global politics." Ambitious, no doubt. But the presentation has an uncomfortable diffidence. I went on a drizzly December day with a clever, sassy friend, who immediately nudged me as we read the first labels, raising her eyebrow at the evasive historical detail, the fudging, politically correct phrase.

This raises the question of how much one can appreciate an individual work of art, or indeed a genre, when the context is so dominant. The first room, for example, is filled with maps, many showing the spread of pink across the globe. It begins with a vivid watercolor diagram of the siege of Enniskillen Castle in 1593, a part of the English campaign to capture the Ulster province of northern Ireland, the beginning of colonization—a land-grab near to home. It feels embarrassing to admire—as I couldn't help doing—the clever sketches of little groups of musketeers and the beautifully drawn boats with their siege ladders on board, in the knowledge of the centuries of trouble that lay ahead.

Next to this hangs Henry Popple's huge, ravishingly beautiful 1733 map of the East Coast of North America, from Newfoundland to below the Gulf of Mexico, showing the British colonies. The label tells us that the founding fathers kept this after the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 even though it was now "redundant." We were puzzled—how could such an intricate, careful map be redundant? The colors of possession had changed, but the creeks and inlets, the forests and mountains remained, regardless of politics. And of course they kept it, not only for its beauty but for its reminder of what they had won.

There is another side of imperialism here—a sense of wonder, as the eyes of Europe were opened to the myriad beauties of distant lands, evident in zoological and botanical paintings of new species: a tall, serene crane from India; colorful birds and fish from China; and a spectacular spotted pink fungus from south-east Asia named after Sir Stamford Raffles, the British governor of Java and founder of Singapore.

This is in stark contrast to the powerful issues of meaning and reception provoked by a room aptly named "Imperial Heroics," where group after group of soldiers appear, braving violence and extremes. These include famous propagandist works: Benjamin West's *The Death of General James Wolfe*; Elizabeth Butler's *The Remnants of an Army*, showing the only survivor of the British army after the disastrous 1842 retreat from Kabul during the first Afghan war; Joseph Noel Paton's tear-jerking women and children in the "Black Hole of Calcutta." On one wall a solemn Victoria offers a Bible to a kneeling African prince as *The Secret of England's Greatness*; opposite, in Edward Armitage's *Retribution*, a huge, muscular Britannia rams a sword into an Indian tiger. These are appalling images in all senses. Yet artists made good money out of such paintings, a reminder of how art is driven by the market: in this case by Victorian manufacturers and provincial corporations rushing to show their pride in empire.

Jenny Uglow, "The Shame and Pride of Empire," *New York Review of Books*, December 2015.

**For each category below, create one CARS question stem derived from the passage above.**

**Main Idea**

These are general questions dealing with the cardinal issues of the passage. Main idea questions are designed to see if you grasped the central theme of the passage as a whole.

**Author's Tone**

This type of general question asks whether you understood the author's point of view on the subject of the passage. These questions are often the most subtle. Is the author being critical or supportive. Is their tone objectively neutral or biased and partisan? The differences among the answer choices in tone questions can sometimes be hard to tease out.

**Thematic Extension**

These questions are in the same family with the Main Idea or Tone questions, which deal with the passage as a whole, but Thematic Extension questions ask you to take the author's argument or point of view and draw a conclusion about another subject or derive a broader proposition.

**Specific Inference**

These questions will identify a specific section of the passage and ask for an interpretation that goes a little deeper than the explicit reference, asking you to read 'between the lines.' These questions are often about judging the shade of meaning the author puts on a word within a specific context.

**Facts & Information**

On one level these questions are a test for your retention of specific facts or concepts stated in the passage. However, on another level, they are a test of how well you synthesized and retained the organization and flow of the passage. This is because often the process of answering this kind of question involves returning to the passage to find the information.