

**Handout 9.2.** Sample Student Responses

Although every teacher defines excellence differently, the nuanced awareness and articulate precision evident below revised my idea of what students are capable of achieving online. These excerpts reveal students responding thoughtfully (though not flawlessly) to one another, to the assigned text, and with subtle reference to authors studied earlier in the year.

**Posted: 5/8/2007 7:50 p.m. by MARVER1**

I totally agree with Elaine's statement about how Ben represents the savagery and darkness within each individual that society tries to suppress. . . . Ben is what unravels the semblance of security and happiness Harriet and David try so hard to maintain. Ben is a specimen, to be examined with disapproving curiosity, but never to love. He is "Different", the manifestation of all the fears Harriet and David have regarding the functioning of their perfect family and perfect marriage.

**Posted: 5/8/2007 11:46 p.m. by HAKIMYOHYMY**

I'm kind of responding to other people here and kind of continuing a post I just made in 75-100. . . .

Maybe you can never banish the evil, and never weed the garden. When you take that view to the extreme you get Eugenics, and you get Nazism.

Maybe you can never purge the dark part from one person, and you can never exterminate the dark people in a society. There is no eliminating, there is only suppressing. Is Ben the manifestation of all the Bad the Lovatts tried to squeeze out, contained and concentrated into one evil being? Yes, on a literary level he very well could be. Things don't actually work like that.

It's like saying everyone has a quota of bad; if you push it out somewhere it all comes back at you anotherwhere. Good and evil are not like potential and kinetic energy, there is no law of conservation. David and Harriet just got unlucky.

**Posted: 5/9/2007 9:30 p.m. by JOSMCG1**

Studly effort Nathan. Everyone has already discussed the real answers to the question of how Ben affects everyone; there is plenty of textual evidence to support almost any claim in that direction. But what Nathan has brought up, the plain old bad luck that Harriet and David experience in the form of Ben, makes me think of what Lessing is trying to do with this story. (and I don't really think it has much to do with a society of sedation Clay) I haven't read to the end yet, but I have gotten up in the 80-90 page range so my comment will spill a little bit into that territory. Anyway, in the real world of this novel, the world that doesn't

take into account literary symbolism and the like, Ben is just a troublesome baby. He may be labeled a “troll” or a “brute,” and he may have murdered some house pets (which I grant is scary and wierd) but when Lessing starts talking about institutionalizing Ben, and actually describes that process, we start to get a different view on the situation. Nathan said it well that there is no eliminating evil in society there is only suppressing it. But in this case, they (meaning the family that despises Ben) are suppressing a child. Yes it is a screwed up child, but Lessing’s description of him “unconscious [. . .] naked [. . .] inside a strait jacket” (82) made me really feel badly for him. I think that is Lessing’s intention. Harriet, displaying a truely motherly drive, expresses her pity for Ben, and I think that is another signpost towards what Lessing wants us to see. Yeah Ben affected the family negatively, but the family’s attitude, literally “him or us” (74) seems pretty outrageous to me. I know I haven’t gotten to the end, but this story is shaping up to be a commentary on, as Nathan put it, the suppression of society’s evils, and the subsequent evils that are caused by its suppression.

**Posted: 5/10/2007 10:39 p.m. by CLAFOX1**

If we look at McG’s idea of suppression as theme, it is fitting on a larger universal level as Lessing connects this at the end of the novel. “Soon after that, Ben and the others went off again for some days. She saw them on the television. There was a riot in North London. ‘Trouble’ had been forecast. They were not among those throwing bricks, lumps of iron, stones, but stood in a group at one side, leering and jeering and shouting encouragement” (Lessing 126). This idea of young rebels fighting against the suppression of the conservative 80’s is perhaps the larger level to which Ms. Lessing takes Ben’s theme of repression. He has felt it in his life, and therefore wants to be near some kind of larger solution against it. Just a possibility. Not any kind of definite thesis.