

Moderators' Report/
Principal Moderator Feedback

January 2012

GCE English Literature (6ET04)
Literary Studies

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General Overview

January is an interesting time to be looking at Unit 4 folders, perhaps because only the most successful students are entered.

There was a rather disappointed reference in last summer's report, to some centres not taking full advantage of what coursework can offer. This referred to work sometimes being restricted to a comparison of two books, with only lip-service to criticism - and occasions where all students wrote on the same books and addressed exactly the same topic in the same way.

This January was different. There was one centre, for example, that had bravely abandoned the idea of teaching two texts and letting students choose their own third one; instead, as the centre itself says, We have tried to hand over the ownership to the students more. The result was impressive, with a wide range of texts, as can be seen in the Choice of Topics and Texts section below.

Of course, the favourite topics and texts are still to be found, and there is nothing wrong with them. They may seem overly familiar to teachers, but each year a set of students will be coming at them as new.

The reminder below has appeared in previous reports, but is worth repeating. Twelve different texts need to be studied for students to achieve an A level in this subject. It might be tempting to economise by doubling-up on texts to do with War for example (if this topic has been chosen for Unit 3) but apart from giving the students a very limited experience in the second year, it would infringe the twelve-text rule.

Overlap between set books and texts chosen for coursework

There are a few points to bear in mind here.

- Students 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.
- Students are not allowed to write about texts for unit 4 that have previously been assessed in any other unit (page 35 of the specification). This, of course, would include the AS coursework unit, as well as Unit 1.
- Students 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 submissions in January 2012.

AO1

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

So much depends on the task the student has chosen here. Very general titles do not give the essay enough to respond to. Here is quite a good title – and a very good opening:

To what extent is class struggle the dominant theme of A Tale of Two Cities and the poetry of Shelley?

In A Tale of Two Cities and the political poetry of Shelley, one of the main themes is the idea of repressed workers rising up against brutal aristocrats. During the 18th and 19th centuries there was a fear amongst the wealthy that the working classes would revolt and overthrow the existing order. This fear became widespread with the Industrial Revolution, which meant that cities swelled as an increasingly impoverished proletariat flocked to them. In A Tale of Two Cities and Shelley's poetry, social class is seen as something inherently damaging. The downtrodden characters in Dickens' novel are trying to break free from this miserable existence, while the aristocrats are continually trying to keep them subdued. Dickens created the Marquis Evremonde to represent the cruel caste system of France. He shows absolutely no compassion towards others and embodies the "heartless indifference" so despised by Dickens. However Dickens also disfavours the actions of the poor against the rich and condemns how the peasants choose to overcome their oppression. Class hatred and the struggle of the poor are also themes in Shelley's poems ...

This is so readable! The argument flows from one idea to the next – it starts by introducing some context material, and then quickly moves to talk more precisely about the characters in Dickens. What is so skillful, however, is the ability to put up counter-arguments – even Dickens also disfavours the actions of the poor – and shows that the writer's attitude is not totally straightforward. From the last sentence it is clear that the essay is going to "juggle" the two chosen texts throughout (and later it brings in some substantial critical references as a third text).

Examiner's Comment:

This is a good opening, because it addresses the question. It does not have a heavy-handed, "First we must define class approach", but quietly settles

to the task, dealing briefly with context before moving into the texts themselves.

Examiner's Tip:

It is a good idea to introduce your two or three chosen texts straight away. Your title will have established something they have in common – or something that is different and worth talking about – so link them right from the start, rather than write about one text and then, in the second half of your essay, write about others.

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.

Students who have seen past examination papers will be very familiar with the rather academic-sounding formulation of words above, defining this assessment objective, because it appears as the unseen question in Unit 3. Essentially, it means that the student is to unpick the text and see how it works, and there is no better way to do this than by using quotation and commenting on it. Quotation is at its best when short and relevant, and incorporated into the argument of the essay, as in this example, which is taken from a folder looking at Tennessee Williams' plays:

Williams also shows the theme of dependency through Stella's pregnancy. Most members of the audience at the time, and arguably a modern audience, would immediately deduce that Stella is pregnant "her belly rounded slightly with maternity" [the student has put this quotation in italics because it comes from a stage direction rather than actual dialogue) though Blanche does not notice immediately and thinks Stella is getting fat "you're just as plump as a little partridge." The constant physical reminder of Stella's pregnancy allows Williams to make the audience aware of Stella's dependency on Stanley not just for herself but also for the unborn child. Williams uses the increased reliance Stella has on Stanley to show a reason why she puts up with his violent behaviour and also why she believes his story over Blanche's - " I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley." The use of appearance as a way to show dependence is also used by Williams in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof as Maggie tries to use illusions to make the rest of the family believe that her and Brick are happy together -

“Brick, honey, aren't you gonna give Big Daddy his birthday present?” Maggie is often thought of as the strongest female character created by Williams - “can't afford t'be thin-skinned anymore.” Her perseverance is to stay with Brick and make their relationship work because that is ultimately what she wants - “I can't see a man but you” - not what she depends on because of her own frailties. However it could be argued that Williams makes Maggie the most dependent of all the women and that is why she cannot bear to leave Brick, even though he is giving her a way out.

Examiner's comment:

Actually, this extract might be a little heavy-handed in the use of quotation, feeling that everything has to be illustrated – the paragraph feels a little over-crowded.

Examiner's Tip:

Choose quotations carefully, to make a precise point. If it is a play, stage directions can be helpful (although be careful with Shakespeare as we do not actually know who wrote the stage directions there!).

A03 (part one):

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

As there are two parts to this assessment objective, they will be dealt with separately.

This is the concluding paragraph of an essay that skilfully combines ideas about the three texts the student has chosen - Joyce's *Dubliners*, Friel's *Translations* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

*In all three texts the writers identify opportunities to escape from repressing influences: the boy in Araby escapes his paralysing environment through language and writing; Maire in *Translations* has the possibility of escaping the entrapment of Ireland by going to America; Owen finds a new sense of direction in recovering his Irish identity, and Hughes realises in his last fragmented speech that he cannot stay entrapped in the past. Although the play ends in 'black', when the lights go up in the theatre and there is interaction between members of the audience from both sides of the sectarian divide in 1980 (and today), Friel uses theatre to bridge a political gap, creating hope for the future. When the characters become so isolated in their own consciousness, however, as does Eveline who appears incapable of interaction with the outside world, or Dorian Gray whose self absorption causes him to abandon his moral sense, they cease to be human and become instead passive bystanders in their own lives.*

Examiner's comment:

This is an elegant summary, linking the texts and their ideas in an exciting and challenging way.

Examiner's Tip:

The key word in this part of the assessment objective is exploring. Do not just say this can be compared with this – investigate further to see where this comparison might lead. A good title is a great help, because this sets up a clear investigative line for the essay to follow. In this case, the title was "Consider how the themes of paralysis, isolation and entrapment have been presented by the writers you have studied".

AO3 (part two):

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

The student here is exploring to what extent Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* are feminist texts, or about asserting oneself, regardless of gender.

It can be said that Nora, rather than rejecting capitalism in her disillusionment with material objects, rejects her role as a "doll" to be dressed up and played with just as the girl of The Erl-King rejects her transformation into a bird....However the idea of self-assertion need not be seen solely as being against a patriarchal or capitalist society within these texts. On a more individualistic level, the role of parents is also significant in how various characters within A Doll's House and The Bloody Chamber behave or are treated....

Examiner's comment:

These extracts show that the writer is open to different possible interpretations of the texts.

Examiner's Tip:

Phrases such as, "it can be said that..." and, "however this need not be seen..." are indications in themselves that the candidate is taking the correct approach. To avoid becoming mere assertions, however, these points of view need supporting and a good bibliography at the end of the essay should help to make it clear that the candidate is responding to interpretations of other readers. This particular candidate chose only two literary texts, making the third text one of critical reading. In this case, the critical reading needs to be clearly referenced in the essay - who was this other reader and how does the candidate's reading compare with his or her point of view?

AO4:

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

It is well-known, by now, as the point has been made repeatedly in many previous reports, that the main weakness in addressing this assessment objective lies in simply offering a great deal of historical information, not linked to literary considerations. This essay, based on three texts, centred on Joan of Arc, Shaw's *Saint Joan*, Shakespeare's *Henry V1 Part One* and Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, uses historical information but keeps it well under control:

“One knows at the start how a story about Saint Joan has to end badly” (Hans Mayer, The Scandal of Joan of Arc). While this fate is guaranteed in almost all literary works about Joan of Arc, the way in which this fate is reached is always – at least slightly, and often dramatically – different. Playwrights have been inspired by historical characters for centuries. There are endless plays based on past monarchs, political rulers or religious leaders. But it is rare for someone of humble beginnings, who died before reaching their twenties, without achieving great wealth or status during their lifetime, to capture the imagination of playwrights, authors and poets alike in the way that Joan does. Nearly 600 years after her death, an impressive range of literary works portrays her in very diverse ways.

Examiner’s Comment:

There is an obvious historical context here – the life and death of Joan of Arc. But there is an even more interesting one as far as this unit is concerned – a consideration of how the story of St Joan has been treated in literary texts over the years.

Examiner’s Tip:

Context in this instance is not about history. It is about the way that texts have been influenced by what is going on around them – battles, ideas and attitudes, wealth and poverty, fashions, obsessions, plagues, religions, politicians – and how that has affected both the way that they are written and the way they have been read and understood. Therefore, only include historical facts if they help you to look at this.

Three texts or two?

Last summer’s report began with a complaint from one moderator who said This is becoming a two text unit! The reference was to the fact that some candidates were only paying lip-service to a third text of literary or cultural commentary and therefore ending up with an essay that was no more than a comparison of just two books, rather than an investigation in a fuller sense.

There is nothing wrong with the two texts plus a work(s) of criticism approach. It has the advantage, done properly, of ensuring that the second part of AO3 is addressed. The essay will have to look at a named critic(s) and make a response to that/those other reader(s). If three literary texts are used, that assessment objective will still have to be addressed so, in a sense, there is more work to do.

The examples of the essays given above reflect the strengths of both approaches. There are two three-text approaches - the essay on Saint Joan, which clearly lends itself to a real investigation of a broad sweep of literature, and the scholarly study of paralysis isolation and entrapment in Joyce, Wilde and Friel. The two-text studies are more precisely focused, looking at Dickens alongside Shelley and Ibsen alongside Carter. Here, the issues of social upheaval and gender are very clear, yet give the writers plenty of opportunity for debate. All these essays performed very well.

Choices of topics and texts

Very interesting texts appeared this January. Below are some of the slightly more unusual. Of course, the old favourites were still there, but teachers and students might be interested to see that these were texts and combinations that also seemed to work well.

- *King Lear, Metamorphosis & The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*
- *The Rape of the Lock* coupled with *Sense & Sensibility* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- *Othello* with *Amadeus & My Last Duchess*
- *Medea* with *Macbeth & The Great Gatsby*
- *Brick Lane* with *White Teeth & The Thing Around Your Neck*
- *Lear, Anna Karenina & Orwell's essays*
- *The Waste Land, Four Quartets & Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
- *Richard III, Othello & Sweeney Todd*
- *A Thousand Splendid Suns, Tess of the d'Urbervilles & The Handmaid's Tale*
- *The Tempest, Jane Eyre & The Whitsun Weddings*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire, Revolutionary Road, Sylvia Plath's poetry*
- *Tristram Shandy, Mansfield Park & Vanity Fair*
- *Dubliners, Translations & Dorian Gray*
- *The Wide Sargasso Sea, Dorian Gray, Dubliners*
- *Othello, Death of a Salesman, The Taming of the Shrew*
- *American Psycho, The Shining, Hansel & Gretel*
- *The Catcher in the Rye, The Wasp Factory, The Outsider*
- Sri Lankan writers, including: *Funny Boy, Cinnamon Gardens* (Shyam Sevadurai); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston); *Thicker Than Blood* (Lelon Weerasinghe); *The Road from Elephant Pass* (Nihal de Silva).

Conclusion

This unit continues to be a success story, in the sense that the freedom it offers gives every student a chance to do his or her best. It is a pleasure to read these coursework folders.

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