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Examiner's Report Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

Pearson Edexcel IAL
In English Literature (WET01)
Unit 1: Literature: Post-2000 Poetry and Prose

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Introduction

There was a significant increase in the number of entries in this sitting of the paper, the third since the specification started in 2016. There was also a pleasing and significant increase in the number of students whose work reached the higher bands in the mark scheme, reflecting some real engagement with the texts. In particular it was noticeable that most students were choosing appropriate second poems for comparison in section A (not simply falling back on the poems they knew particularly well) and in section B the best answers were ones which took heed of the nuances and suggestions in the given statements¹ when responding to the questions. For example, a question on Martel's *Life of Pi* asked students to "explore the ways in which Martel presents Pi in the novel". However, the initial statement, the aim of which was to trigger a more focused response, was "this is a novel which captivates its readers: we are charmed by the gentle and good natured Pi." Less successful answers tended simply to write about Pi's character; better ones took into account the writer's craft, recognising that Pi is a construct, which the writer "presents" to us. The best answers of all acknowledged that the question is addressing them specifically as readers who may (or may not) have been "charmed" by the writer's presentation of his protagonist. AO5, which requires consideration of different interpretations, is not specifically addressed in this unit, so there is no requirement to challenge the statement offered with an alternative point of view; it should be remembered however that the statement is not meant to represent the voice of authority - it is a point of view, an opinion, an assertion, placed there with the intention of trying to help students by giving them something to think about.

To recap on the format: this paper has two sections to be completed in two hours. Candidates are required to write one essay for each section. The assessment objectives tested are:

- For Section A (where candidates choose one of the two questions offered on *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry 2002 – 2011*) : AO1, AO2 and AO4.
- For Section B (where candidates choose one of the two questions offered on their chosen novel. The novels are modern, lend themselves readily to discussion of contextual issues and are set predominantly in Afghanistan, India, Ireland and the US, Nigeria and, in the case of *Life of Pi*, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean) : AO1, AO2 and AO3.

¹ The "statements" referred to here are the assertions offered in inverted commas at the beginning of each question in Part B. These are followed by injunctions which set the actual tasks.

Section A

Question 1 asked students to compare the ways in which poets express a political point of view. The given poem was George Szirtes' *Song*.

There was a wide range of poems chosen for comparison including Burnside's *History*, Carson's *The War Correspondent*, Doshi's *The Deliverer*, Ford's *Giuseppe*, Nagra's *Look We Have Coming to Dover*, O'Brien's *Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright*. All of these could be made to fit the question well.

This extract reveals a student who is (quite rightly) conscious of being a reader:

"Both poems *Song* and *Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright* have titles which suggest an artful and lyrical content. However, they surprise the reader by presenting powerful and unexpected emotions and opinions. In *Song* George Szirtes intentionally uses the structure of a song with regular rhymes and a strong rhythm. His support of the liberal and democratic view is suggested by the form of his poem as well as the way in which refrains are sung about the power of unity ... Szirtes seems to be calling the reader or listener to join in the movement and compels them to do so with the alluring power of this "song."

Most students appear to have been told by their teachers that some sort of conclusion is required to their essays and there were some excellent final paragraphs that seemed to clinch the arguments and leave the examiner convinced they were top band responses. Students should not however waste time on a concluding paragraph if it simply repeats what has already been said. In some cases a good essay had a rather bland conclusion, as if the student felt obliged to offer it. In the worst cases, conclusions could be reductive, spoiling a more complex argument by summarizing it with a clichéd aphorism. In these cases students would have done better to move on to the next question.

The alternative anthology question was less popular, possibly because the given poem, Heaney's *Out of the Bag* was perceived as quite long and challenging. When tackled, it did produce some very good answers to the question about the ways in which poets create a sense of place (and, of course, there was plenty to say about this with regard to this poem, especially if students moved on beyond the first section). The most usual comparison poems were Duffy's *The Map Woman*, Minninnick's *The Fox in the National Museum of Wakes* and, most frequently of all, Nagra's *Look We Have Coming to Dover*. This poem was also a popular choice for questions and nearly always elicited an enthusiastic and engaged response whether writing about its political voice for question 1 or its evocation of various places with a mixture of comedy, bitterness, anger and the intertextual referencing of Arnold's *Dover Beach*.

Appreciation has also doubtlessly been helped by students having seen and heard this poem in performance by the poet himself (easily available of course on YouTube).

Less successful answers, as always, tended to fall back on what they know, in spite of the specific question here on a sense of place. Students often appear to have been well prepared in writing about themes, but it is not simply pre-learnt points about themes that can be used to link poems.

Students should be reminded that the best answers refer to both their poems from the very start of the essay; essays which deal exclusively with one poem first and only address the other half way through the response, invariably perform less well for AO4, the assessment objective that covers "connections between texts".

Section B

Questions 3 & 4: *The Kite Runner*- Khaled Hosseini

These were the most popular questions in this section of the paper. Question 3 on unfairness in the novel enabled students to offer relevant context points about the Taliban and the prejudice against Hazaras, leading to discussion about the unfairness of Afghan society. Some students examined the role of women in Afghanistan and the United States. It was particularly good to see students writing about the significant part of the novel set in California. In the example below a student is struggling to make a point absolutely clear: but one feels the essay is on the brink of making a useful point:

"The unfairness of life is presented in a different way when Sohrab's immigration into the US is a clear *deus ex machina*, as it contrasts the danger Amir and Baba faced as they escaped Afghanistan - perhaps an attempt by Hosseini to show that sometimes unfairness can be a positive idea."

Perhaps the point being made here is that the novel's ending, the escape to the West, is not simply a happy resolution and an escape from all of life's unfairness: it works only for the lucky few.

It was fascinating, as an examiner, to read different approaches to the same text (the same point will be made later on with regard to *Brooklyn*). Here two concluding paragraphs provide an illustration:

"Ultimately Hosseini argues that the unfairness of life is unable to be decided by ourselves but our reaction to this unfairness can save us, such is the case with Amir's redemption and eventual hopeful ending with Sohrab."

“Hosseini leaves the reader uncertain of what fairness truly is and presents the search for fairness as futile and possibly impossible.”

There are of course no right answers. As always, different interpretations of texts, if well backed up and logically argued, are all acceptable.

Question 4 was on the nature of close friendship. Students explored the relationship between Amir and Hassan, bringing in valid context points about the Pashtun and Hazara divide; some questioned whether the relationship was truly a “close friendship” at all. Amir’s rescuing of Sohrab was seen as repaying his debt to his dead friend. There was plenty of material from the novel for students to use; without careful selection however some answers became swamped by narrative retelling.

Questions 5 & 6: *Life of Pi* - Yann Martel

Question 5, with the statement that the novel “captivates its readers” through the way the character of Pi is presented has already been mentioned in this report with regard to the importance of the statement that precedes the injunction. An answer that starts in this way is clearly on the right lines:

“To begin with one could agree partly with the statement, implying that Pi is being positively presented in the novel. This can be seen through his following three religions, his strong faith and love for God. However, Pi’s savage instincts are also mentioned through his ordeal in the Pacific Ocean and this becomes clarified later, in the second story...”

This opening reassures the reader that the question is going to be addressed fully and the book explored as a whole (not just considering Pi’s adventures at sea.)

A number of answers considered the post modern element of the novel which allowed for the reader to choose “the better story” also mirrored the attitude of Pi, imaginative, open to suggestion and ambivalence, in contrast to his logic driven interrogators at the end of the novel; better answers also recognised that Pi, as his name implies, has an elusive quality that makes it impossible to define him precisely. These responses recognised that a “gentle and good natured” story teller is central to one’s reading and understanding of the novel.

Equally popular was question 6 which asked about the presentation of “ideas about fear.” As often in the novel section of the paper there were students who knew their set text well and had a great deal to say about them, but were not always rigorously selective enough in order to make carefully chosen parts of the novel fit the question and also allow credit to be gained for AO2, analysing language and commenting on the writer’s craft. The result could be an answer which was excessively narrative or simply listed as many examples of fearful situations as possible.

An answer which explores the text and looks in some detail at how Martel presents fear is shown here:

“When Pi wants to get back on the tarpaulin, fear and reason are personified - “fear and reason fought over the answer.” And at last reason won over fear and Pi did not die after reaching the tarpaulin showing how reason is more reliable than fear in the situation of survival. It is personified once again in chapter 56 as a “clever, treacherous adversary” with the use of warrior diction of fighting such as “foot soldier” and “weapons technology”. Fear is seen as an internal battle within oneself and by succumbing to fear all is lost. A simile is also used to show how fear infiltrates the mind - it “nestles in your mind, like gangrene” - which further emphasises the importance of having a strong will to fight fear.”

Questions 7 & 8: *The White Tiger* - Aravind Adiga

So far, in the early life of this specification, there have been relatively few centres choosing to prepare students for this brilliant and audacious novel. Both questions set this series aimed to challenge the candidate into making an evaluative response, question 7 suggesting that “The novel provocatively explores the ugly and unacceptable side of life” and the question 8 presenting the statement that “this is a novel of extremes - and that is both its strength and its weakness.”

The best work answered the question by responding to the challenge in the statement rather than just recounting the incidents in the novel that show us the “ugly and unacceptable side of life” or writing about the extreme situations in the book without considering if there is a way its starkly drawn polarities might also be considered a weakness as well as a strength.

Examiners look forward to seeing more responses to this novel in the future as such a provocative and challenging text can lead to provocative and challenging answers.

Questions 9 & 10 *Brooklyn* - Colm Toibin

Question 9 offered the statement that the novel presents love as bringing joy and pain in equal measure. Students saw the novel in different, and quite acceptably different ways: some saw the novel about finding love in the new world, away from the repressions of Enniscorthy and poverty in 1950s Ireland; some focused more on what they saw as a heartbreaking decision at the end of the book when Eilis finds herself committed to turning her back on a new found love and the possibility of what might have been. Examiners are of course open to different responses, provided they are backed up with evidence.

There were some perceptive answers to this question, the best ones seeing the subtleties in Toibin’s narrative whereby nothing is ever totally black or white:

"Even the most joyous moments in the novel are somehow overshadowed. For example at the baseball game we as readers are never quite sure how happy Eilis is going to be, just as the excitement of her new life is qualified by remembrance of what she has left behind which comes fully into focus once she returns and meets Jim. Tony's delighted picture of married life with Eilis is spoilt by her reaction and there is more than a hint that her apprehensiveness about marriage as leading to a loss of independence is well founded."

Answers also looked beyond the triangle of Eilis, Jim and Tony to see the desperate search for love and happiness amongst the single girls both in Ireland and Brooklyn and as one answer put it "they are described in a way that mixes comedy with pathos."

Question 10 posited that Jim and Tony are not just two different characters but represent completely different alternatives. The statement made clear that a character study of two people was not required, but an exploration of how Toibin uses them to represent something. As one student put it:

"Toibin uses the sea as a metaphor to present Eilis' relationship with each of them and by extension what they represent. At the beach with Tony, Eilis is cautious of being "out of her depth in this unfamiliar sea." This can be shown to represent Eilis' fears at Tony moving quickly in the relationship, portraying Tony as more worldly and open than her. For Tony the metaphor of the sea means something different as shown when Eilis realises he "hated her swimming away from him" demonstrating his clingy nature. However, after Eilis returns to Enniscorthy, she carries a worldly confidence that overpowers Jim's at the beach, when she stalks past him "swimming into it [a wave] as it broke and then out beyond it." This continued use of the sea as a metaphor for confidence demonstrates Jim's significantly more sheltered world view. In this way, the two characters represent not just the differences between Brooklyn and Enniscorthy but the different paths Eilis' life could have taken.

The novel's ending is ambiguous. Why does Eilis "almost smile" at the thought that her going back to Brooklyn would come to mean less and less to the man [Jim] ... and would come to mean more and more to herself? Is it a rueful admission that she has to accept her fate and that, while Jim will one day forget all about her, she will never forget him and, significantly, the alternative life he represented?"

Questions 11 & 12: *Purple Hibiscus* – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Both questions produced some strong answers, with students showing real engagement with this text and the contextual issues connected with it, for which they had clearly been well prepared. Question 11 was about "the place of women

in society"- the statement claimed that the novel makes the reader ask questions about this, but never supplies any answers, a point addressed by this answer:

"*Purple Hibiscus* presents the reader with a striking picture of Ifeoma, a woman who survives despite everything stacked up against her. What disturbs the reader more than anything however is that in the end she appears to give up and go with her family to America."

Interesting comparisons were made between the characters of Kambili and her cousin Amaka in terms of the novel as a bildungsroman.

The alternative question was about the "vivid depiction of settings". Less successful answers merely described various locations in the novel but many made good use of the contrasts between wealth and poverty in particular settings and broadened the discussion out to consider political and contextual issues in the country as a whole.

Paper Summary (repeated from the report on previous papers)

Future students are offered the following advice:

Address the assessment objectives, making sure you put special emphasis on comparison when writing about poems in Section A and context when writing about your chosen novel in Section B:

- Remember the context is not simply writing about history but can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, etc – that influence both the writer and the reader.
- Never allow yourself to get carried away by retelling the story – narrative answers are not likely to be successful.
- Look carefully at the starting point assertion and the injunction which follows it and make sure your answer does not simply latch on to only part of the question.