

Moderators' Report/
Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2015

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

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General Overview

This report is based on individual reports submitted by a number of moderators. The opening comment which follows comes from an experienced moderator and examiner. It is typical of many:

"It was, once again, a pleasure and a privilege to read many of these scripts. Most candidates, as in previous years, readily accepted, or even relished, the challenge of this coursework unit. Many essays were confident in presenting a personal line of argument, supported by critical understanding and independent reading. Some responses showed evident scholarship and a good number were interesting to read - with at least some explorative and illuminating points and connections."

Another report (from another experienced hand) sums up the feelings of many:

"I saw some outstanding work this series, covering a hugely varied range of texts and tasks. The best work clearly demonstrated that candidates had been able to research their own particular areas of interest and had read widely and independently."

These are the three things which earn the best marks: candidates following up their *own interests* by dint of *wide* and *independent* reading.

Many centres teach all the texts being covered for coursework but offer candidates a choice of tasks, others teach only one or two of them, others teach none of them at all, leaving the candidates to discover their own texts with (importantly) support and advice from their teachers. All three methods can be shown to work well. It is worth remembering however that, to reach the top of the highest bands, the assessment criteria require the work to be original - and that does not simply mean that it has not been copied or plagiarised. It should have an originality of voice and thought. It will not be original in the sense that an eighteen year old student has discovered something for the first time in history about *Hamlet* or is saying something about the poetry of Keats that no one has ever thought of before; but it will be original in the sense that, for this candidate, the ideas are new and fresh and the act of synthesis – putting texts and ideas together and thinking through one's own individual response in the light of other readings, being sharply aware of oneself as a reader in the twenty first century – makes the essay undeniably a top band response.

Popular choices and tasks which worked well

The following themes were particularly popular in 2015:

Dystopian societies
The impact of war
The female experience in a variety of cultures
Gothic horror

The following texts made repeated appearance:

Novels

The Handmaid's Tale,
1984
Brave New World
Zamyatin's We
The Picture of Dorian Gray
The Bell Jar
The Catcher in the Rye

Plays

A Streetcar Named Desire
A Doll's House

World Literature

A moderator writes: "It was pleasing to see candidates extending their reading beyond America and Britain with Camus, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Homer and the Norse sagas featuring alongside 'mainstream' literary texts (such as the combination of *Crime and Punishment*, *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Brave New World*).

In one centre the same two core texts *The Tempest* and *Translations* had been studied but the candidates independently chose a third text. An interesting variety of tasks were offered, all based around post-colonial readings.

Creative responses were seen from a centre in which a fairy tale had been re-imagined in the style of Angela Carter, along with a critical commentary. The moderator reports that the creative pieces were very interesting and enjoyable to read, demonstrating a clear understanding of Carter's methods and style. Whilst all the candidates answered the same task, they had chosen different fairy tales on which to base their work, so there was clear evidence of independent choice and research.

Combinations which worked well

Jane Austen's presentation of the female protagonists in *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey* supported by a range of background reading including Austen's Letters, her juvenilia and work by Mary Wollstonecraft.

Dystopian literature: *The Handmaid's Tale*, accompanied by some very recent novels: De Stefano's *Wither* (2011), and Cohn's *Beta* and *Emergent*.

King Lear, *Endgame* and Bennett's *Waiting for the Telegram* as Nihilist plays.

The role of women in oppressive societies: *The Wife of Bath*, *The Crucible* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, [assuming *The Wife* not offered for 6ET03]

Friel's *Translations* in a range of combinations (with Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* – focus on violence as fundamental to successful colonial rule; with *Things Fall Apart* – father-son relationships; with *Heart of Darkness* – "To what extent are colonisers presented as 'bearers of a spark from the sacred fire?"; with *Wide Sargasso Sea* – significance of naming, both set in 1833 [assuming *Wide Sargasso Sea* was not used for 6ET01].

The Handmaid's Tale, *We, Never Let Me Go* – "To what extent are narrators complicit in the totalitarian regime in which they are writing / speaking?"

Hamlet, *The Trial*, P.K.Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* – theme of entrapment.

Pygmalion, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *The Crucible* – socialist writers using literary texts as vehicles for political ideas.

Streetcar, Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Myfanwy Piper's libretto for the opera version of *The Turn of the Screw* – exploring the way writers depict the entry of an outsider.

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?" might be a bit clumsy but often provided a reassuring "hook" from which candidates could develop their arguments for AOs 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 candidates to establish an argument.

Questions which included an evaluative element (e.g. How far do you agree with [this critic's opinion] in relation to the texts you have studied?) enabled candidates to establish a coherent line of argument (AO1) while

citing a critic (such as Bakhtin's reference to 'carnavalesque / grotesque realism' in relation to Carter's *Wise Children* and Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* or Amin Malak's six components of dystopian fiction in relation to the texts under consideration gave candidates a head start in addressing the second strand of AO3.

What has not worked so well

Online sources are fine, but candidates sometimes do not look beyond the first few sources that pop up in front of them. Gradesaver, Sparknotes and Shmoop may be useful as part of a range of critical sources but they are not really sufficiently challenging to make up the bulk of the wider reading required for this unit.

Some centres have not annotated the candidates' work, or only quoted from the generic assessment criteria without relating comments to the specific essays in front of them. Some teachers only make totally positive points about candidates' work, even though the marks indicate they have reservations - it is helpful for the moderator to know why a candidate has lost, as well as gained, some marks.

Tasks with a heavy sociological (rather than literary) bias, or those with an excessive historical or psychological bias, tended to be less successful.

Three examples of successful (and interesting) submissions

1. First, the truly scholarly essay. The title is: According to Linda Alcoff in her essay *Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*, "a woman in society ... is always the Object, a conglomeration of attributes to be predicted and controlled...."

To what extent can this theory be applied to the presentation of women in feminist literature? Main text *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, subsidiary texts *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins-Gilman.

Moderator's caution: this is not a title for all comers, but it does illustrate the way differentiation can be used to challenge candidates who are ready to cope with this sort of task. Here the essay title was partly devised by the student herself. The essay begins:

Stein suggests that the preliminary and concluding material of *The Handmaid's Tale*, namely Atwood's two dedications, three epigraphs and the pseudo-factual "Historical Notes", act as a frame to Offred's narrative, much like the way in which "a frame around a painting tells us to read an enclosed space in a certain way, as an art object, an object re-presented".

A footnote guides the reader to Karen Stein's 1996 essay *Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal*.

This heavily footnoted, overtly scholarly essay was awarded full marks, and deservedly so. At first sight it may sound a little pretentious, but the quality of work and argument went on to demonstrate that sometimes folders are worth more than 80 out of 80 (and this is an important point – work may not be as good as this one was and yet still receive full marks).

2. Next, an essay which is never quite literary enough to reach the top bands. This folder had a title which also started with a quotation, this time from *Gulliver's Travels*: "It gave me melancholy reflections to observe how much the race of human kind was degenerate among us". It was followed by a loosely linked sub title "Dystopian novels and social commentary."

Sometimes a closer tie up between starting point quotation and the injunction is helpful. The essay which follows is solid – it links Swift and Atwood because of their handling of irony, but it never becomes evaluative and therefore ends up with a secure pass mark but not one of the higher grades.

Texts are linked through context (it often happens that AO3 and AO4 requirements overlap) but there is something rather wooden about the way this happens:

The rule of Hitler in Germany had similar influences both on *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. This is due to how the youth of both novels are shown to resemble the Hitler youth, we learn this with Offred's comment on how "the young ones are the most dangerous, the most fanatical" which relates to the "fanatical adulation" which was encouraged by the Hitler Youth movement". Orwell also creates the same effect with Parson's children "in the blue shorts, grey shirts and red neckerchiefs which are the uniform of the spies".

This is all very true, links are made, context is understood, but there is not much in the way of literary exploration.

3. This essay links three very different texts. The title gives a quotation from *King Lear* "He hath ever but slenderly known himself" with the injunction "Explore the relationship between madness and self knowledge in *King Lear*, *The Wasp Factory* and Poe's *The Black Cat*."

The result is not a perfect essay (this one does not score 80 out of 80) but it does edge towards the top grade. Here it is at its best:

Lear is so unaware of not only himself, but also of others around him that he lets false declarations of love overpower real ones. He "disdains all paternal care, propinquity and property of blood" when he addresses Cordelia. The semantic field of monetary bargaining and possession is used here, and therefore has connotations of financial relinquishment, and highlights the view of the time that a father owned his daughter. Thus it is impossible for a father to disclaim what he owns without impoverishing himself. This is therefore an act of undermining the very construction of his identity.

The teacher has written "interesting idea" in the margin here – and indeed it is! Very interesting indeed.

Overlap between set books and texts chosen for coursework (repeated from previous reports)

There are a few points to bear in mind here

- 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 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.

Practical points commonly arising on reports to centres:

- Do make sure that the moderator receives work by the published date (May 15th). This is the actual deadline – receiving it early is always appreciated.
- 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 candidate 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 candidates’ 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.

- Ensure that everything is signed and that candidates have included a cumulative word count at the foot of each page. Please don't let them exceed the maximum word count, as this is part of the exercise: the task is to create a folder within 3,000 words and reward is given within AO1 for doing this.
- Numbering pages is really helpful, as is having work in a readable size of print (less than 12 point can be troublesome).

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>

