

Moderators' Report/  
Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel GCE  
in English Literature Unit 4  
(6ET04/01)

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## General Overview

This year several moderators have commented on the increase in the proportion of centres allowing a completely free choice in the selection of texts, testifying to teachers' confidence in encouraging their students to take full ownership of their A2 coursework. There were a number of very imaginative combinations of texts and supporting material this session too, often from different genres (including poetry, non-fiction, memoirs, essays, articles and film) which facilitated students' engagement with form and structure as well as language for AO2, enabling them to produce some truly "original and illuminating" (descriptors for Band 4 of AO3) coursework.

Several moderators sound a note of warning, however. Where students are offered a free choice it is important to ensure that they choose sufficiently "productive" texts for A2 study. An example was given of a single Shakespeare sonnet alongside a short novel (plus critical reading) which did not provide sufficient material for the student to explore in the depth required at this A2 level.

Giving students some freedom is therefore to be welcomed. It can be done in several different ways. Some centres teach none of the texts. Some teach one of two core texts and allow students freedom to choose a second or third text of their own. Others teach all the texts but offer students a range of themes from which they can construct individual tasks, appropriate to particular interests and needs. One extreme method does not work well however, as often mentioned in previous reports, and this is when all the students at a centre study the same texts, are given the same critical support and are then directed by a single given title to look at those texts from the same perspective. What happens then is that they all use the same quotations and often appear to follow the same template in structuring their argument. This defeats the object of this unit, which is intended to foster students' personal response and allow them to discover things for themselves.

## Examples of good practice

In one centre all students studied *Emma*, *Beloved* and *Atonement* but did so from various perspectives. These students had been enabled, by the careful choice of novels and tasks set, to engage closely with how novelists' techniques have developed over time, thereby strongly addressing Assessment Objectives 2 and 4.

Background reading undertaken by these students had similarly enabled them to register some interesting insights which influenced their interpretation of text (such as Austen's sly references to Mrs Elton's association with Bristol which in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century seemingly had a reputation for radicalism and philanthropy, thereby adding another ironic layer to Mrs Elton's apparent championing of the downtrodden Jane Fairfax!).

At another centre *Streetcar* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* were taught, to which students added another post-1945 text of their own choosing. They produced some interesting responses to the notion that post Second World War American writers have been preoccupied with the idea that "human kind cannot

bear very much reality". Contextual factors were effectively synthesised in the fabric of the essay.

A centre chose three 20<sup>th</sup> century plays for study (*Pygmalion*, *Streetcar* and *The Homecoming*) ensuring students were implicitly directed to consider the very different contexts which influenced how Shaw (1912), Williams (1947) and Pinter (1965) portrayed the shifting relationship between power and gender over fifty turbulent years.

### **Devising successful questions**

The formula of an initial critic's proposition followed by "To what extent do you agree with this assessment of how writers have presented this theme in the texts you have studied?" often provided a reassuring "hook" from which students could develop their arguments for Assessment Objectives 1 and 3.

Introducing a qualifying adverb in the title (e.g. "To what extent do you agree that female characters are always presented as victims in dystopian fiction?") was another helpful tactic for enabling students to establish an argument.

### **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) which 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 the A level specification were prepared for first teaching in 2008. 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 (AOs)**

All examples of good practice here are taken from this summer's submissions, 2014.

#### **AO1**

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

This is a very strong opening from a student.

The title is:

"Character determines destiny". To what extent is this true for the protagonists of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Oedipus the King*?

The protagonists of these three plays experience similarly miserable destinies: loss of family and death; degeneration from "noble" to "tyrant" and death; "a black sea of terror" and exile. This reflects one unchanged convention of tragedy: a hero's peripeteia, leading to a catastrophic denouement.

**Moderator's comment:**

You do not have to use words like peripeteia (a reversal of circumstances or turning point, originally Greek) and denouement (the final resolution or clarification of a dramatic or narrative plot, originally French) and sometimes essays will over-use terms as a way of trying too hard to impress. Not so here; the terms are appropriate and the ideas in them will be developed in the essay.

**Moderator's tip:**

George Orwell once famously said "never use a long word where a short one will do." His advice still makes sense. We moderators do read a number of essays that seem to have used a thesaurus to replace every plain word with a multi-syllabic one. There are occasions however when the precise use of a term makes all the difference. The Greek and French words here both replace a long winded phrase in English.

**A note for teachers and assessors about word length:**

A student who has failed to comply with the 3,000 word limit will not have shaped and organised material in a way which another student, 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.*

One moderator makes this interesting comment:

Some centres might help their students by encouraging them to consider the term "evaluates", which appears in Band 4 of AOs 2, 3 and 4. In the best work I saw this year there was some genuinely impressive sensitivity to the power of the texts to influence readers and audiences. Here are a few notable examples: Atwood's chilling dystopian vision drawing on recognisable features of 1980s America; the difficulty, when watching Williams' Blanche Dubois, in knowing whether to sympathise with or condemn her; the relative power of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* to make a reader uncomfortably aware of their own flaws. Such understanding is obviously articulated through detailed analysis of the writer's craft, including, but not limited to, language,

form and structure. Those students who sustained this balance between careful focus on detail and sensitivity to the impact of the text fully deserved 20/20 for AO2. This is not to suggest that painstaking analysis of a writer's choice of words should not be rewarded, and a large number of students reached a strong AO2 mark through this technique. However, there was some tendency in less confident students for this process to become somewhat laborious and, in its tight focus on individual words and phrases, to distract students from their impact within the whole text.

Here is an example of a student who is really confident in her/his use of a text:

The aim of the state in Gilead is to utilise women's bodies as political instruments, thus reducing women to represent nothing more than their fertility. Atwood creates situations where the handmaid suffers objectification by males. Offred describes a moment where she is being watched by a Guardian. She knows they are watching; "I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me." She explains how it is like "teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach". Atwood is not only referring to the idea that women are seen as objects of male fantasy but also the male view that women torment the sexuality of men. Moreover, although women are made out as objects of fertility, they are made to reject their sexuality. A critical passage where this is suggested is when Offred talks of her body while in the bath: "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely." This is also telling of what Atwood believes patriarchy does to women psychologically. There is a strong sense of self-hood and self-respect in Offred's description of her body being like "a swamp, a fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory." She repeatedly calls attention to how completely she is determined by her own fertility.... Not only is she afraid of her body, but there is also a sense that she feels disgust towards it. Indeed, whenever Offred comes across her reflection, she is often wary and guarded.

**Moderator's comment:**

This writing has a confident feel to it: detail of what is happening in the novel is never just a narrative re-telling but always used to make some point about the writer's craft.

**Moderator's tip:**

Aim to move away from the rather mechanical PEE approach often favoured by teachers at Key Stage 3; use the name of the writer to establish what s/he is doing and how the effects are achieved.

**AO3 and AO4**

There are three requirements here. For AO3 essays need to do two things: *explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts* and ensure their explorations are *informed by interpretations of other readers*. For AO4 they

need to *demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.*

One or two centres seemed to be a little uncertain as to what should be rewarded under AO4, particularly for popular historical texts such as Friel's *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, McEwan's *Atonement* and Barker's *Regeneration*. A number of essays containing very little (sometimes no) reference to the context(s) of production and reception had been awarded very generous AO4 marks (18-20/20); the annotation indicated that assessors were rewarding the candidates' analysis of the writers' commentary on their historical setting.

It is important therefore that there is a clear understanding that writing about the historical setting of a novel or play is not the same thing as commenting on the *significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.*

This essay explores the way that attitudes towards "monstrous fiction" have changed over time:

Perceptions of vampires and monstrous creatures have developed over centuries. Science and religion play a crucial part in this development, owing to scientific knowledge expanding and religious theories disappearing. People's desire for credible gothic fiction has encouraged the growth of monstrous fiction's expanse over time. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) presented a monstrous conception that during that period provided fear and entertainment yet changing attitudes and further scientific development made by Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, (as published in *The Origin of Species* in 1859) fuel a new insight. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) displayed a monster figure, a vampire. Superstitions and falsehoods were a way in which readers from the eighteenth century onwards could fantasise about the unknown; these attitudes were further advanced through scientists making significant changes stemming from fact and fiction. Thus we have Stephanie Meyer's 2005 *Twilight Saga*, generating a creature which twenty first readers would deem believable, with the monstrous character's appearance being typical of human beings, as opposed to abnormal and "monstrous". Throughout this discussion, the evaluation of the attitudes surrounding gothic fiction and the consequences of changes and developments over time will be explored.

**Moderator's comment:**

There is a slight possibility here that the essay is going to force interpretations on these texts to demonstrate a historical progression that might almost be a little too straightforward. Nevertheless the aims of the essay are clear and the contextual insight clearly goes a long way beyond just knowing a few dates.

**Moderator's tip:**

To score marks for AO3 and AO4 you need to look at how different readers interpret things differently. One way of doing this is to choose texts with a similar theme but written at different times.

## Conclusion

A few practical points commonly arising on reports to centres:

- Do make sure that the moderator receives work by the published date (May 15<sup>th</sup>). This is the actual deadline – receiving it early is always appreciated.
- Unless it is your school's policy, there is no need for the parcel to be sent "signed for" (although it is important to obtain a certificate of posting for your own records): having to collect a parcel from the post office, because the moderator (who is probably a teacher too) was not at home, only delays matters.
- Remember to include the folders with the highest and lowest marks, even if they are not asterisked. (A tip: where either of these two folders represents an extreme – a sudden really good piece of work in a more modest collection, or one that is markedly below the standard of the rest – take care not to over-react. A folder is not worth full marks just because it is the best one in the pack, nor is the weakest response necessarily worthy of a mark down in the teens and twenties. Getting these, and the rank order right, help to present a stable collection of marks that will make sense to the moderator.
- Be as helpful as possible to the moderator by commenting evaluatively on the students' work. It is quite tempting only to pick up on the positives in an attempt to "sell" the given mark to a moderator, but an acknowledgment of weakness also helps the moderator to confirm the centre's judgement.
- OPTEMS: the centre should keep the green one. Enclose the yellow one with the work that goes to the moderator. The top copy goes to Hellaby, Rotherham. It is important to retain the green one at the centre in case anything is lost in the post, and sending the top copy to the moderator delays the process of inputting marks into the database.

## **Grade Boundaries**

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>

