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Moderators' Report/ Principal Moderator Feedback

June 2011

GCE English Literature 6ET04

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June 2011
Publications Code UA027907

General Overview

"This has become a two text unit!" reported one moderator, having seen so many folders where the third text was purely notional – a nod in the direction of some critical writing or a theatre review or a stray point from the internet. As a result, coursework essays had been little more than a straightforward comparison of two texts. Other moderators were delighted with the folders they saw, finding work that was truly investigative. At the top end of the scale, reference was made to critics, reviews, film interpretations and so forth as a matter of course, while still exploring some thesis based around three texts; when the third text was a composite of critical, cultural and background materials, and was woven into the rest of the writing, the results were often excellent. When the third text was a single critical volume or a work of cultural criticism, this also worked well, providing that the third text had a significant presence in the essay. There remains however a number of teachers and candidates who perceive this as a "two text unit".

Unnecessary citation is of course to be avoided. There are no marks for simply name checking famous critics. Occasionally a critical reference is used to back up fairly anodyne remarks, to confirm the self evident, while neglecting more contentious points that follow. One essay tells us "Bradley says 'the approach of the play-scene raises Hamlet's spirits.'" (It was also good to find candidates who had moved beyond A C Bradley!) But Bradley also says a few lines later 'Hamlet's device [the play scene] proves a triumph far more complete than he had dared to expect.' This is a statement crying out for some AO3 treatment. Isn't the play scene an unmitigated disaster? Isn't this a point which needs discussing?

Moderators start by assuming that centres know their candidates and have arrived at given marks through sound judgement. It is therefore important that centres have done rigorous internal standardisation and that reasons for marks have been explained as fully as possible. Quoting verbatim from the assessment criteria at the end of an essay is not individual enough, and merely labelling assessment objectives in the body of the work is not evaluative enough. Many centres provide very useful comments and the most helpful ones point out the weaknesses as well as strengths of the work, relating the marks given securely to the appropriate assessment objectives.

In this unit the assessment objectives are applied equally. It is therefore important to set a task that will attract a natural response to all four AOs. A look at the assessment criteria will show that originality and creativity are prized at the top end of the achievement scale. Setting a task that does not encourage a response specifically to context or to comparison or to a consideration of different points of view can result in an otherwise very sound piece of analytical writing achieving a disappointing mark, as it may be impossible to give many, if any, marks out of the 20 allocated for the overlooked AOs. Context issues are worth an extra mention here.

Occasionally there is misunderstanding from candidates and perhaps their teachers too about the distinction between setting and context. AO4 is

about the effect of contextual issues on texts at the time they were written and /or the time(s) in which they are received. Simply writing about a historical novel for example is not writing about context. Describing the war time setting in *Spies* is not context either, unless the candidate goes on to consider how the recreation of the war time ambience is significant to a post-war reader. The gothic setting of Dracula's castle is not a point in itself unless the candidate can explore the Victorians' interest in the past through all things gothic or go on to look at the age's fascination with medical science and life beyond the grave. An exploration of the appeal of vampire stories to the modern reader can also of course raise contextual points.

Overlap between set books and texts

There are a few points to bear in mind:

- Candidates are allowed to write about texts that appear on the set book lists for other units, *provided that they have not written on them in exams or are not intending to do so in the future*

- Candidates are not allowed to write about texts for Unit 4 "that have previously been assessed in any other unit" (page 35 of the specification) which of course would include the AS coursework unit as well as Unit 1

- Candidates and their teachers should ensure they keep to the "three texts per unit" rule as prescribed by the regulator as a minimum requirement for study when A level syllabuses were prepared for first examinations in 2009. If a centre decides to carry the theme of, say, War, across from Unit 3, this rule would be infringed if the same text(s) were to be used twice.

Performance by Assessment Objectives

All examples of good practice here are taken from this summer's submissions, 2011.

AO1 *Articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression.*

The word "relevant" does not appear by name in the assessment criteria, but it is there nevertheless. A clear argument, that responds to a clear task, is what this AO is about, as well, of course, as accuracy and appropriate terminology. To achieve this, so much depends on the title set. Here is an opening paragraph that convinces the reader the essay has a clear sense of direction. The task is about the nature of revenge.

> The biblical idea that revenge is a wholly self-destructive, pointless goal is arguably the salient message of both *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost*. Yet both works prompt a deeper question about the true nature of revenge: to what

> extent is revenge a general backlash against a set of circumstances, a reaction to being habitually abused or ignored? Perhaps the Creature merely uses Victor as an object towards which to direct his anguish, when actually his real anger is towards an entire society which spurns him, and his ultimate desire is for "eternal hatred and vengeance to **all** mankind". Or, conversely, maybe revenge is a colder, more calculated entity, deliberately fixated on one, specific subject; Satan, after all, meticulously plans his voyage to Earth, and his corruption of Mankind, just to subject God to his revenge. Both texts, together with *The Tempest*, depict a character bent on revenge, and in so doing, invite the reader to contemplate the essence of this all-consuming drive.

Examiner Comment:
This works really well as an opening. We have been introduced to all three texts under discussion; a debate has been set up (is revenge just self destructive or is it a reaction to being abused? is it only *apparently* directed at a single person, whereas the true purpose is a wider backlash?) And one can sense some good AO3, "different points of view", material likely to be cropping up – is *The Tempest* really a play about revenge, and not redemption, for example?

Examiner Tip:
Avoid predictable openings that begin with something like "First we must define Revenge". This opening *does* define revenge, but it does it subtly – avoiding a dictionary and instead using the chosen texts. Lead your reader into your argument by referring closely to the texts you are going to use and it is a good idea to introduce them all early on.

A note for teachers and assessors about word length (repeated from previous reports):
A candidate who has failed to comply with the 3,000 word limit will not have shaped and organised material in a way which another candidate, mindful of this requirement, will have done; the latter could possibly be rewarded under Assessment Objective AO1 for "fluent, cohesive and controlled writing" whereas the former is unlikely to reach this top band requirement. Please remember that assessors should stop reading once the 3,000 word limit has been reached.

AO2 *Demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meanings in literary texts.*

The key thing here is being close to the text and one of the best ways to demonstrate this is to use quotation. Here a candidate carefully unpicks the stage directions and dialogue in Pinter's play *The Homecoming* and finds no easy solution:

> In the final scene the men kneel before Ruth and she is seen as the mother figure, as in this stage direction – 'He kneels at her chair, she touches his head, lightly.' She seems to

> resume the dominant role and the stage direction's use of the word 'kneeling' represents submissiveness and that Ruth has won. But Pinter presents this in a way to make the audience wonder whether the woman really is in control when the directions continue with 'He looks at her, still kneeling' and says 'Kiss me.' In fact we are left confused about which is the most dominant gender. Perhaps Pinter himself is taking the dominant role and confusing his audience about never fully understanding the whole truth. The battle for power has come to its end. At face value it appears Ruth is victorious, but from the actual script it is hard to tell.

Examiner Comment:
It is good to see the use of the phrase "Pinter presents this in a way to make you wonder…" as essays often talk about characters as if they are real people without looking at the way the writers present them. The close examination of stage directions and dialogue is excellent here – the candidate is really in control of what s/he is doing, using the text to make a point and analysing the writer's craft, which is what AO2 is all about.

Examiner Tip:
Without being too mechanical and formulaic, aim to use phrases such as "[the writer] presents [a character] in a way that…" and include a reference to the audience (if it's a play) or the reader (if it's poetry or a novel) and the way that audience or that reader is likely to be affected by what the writer is doing.

AO3 *Explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts, informed by interpretations of other readers.*

Here a candidate is discussing Ophelia's madness in *Hamlet*. There is a reference to Elaine Showalter in her book "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism" but also to Gregory Doran's and Nicholas Hytner's theatre productions. The essay is looking at the representation of madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Nell Leyshon's new play *Bedlam* and Sebastian Faulks' novel *Engleby*.

> A key element of Ophelia's madness is exemplified through her overt sexuality in insanity. Showalter states that Ophelia is 'a product of the female body and female nature'. This implies that it is her femaleness that makes her mad. The eroticism that is vented in her madness is shown through her songs - 'then up he rose and donned his clothes and dupped the chamber door.' This allusion to the loss of virginity and the uncouth lexis, as 'chamber door' euphemises the female sexual organ, clearly denotes her madness implying her lunacy is caused not by, as is widely perceived, the death of her father, but from her unconsummated love of Hamlet. Showalter underscores that the use of song, when Ophelia articulates during insanity, makes the representation 'musical rather than visual', this

being less likely to offend the audience by emphasising the triviality of her words. This links with the idea that Ophelia is only permitted to express her sexuality in madness in a way that she could not do as a gentlewoman. Ophelia only speaks 173 lines in the entire play (outside of her madness) a miniscule amount compared to Hamlet's 1459 lines; depicting her inferiority and how her madness frees her, as she speaks more frequently in lunacy. In sanity, her speech is denied by her superior father and brother. It is her madness that liberates her from the heavily patriarchal Elizabethan society. In both the Royal Shakespeare production by Gregory Doran and the recent depiction of *Hamlet* by Hytner at the National Theatre, Ophelia undresses in this scene. This physically represents a preparation for sex and directors may use this technique to mirror the shock that these words would have provoked from an Elizabethan audience, as to a modern day audience this shock can be lost through changes of language and meaning.

Examiner Comment:
AO3 is about comparing and contrasting texts bearing in mind "other interpretations". These interpretations can be shown through theatre or film or television adaptations as well as by literary critics sourced from books or the internet.

Examiner Tip:
Find interpretations – such as here, with a director deciding that Ophelia should take off her clothes in her mad scene. But don't leave it there. Go on to explore that interpretation. Here, the candidate links this idea to what a critic has to say about Ophelia's madness and the sexual implications in what she sings. Through linking ideas together, the candidate has created a new idea – her own. This act of putting together ideas from different sources and making them your own is called *synthesising* and is a high level skill described in the very top bands of the assessment criteria.

Further Comment:
It would of course be very interesting to take exception to some interpretations. Why *should* Ophelia have to undress? Doesn't this detract from the significance of the words of her songs? Do we simply accept that a modern audience won't understand the meanings and insinuations of such things as "dupped the chamber door" without the person who plays the part of Ophelia stripping off her clothes?

AO4 *Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.*

Sometimes this AO can overlap with AO3. In the essay about *Hamlet* quoted above the candidate makes points about interpretations which also have to do with context when s/he claims that a modern audience needs to see Ophelia undressing in order to realise there are sexual connotations in the words of her songs.

Here is an extract from an essay about how texts can disturb their readers and audiences. The texts used are Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Pinter's *The Homecoming* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

> Williams needs the audience to feel for Blanche and make her a sympathetic character, because his play deals with the idea of old America being crushed by the new, industrial country emerging, represented by Stella and Stanley. Signi Falk describes the play as 'an American parable of sensibility crushed by brutishness so common'; Williams' technique is to lead the audience to mistake Stanley for the hero, yet by the end of the play we feel empathy with Blanche as opposed to Stanley.
>
> Shakespeare also deals with social worries at the time. The age of discovery brought stories of new, magical lands that would have caused wonder for the Jacobean audience. Shakespeare plays on this fear of new lands, especially with Ariel, and the wrecked noblemen's reaction to him:
>
> 'Oh monstrous, monstrous!
> Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;
> The winds did sing it to me.'
>
> The impossibility of the wind singing and speaking makes this land more foreign and magical, but it is described as monstrous, playing with the idea of these new lands of discovery being terrifying places. The idea of magic works to disturb the modern audience: we are taken to another world of impossibilities, which is both magical yet horrifying.
>
> Pinter also uses the rise of female liberation as a somewhat disturbing theme for his text…

Examiner Comment:
This essay elegantly links the three texts by looking at the various ways audiences have been disturbed over time – how Tennessee Williams plays with his audience's sympathies in order to demonstrate the loss of old Southern values in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; how both contemporary and modern audiences might react to the disturbing magic in *The Tempest*; and the essay goes on to explore how, in the 1964 play, *The Homecoming*, Pinter exaggerates the idea of a female usurper in a play that shocked audiences of the time and still has the power to do so today.

Examiner Tip:
Remember the two sides to writing about context (when writing about an older text) – how what was happening at the time influenced the way plays and books were written, and how we might be influenced when seeing them or reading them today. But don't supply a whole lot of historical information – it's the texts themselves you need to talk about.

Choices of topics and texts

There are some wonderful and unusual texts studied by enthusiasts. Nell Leysham's new play *Bedlam* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* are two examples for the examples of excellent work illustrated above. Candidates

are forever using their own enthusiasms to explore often quite unusual texts. There are some standard favourites however, and the themes listed below make a regular appearance:
The American Dream
Dystopias
Colonialism and Post-Colonialism
Slavery
Writing about women
Power

Shakespeare and modern drama are very popular choices, with centres possibly feeling that this unit offers a break from the novels and poetry being studied elsewhere.

Conclusion

Candidates who perform best in this unit are clearly the ones who have started planning early and gathered ideas from a range of sources. A certain amount of freedom pays off too – candidates who have been helped too much by scaffolding and suggested approaches, or have not been given a choice of texts or tasks can find it difficult to access the top bands in the assessment criteria which require a certain degree of originality. (Occasionally moderators say that all the work from a particular centre feels like the same essay being repeated over and over again). It is gratifying to find work - and not necessarily work that reaches the highest grades – where one feels a candidate has managed to do his/her best, has enjoyed the task and has been able to show skills which examination alone could not encourage or evaluate. In other words, one is reassured about the perennial value of coursework for all candidates across the full range of ability. It is important to acknowledge that all moderators are aware of the many hours that teachers have spent in enabling their students to perform to the best of their ability through devising tasks, monitoring work in progress, sometimes reading unusual texts chosen by students and, finally, marking and commenting on their work.

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Order Code UA027907 June 2011

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