Q: ’It is an artist’s duty to respond to the social and historical changes of their period’. (30 marks)

A: The 19th Century was marked by various political and social changes across Europe. Expansion of cities, rural migration, poverty, were amongst these examples. Such events would have an effect on the lives of all members of society and many artists responded to these changes by making them the main subject of their work. However not all artists made direct comment on these issues.

Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers*, oil on canvas, 1848 is a large scale Realist scene of working life in mid 19th century France. Courbet has chosen this subject to highlight the plight of the individuals depicted and their role in society at that time. Two male figures are shown breaking stones for a road, this task was usually filled by the lowest members of society and such individuals would be seen throughout the country as roads were built to link rural areas to cities. An elderly man kneels breaking stones with a pickaxe while behind him a boy struggles to carry a basket filled with stones to one side. Their tattered clothing adds a sense of realism to the scene. They are unidealised, with the faces of both figures shown in profile. This hides their identities showing them as nameless men engaged in the lowest form of labour.

Colours are muted, the dull browns of their clothes match the colours of the stones they break. The elder man’s skin is tanned, implying he has done such work for years. A patch of blue sky is visible in the top right corner, this tells us it is early and the men have a full day’s work ahead of them. Paint has been applied roughly, giving the figures an unidealised appearance and the work a coarse finish. Courbet has chosen this scene to make the viewers of the time sympathise with the men shown. The large scale of the work, traditionally reserved for historical paintings, gives these figures a sense of importance- something they would not receive in real life. He treats the men as victims of their time, where the poor were forced to work in harsh conditions, labour which the social commentator Proudhon described as devouring ‘the generations in their youth’. Similarly in Britain, Ford Madox Brown’s painting ‘Work’ also shows a crowded scene of manual labour, however the workers here are represented as heroic. They improve society by building a sewerage system for London. Madox Brown includes the figure of social commentator Thomas Carlyle who said “work alone is noble”. This shows the importance Victorians placed on people being employed to benefit all society. Both Courbet and Madox Brown record changes in their countries social and physical structure, giving the viewer an insight into life at that time.

Holman Hunt’s ‘*Our English Coasts*’, 1852, oil on canvas is a Pre-Raphaelite landscape with a political subtext. We see a brightly lit clifftop near Hastings with a flock of sheep straying dangerously close to the edge of the cliff. In the background is the English Channel and on the horizon sails a boat. The setting of Hastings reminds us of the famous battle from 1066. Holman Hunt is deliberately making links between Britain’s medieval past and the present day. Such themes were popular with the Pre-Raphaelites. In Holman Hunt’s era there was a fear that Britain risked invasion from France as Napoleon III was now Emperor. His uncle Napoleon Bonaparte had once been at war with Britain in the beginning of the 1800s. Furthermore Holman Hunt links England’s defeat at the hands of the French in 1066 to current Victorian political fears.

The white and black sheep stand out in contrast to the bright green landscape. They represent the people of Britain, some are tangled in briars while others appear to be in danger of falling off the cliff to their deaths. Sheep in the foreground look directly towards the viewer as if seeking our assistance. The rich green landscape, painted plein air, reminds us of the beauty of England’s countryside and the threat to its safety from foreign enemies. Dark shadows appear to creep across the hills in the background as if plunging the country into darkness. The boat on the horizon suggests that England’s coastal defences are weak and that the population have been abandoned, like these sheep and left to fend for themselves. By using the genre of landscape and this location in particular, Holman Hunt forces the viewer to consider what is at stake in Victorian Britain unless the country responds to political developments in Europe.

By contrast, Monet’s landscape ‘*Impression, Sunrise*’, 1872, oil on canvas, has no political message to convey. Instead Monet uses this genre to experiment with new techniques in painting.

Monet visited his hometown of Le Harve to capture the changing light of the sun as it rose over the sea. In the background we see the docks of Le Harve. Painted plein air using tubes of oil paint, which were a recent technological development, this radical work gave the movement Impressionism its name.

Monet painted quickly in an attempt to show the morning sun and the changing effects of sunlight on forms. The sun is shown as a solid orange globe of thickly applied paint. Solid dabs of this colour are used to depict the reflections of the sun on the sea. Small boats with simplified figures are shown near the foreground, painted in dark blues to suggest they are in shadow with the sun behind. The sea and sky are painted in thin washes of greys and blues, implying it is not yet fully daylight. Bare areas of canvas in the sky give the work a sketchy appearance and highlight Monet’s technique of painting quickly to capture a fleeting moment. The sky around the sun is shown with shades of pink and orange which bleed into the darker blues of the sky. The lack of a clear horizon line and the vaguely sketched buildings on the dock furthermore give the work a crude and unfinished look. This would shock viewers and critics at that time as it breaks with all academic conventions in painting. One critic complained that “a drawing for a wallpaper pattern is more finished than this seascape”. Monet makes no attempt to give the landscape a meaning, it is an experiment in painting. This avant-garde approach to subject matter and technique would influence many artists into the modern era.

In conclusion, it is important for artists to record their changing world for future generations, as shown by Courbet and Holman Hunt. However I would argue that Monet’s landscape has had more impact on art history and the work of later artists and this work ironically shows how Courbet’s painting technique influenced him.