

General Certificate of Education
June 2004
Advanced Level Examination



ENGLISH LITERATURE (SPECIFICATION B)
Unit 6 Exploring Texts

LTB6/PM

To be issued to candidates on Friday 18 June 2004 for examination
on Tuesday 22 June 2004 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm

Pre-Release Material

- To be given out on or after Friday 18 June 2004.
- On receipt of this material, you are advised to check carefully that the booklet is complete and that no pages are missing or illegible. There should be 12 pages. If you experience problems you should consult your teacher.
- You should use the time between receiving this material and the examination to familiarise yourself with its contents.
- You are permitted to make **brief** annotations on the pre-release material. Such annotation should amount to no more than cross-references and/or the glossing of individual words or phrases. Highlighting and underlining are permitted.
- You are **not** permitted to bring any additional written material with you into the examination.
- Your teacher is **not** permitted to discuss the pre-release material with you before the examination.
- **You must bring this material with you to the examination.**

Pre-Release Material

Empire and Ethnicity

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Item One

The following essay is by George Orwell (1903–1950) and was written in 1936. In it Orwell recalls an incident that occurred in 1926 when he was serving with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, during the days of the British Empire. It was first published in *New Writing*.

Although Orwell is most famous as a novelist, he is regarded by some critics as being even more gifted as an essayist. The essay as a literary form goes back at least as far as the third century BC and is still flourishing today. Its length varies from a few hundred words to book length and, as the extract on the essay in the Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory notes, ‘It is one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms’. This flexibility is shown in the great variation both in form and content of the essay in the hands of different writers and in different ages. The aspects all essays have in common are that they are written in prose and are non-fictional.

Many famous essayists started life as journalists or worked simultaneously as journalists, as Orwell did. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries essays were frequently published in magazines or periodicals. Nowadays we can read literary essays in the review sections of broadsheet newspapers or in ‘The London Review of Books’.

The style and language of essays varies enormously depending on the date of composition, the topic, purpose and viewpoint of the author. Their structure is as varied as that of novels, some being loose and fluid, others highly organised. Essayists employ many of the same kinds of literary methods as novelists and in many ways the literary essay can be seen as the non-fictional equivalent of the short story. Like novelists, essayists need to entertain the reader in order to sustain their interest. Modern novelists such as Will Self are keeping up the traditions of their predecessors in contributing essays to newspapers and periodicals.

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Item Two

Ways of approaching Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*.

In 1936, when Orwell wrote his essay, *Shooting an Elephant*, the British Empire had passed its peak, although jingoistic attitudes to the Empire on which the sun reportedly never set, were very much embedded in the British psyche. However, in reality, even at the height of Empire, the idea that this worldwide Empire was regarded even by those who worked in it as an unalloyed good, was mistaken. Readers sometimes expect that literature of the Empire will be concerned primarily with the idea of British superiority and its power to improve the native populations it dominated around the world. That this was not the case is clearly shown by such novels as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, which gives a highly critical view of the British Raj. His view was echoed by many of his contemporaries. Similarly Orwell's recall of an incident in 1926, when he was working for the British Empire in Burma, shows how the people on the ground experienced at best ambivalence, at worst revulsion, towards the roles they found themselves having to play.

Even when many people fundamentally endorsed the idea of Empire, there was great diversity of opinion about colonialism, the principles underlying it and how they might best be effected. This wide diversity of view has perhaps not always been fully appreciated by the proponents of Postcolonial criticism, a way of looking at literature which emerged in the late twentieth century. Postcolonial criticism emerged as a protest against the assumptions many white western writers were felt to make, that their view of the world was the norm. Postcolonial views can be seen as a way of expressing the viewpoint of the colonised people, not simply those of the coloniser. Although this is clearly a valid view, such critics do not always highlight the instances where white western writers *do* concern themselves with the viewpoint of the colonised peoples as well as the colonisers. Such an approach is evident in Forster's *A Passage to India*.

However, it is arguably the case that the British view of Burma and India during the period when they were part of the British Empire tends to be almost entirely that of the white, middle or upper class British male. A postcolonial reading of a white western text would point out that the foreign country was seen as a homogenous entity, its people masses rather than individuals, who acted as they did because of their racial identity rather than through the conscious choices that might be made by any of us according to our particular situation and role.

Shooting an Elephant is a particularly interesting text to look at from the postcolonial perspective, because Orwell, unlike the vast majority of white men in the East bearing what they often saw as 'the burden' of Empire, hated the job he did and 'was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British'. However, because of his background and education he inevitably shared many of the prejudices of his colleagues. The lack of individuality in the presentation of the native people is noticeable here in spite of Orwell's obvious sympathy for the Burmese, shown in such phrases as 'The wretched prisoners'. His ambivalence is clear through his generalised references to 'the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere' and 'the evil-spirited little beasts'. No-one apart from the narrator has a personal identity in this story. Some Burmese are individualised by their rank or job and the dead man is distinctive as a 'black Dravidian coolie'. The word 'coolie', meaning an unskilled native labourer, would now be seen as an offensive term.

The whole story is Eurocentric in being seen through the eyes of the coloniser. Orwell's description of Burma and of the native people is fairly detached. He does refer to the 'expression of unendurable agony' on the dead coolie's face but quickly moves on to compare the corpse to a skinned rabbit. The crowd is generally seen as without individuality: 'It was a bit of fun to them'; 'I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes', and where their views vary, the implication is that they are either confused or being deliberately deceptive: 'Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant'. The choice of 'professed' suggests duplicity. The attitudes of the Burmese are almost always seen as at best childish: 'They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot'. The single word 'merely' alerts us to Orwell's amused contempt for their values.

Most texts written at the time of the Empire by British citizens either at home or serving the Empire throughout the world, will inevitably show signs of the kind of Eurocentric approach described here. As has been pointed out, the approach of these writers is also, more often than not, that of the male. Consequently in the process of analysing text from a postcolonial viewpoint, critics will also find themselves deeply involved in the issue of gender.

Item Three

The following passage is taken from the introduction to Niall Ferguson's *Empire*, published by Allen Lane in 2003. It begins with two quotations.

Britain controls today the destinies of some 350.000.000 alien people, unable as yet to govern themselves, and easy victims to rapine and injustice, unless a strong arm guards them. She is giving them a rule that has its faults, no doubt, but such, I would make bold to affirm, as no conquering state ever before gave to a dependent people.

Professor George M. Wrong, 1909

. . . Colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and . . . Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences . . .

Durban Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, 2001

Once there was an Empire that governed roughly a quarter of the world's population, covered about the same proportion of the earth's land surface and dominated nearly all its oceans. The British Empire was the biggest Empire ever, bar none. How an archipelago of rainy islands off the north-west coast of Europe came to rule the world is one of the fundamental questions not just of British but of world history. It is one of the questions this book seeks to answer. The second and perhaps more difficult question it addresses is simply whether the Empire was a good or bad thing.

It is nowadays quite conventional to think that, on balance, it was bad. Probably the main reason for the Empire's fall into disrepute was its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery itself. This is no longer a question for historical judgement alone; it has become a political, and potentially a legal issue. In August 1999 the African World Reparations and Repatriation Truth Commission, meeting in Accra, issued a demand for reparations from 'all those nations of Western Europe and the Americas and institutions, who participated and benefited from the slave trade and colonialism'. The sum suggested as adequate compensation – based on estimates of 'the number of human lives lost to Africa during the slave-trade, as well as an assessment of the worth of the gold, diamonds and other minerals taken from the continent during colonial rule' – was \$777 trillion. Given that more than three million of the ten million or so Africans who crossed the Atlantic as slaves before 1850 were shipped in British vessels, the putative British reparations burden could be in the region of £150 trillion.

Such a claim may seem fantastic. But the idea was given some encouragement at the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in the summer of 2001. The conference's final report 'acknowledged' that slavery and the slave trade were 'a crime against humanity' of which 'people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples' were 'victims'. In another of the conference's 'declarations', 'colonialism' was casually lumped together with 'slavery, the slave trade . . . apartheid . . . and genocide' in a blanket call to UN member states 'to honour the memory of the victims of past tragedies'. Noting that 'some States have taken the initiative to apologize and have paid reparation, where appropriate, for grave and massive violations committed', the conference 'called on all those who have not yet contributed to restoring the dignity of the victims to find appropriate ways to do so'.

These calls have not gone unheeded in Britain itself. In May 2002 the director of the London-based 'think tank' Demos, which may be regarded as the avant-garde of New Labour, suggested that the Queen should embark on 'a world tour to apologize for the past sins of Empire as a first step to making the Commonwealth more effective and relevant'. The news agency that reported this remarkable suggestion added the helpful gloss: 'Critics of the British Empire, which at its peak in 1918 covered a quarter of the world's population and area, say its huge wealth was built on oppression and exploitation.'

At the time of writing, one BBC website (apparently aimed at school-children) offered the following equally incisive overview of imperial history:

The Empire came to greatness by killing lots of people less sharply armed than themselves and stealing their countries, although their methods later changed: killing lots of people with machine guns came to prominence as the army's tactic of choice . . . [It] . . . fell to pieces because of various people like Mahatma Gandhi, heroic revolutionary protester, sensitive to the needs of his people.

The questions recently posed by an eminent historian on BBC television may be said to encapsulate the current conventional wisdom. 'How', he asked, 'did a people who thought themselves free end up subjugating so much of the world . . . How did an empire of the free become an empire of slaves?' How, despite their 'good intentions', did the British sacrifice 'common humanity' to 'the fetish of the market'?

TURN OVER FOR ITEM FOUR

Turn over ►

Item Four

The following extract is taken from *Memory Hold-the-Door*, the autobiography of John Buchan (1875–1940). Buchan was in South Africa from 1901–1903 with the High Commission, working on reconstruction after the Boer War. Writing about this period of his life Buchan comments on what he learned from his experience in South Africa.

Above all I ceased to be an individualist and became a citizen. I acquired a political faith. Those were the days when a vision of what the Empire might be made dawned upon certain minds with almost the force of a revelation. To-day the word is sadly tarnished. Its mislikers have managed to identify it with uglinesses like corrugated-iron roofs and raw townships, or, worse still, with a callous racial arrogance. Its dreams, once so bright, have been so pawed by unctuous hands that their glory has departed. Phrases which held a world of idealism and poetry have been spoilt by their use in bad verse and in after-dinner perorations. Even that which is generally accepted has become a platitude. Something like the sober, merchandising Jacobean colonial policy has replaced the high Elizabethan dreams. But in those days things were different. It was an inspiration for youth to realise the magnitude of its material heritage, and to think how it might be turned to spiritual issues. Milner, like most imperialists of that day, believed in imperial federation. So did I at the start; but before I left South Africa I had come to distrust any large scheme of formal organisation. I had begun to accept the doctrine which Sir Wilfrid Laurier was later to expound; that the Dominions were not ready for such a union and must be allowed full freedom to follow their own destinies. But on the main question I was more than a convert, I was a fanatic.

I dreamed of a world-wide brotherhood with the background of a common race and creed, consecrated to the service of peace; Britain enriching the rest out of her culture and traditions, and the spirit of the Dominions like a strong wind freshening the stuffiness of the old lands. I saw in the Empire a means of giving to the congested masses at home open country instead of a blind alley. I saw hope for a new afflatus in art and literature and thought. Our creed was not based on antagonism to any other people. It was humanitarian and international; we believed that we were laying the basis of a federation of the world. As for the native races under our rule, we had a high conscientiousness; Milner and Rhodes had a far-sighted native policy. The 'white man's burden' is now an almost meaningless phrase; then it involved a new philosophy of politics, and an ethical standard, serious and surely not ignoble.

The result was that my notion of a career was radically changed. I thought no more of being a dignified judge with a taste for letters, or a figure in British politics. I wanted some administrative task, some share in the making of this splendid commonwealth. I hoped to spend most of my life out of Britain. I had no desire to be a pro-consul or any kind of grandee. I would have been content with any job however thankless, in any quarter however remote, if I had a chance of making a corner of the desert blossom and the solitary place glad.

END OF PRE-RELEASE MATERIAL

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