This teacher-written exemplar essay is extended beyond the limits that most candidates will write in exam conditions. It is intended to be a guide to:

- the key points of understanding in the poem
- the range of points that might be included in a critical essay
- a good range of appropriate quotation from the poem
- making comments to show analysis and evaluation
- an approach to planning a critical essay in response to a task
- model the high standard of writing and expression expected

Choose a poem which deals with childhood, adolescence, family life or old age.
Show how the poet deepens your understanding of any of these stages of life by the choice of content and the skilful use of poetic techniques.

Intermediate 2, 2009 Critical Essay Q.7

“The Almond Tree” is a poem by Jon Stallworthy which deals with an aspect of family life, namely the birth of a child and a father coming to terms with his new son’s disability. The poet has deepened my understanding of this particular stage of life by showing the initial excitement the father has about the birth, the sense of shock and loss he experiences when he is told his son has Down’s Syndrome, and the way in which he gains resolve and accepts the future ahead of him. The poet conveys this skilfully through poetic techniques such as word choice, imagery, mood and structure.

Initially, the speaker anticipates fatherhood with immense excitement. An optimistic mood is set at the start, as in the first line he describes “All the way to the hospital / the lights were as green as peppermints”. This simile suggests that the traffic lights were working in his favour that he was expecting a positive outcome. The father seems somewhat childish in his excitement, since the lights are compared to sweets, and perhaps this is a sign he is not yet mature enough to deal with what lies ahead in fatherhood. He continues the idea of feeling lucky, comparing himself to:

the lucky prince
in an enchanted wood
summoning summer with my whistle
banishing winter with a nod

This word choice of “enchanted” suggests that the experience is magical to him, and that he feels great and powerful, although he is perhaps walking into the unknown. The imagery of a fairytale conveys this well, although the reader feels there may also be dangers lurking ahead of which the speaker might not be aware. He interprets that the church “tower held up its hand: the college bells shook their blessing on his head”, conveying that this is a very momentous event. The personification suggests to him that he is being guided towards his son and that the bells symbolise how fortunate he is, and that maybe even God is on his side.
The man’s excitement at the prospect of fatherhood seems overwhelming, as he speeds frantically to the hospital. He is almost out of control of his car as he “swung by the road from bend to bend”, and noted in parenthesis that he was “Crossing (at sixty) Magdalen Bridge”. The anxious father-to-be is talking to himself:

\[ \text{Let it be a son, said} \\
\text{the man in the driving mirror,} \\
\text{Let it be a son.} \]

The use of repetition here shows his dearest hope, and the enjambment of “said…” shows how strongly affected he is. When he arrives at the hospital, he is again overwhelmed and disorientated, shown by the broken line structure of:

\[ \text{Up} \\
\text{and at the top} \\
\text{along} \\
\text{a bone white corridor} \\
\text{the blood tide swung} \\
\text{me to a room} \]

It seems as though he is being drawn to his destiny, that his emotions are high, shown by the “blood tide” and that he is not fully in control at this stage, with the connotations of “swung” repeated from earlier.

The speaker contemplates what fatherhood means early in the poem. He considers the pulsing blood in his veins, for which “Centuries / it had crossed; from an undisclosed beginning / spiralling to an unmapped end”. The imagery here is very powerful and suggests that his bloodline extends from his own ancestors in the distant past, to his own offspring and beyond, and that for much of this, it is a mystery, shown by “undisclosed”, where he came from or where his future lies, shown by “unmapped”. The word choice of “spiralling” suggests this is a never-ending process and that the thought of it is perhaps very perplexing for him.

The moment of birth is a very profound one for the father, and the painful and exhausting labour is described using the transferred epithet of the “walls shuddered / with the shuddering womb”. The uneven rhythm of stanza five echoes the racing mind of the father, the quick pace of a heartbeat or the process of childbirth:

\[ \text{Under the sheet} \\
\text{wave after wave, wave} \\
\text{after wave beat} \\
\text{on the bone coast, bringing} \\
\text{ashore- whom?} \]

The speaker expresses his joy at fatherhood, through the imagery of his son as “New-minted, my bright farthing! / Coined by our love”. This metaphor conveys how he welcomes the arrival of his son, whom he has created, and how precious he is to him. He seems particularly proud that being a father will mean his son has
a resemblance to his parents, stating “stamp[ed] with our images”. The jubilant tone is continued when metaphorically exclaims that the son is “my best poem!”, showing how ecstatic he is and that the child is his greatest accomplishment.

However, the father’s new found security is broken in the next stanza when “the visitor’s bell / scissored / the calm / of the corridors”. The connotations of “scissored” are that his happiness has been cut, and the bell, which had previously symbolised good fortune, now seems ominous. Suspense and uncertainty is built up as “The doctor walked with me / to the slicing doors”, continuing the idea of something painful about to happen, as the doctor comforts him. The doctor’s reassuring voice alarms the speaker and “set another bell / beating in my head”. The news of his son’s disability is broken to him in a very factual, clinical manner: “your son is a mongol / the doctor said”. The stanza ends at this point, suggesting that the speaker was stunned by the news, and perhaps emotionless.

As the poem progresses, the speaker feels a great sense of loss that his hopes for fatherhood will never come true. He considers the news to be such a blow, that he compares it to a sudden, intense “bullet” which stops his heart and he imagines his own death at that moment, stating “This was my first death”. Hyperbolic imagery is used to show how defamiliarising the experience has been:

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The “I” ascending on a slow
last thermal breath
studied the man below
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It seems that, standing in the hospital, the life has been drawn out of him and he has an experience which takes him out of his own body, where he rises and looks down upon himself from above. He compares himself to a pilot whose plane has crashed, suggesting the complete devastation and disbelief he feels and how what has happened to him has been catastrophic. When he states, “Unfamiliar / the body of my late self / I carried back to the car”, it powerfully shows how detached he feels from his own life and that nothing will ever be the same again.

The father considers the loss of his son using imagery of sailing at sea, as “In a numbered cot / my son sailed from me; never to come / ashore into my kingdom”. This metaphor clearly conveys the sense of helplessness the father feels, that he will never be able to connect fully with his child, and that he will feel that his son is somehow different to him because of his disability. They will not be able to understand each other as the son will not be united with him, “speaking my language”, which as a poet, hurts the speaker most as he will never be able to share and pass on his knowledge to his son as he had hoped.

A key turning point in the poem and in the speaker’s understanding of his role as a father and of what it means to be a human being, is when the speaker contemplates the symbolic almond tree in the car park. Previously in the poem, it had ushered him into the hospital, “waving me upstairs with a child’s hand”, yet at that stage he failed to appreciate the true meaning of the tree. Like in childbirth, he notes “the almond tree / was beautiful in labour” and “it was becoming itself”, which is difficult to understand. Sometimes it is only by going through going through hardship can something so meaningful happen. He sees the tree blossoming and describes it in very rich language as “Blood-/ dark, quickening, bud
after bud / split, flower after flower shook free”, which ties in with the new life of his son. He continues this idea when he sees “a pale face floated. Out of reach”, which is that of his son. In a very complex way the almond tree is teaching the father lessons about life – of the beauty of life, of suffering, of strength, and being unable to control fate.

At the end of the poem, the speaker considers fatherhood in a new, more mature perspective. He sees himself metaphorically like the tree, “rooted in earth and ringed by darkness, I saw myself blossoming”, which could mean that through his difficulties, he will become a better person. He sees himself as being reborn, after his previous death, “wrenched from the caul of my thirty years’ growing”, and that he is now on a new, more significant chapter of his life. Irony is used well when he states “fathered by my son”, suggesting that his son’s birth has taught him a new meaning to life. This is confirmed in the final lines where he states “I have learned that to live is to suffer, / to suffer is to live”.

Poignantly, he manages to reconnect with his son and express his love as a father. He presents us with a beautiful image of his son’s hand reaching out like a delicate new growth, and “take tendril-hold on a shaft / of sun, explore its dusty surface” and expresses his affection (and acceptance) by calling him “my little mongol love”. He addresses his son directly in his cot, acknowledging that both he and his son are in some way trapped in life:

... locked in
your body you will remain.
Well, I have been locked in mine.
We will tunnel each other out.

Here, the writer commits to his son and the journey they will share together in life, and that by doing this, they will be free. There is much that the speaker does not know yet about life, but in stating “I have learned more from your lips / than you will from mine perhaps”, which shows he is prepared to learn, and can take what the future holds, because of his son.

In conclusion, “The Almond Tree” clearly shows the complexity of family life, of parenthood and what it means to become a father to a disabled child. Through the poetic techniques used, the poet explores his changing emotions and the deeper meaning of the uncertainty of life, of human strength and the power of love.