



# Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2019

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

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WET01\_01\_1901\_ER

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## **Introduction**

There were approximately one hundred candidates who took the exam this January – an encouraging number given that we expect a much smaller entry in this month than in May / June. The number did mean, however, that some questions had only a handful of answers and insufficient candidates wrote about one text, *The White Tiger*, to justify comment on the answers in this report.

There are some very positive reflections to make on the quality of work seen. Candidates had been well prepared in setting out appropriately constructed answers with beginnings, middles and ends – though it should be emphasized that a conclusion which simply repeats what has already been said is unlikely to enhance the answer. Most candidates were aware of the apportioning of assessment objectives across the paper – in Section A, AO4 (explore connections across literary texts) is significant and therefore answers need to compare the two poems they have chosen from the outset, not write an essay in two halves. In Section B, AO3 (demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received) is assessed and this needs more than a token universal fit paragraph at the beginning which would be used whatever question were to be asked: context points need to be relevant to the argument.

In Section B the best answers always took the statement into account, not just the injunction. A good example would be Question 10 on *Brooklyn* which starts with the statement ‘The significance of Mrs Lacey, Eilis’ mother, is much greater than it might at first appear.’ The injunction was ‘In the light of this statement, explore Toibin’s presentation of Mrs Lacey in the novel.’ Some answers merely wrote a character study of Mrs Lacey without taking notice of the injunction which says (as do all the questions in Section B) ‘in the light of this comment.’

There were some points which students preparing for the exam should be warned about: literary essays tend to read best when written in the present tense and with a certain degree of formality (not for example using the given names of writers (Carol Ann, rather than Duffy); quotation is best when embedded into the answer and commented on appropriately; occasionally answers did not refer directly to the text at all, which of course made it very difficult for them to be rewarded for AO2 (analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts).

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 as follows.

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, AO1, AO2 and AO3. In Section B 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 variously in Afghanistan, India, Ireland, the US and Nigeria.

Note that AO5 (explore literary texts informed by different interpretations) is not directly assessed in this unit. It does become a feature of the assessment in Unit 2 however, where one way in which answers can gain credit is by challenging the statements offered in the questions. Good answers in this unit will nevertheless always be open minded in their interpretations.

## **Section A**

Question 1 asked students to compare the ways in which poets explore different perspectives on life. The given poem was Sue Boyle’s *A Leisure Centre Is Also a Temple of Learning*. This question proved to be the most popular choice. It was compared to a wide variety of poems from the anthology. The focus

of the question, however, was on the exploration of different perspectives. This indicated a look at the voices of the poems and not every poem chosen was a suitable fit. The most successful answers compared Boyle's poem with poems such as A Minor Role, An Easy Passage or To My Nine-Year-Old Self where the subjects of youth and age were found.

Some candidates commented on the wording of the title A Leisure Centre Is Also a Temple of Learning and noted the surprising choice of the word 'Temple' for a secular building. For the most part, candidates were aware of the descriptions, noting the similes particularly the metaphor 'she is summer cream' as well as the general tone of the language. Comments were also made on the structure of the poem, particularly the inclusion of single lines towards the end. Not everyone noted the 'we' at the end. Some candidates referred to a single woman making observations. However, others included thought of the Greek chorus or even the twelve apostles. Perceptive comments were made about the view of the chorus, some arguing that these onlookers were jaundiced or even jealous, others that they were supportive and sympathetic. Answers ranged from a descriptive approach to very pleasing evaluative comparisons.

Question 2 proved less popular, perhaps because the length of Duffy's poem. The question asked for a comparison of The Map-Woman with a poem of the candidate's own choice, focusing on the theme of escape. Again, as for question 1, a wide selection of poems was chosen for comparison.

The theme of 'escape' was straightforward and again, answers ranged from the descriptive to the evaluative. Some candidates were unaware of the extended metaphor used by Duffy to convey the idea of escape and found difficulties in understanding the poem. This led to some focusing on the poem of their own choice. Other candidates were more successful in approaching the poem and there were some very interesting comments on the snake imagery in the penultimate stanza as well as a discussion of the extent to which one can fully escape one's past. Duffy's ending was seen as pessimistic but realistic.

## **Section B**

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

Question 3 asked about the clash between different cultures and their values, the statement suggesting that this was central to the novel. This question proved to be the most popular choice for this text. All candidates had a strong contextual knowledge of Afghanistan's heritage although, in some cases, more was made of the historical detail at the expense of textual analysis. Other candidates did not fully explain the difference between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras, taking it as given, although commenting on the Taliban and the Russian invasion. Some candidates chose to focus on Afghanistan society only whilst others considered how Amir and the other émigrés fared in both Afghanistan and the United States. Some essays offered detail on American society briefly towards the end of their essays and probably needed to think more widely on the topic before writing their answer. On the whole, context was addressed, although many candidates tended to neglect examination of the writer's craft, particularly regarding the structure of the novel. The extract provided below however is an exception to this, making clear analytical points:

*Other than Hassan and Amir, Baba also experiences a clash between cultures when moving to the U.S. It is stated that 'Baba loved the idea of America' communicating that Baba was a victim of the American Dream, the idea that there is a better life in America, when in reality, 'America was a place' to 'mourn' Baba's memories. Baba shows surprise at being asked to show his ID in Chapter 11 and this communicates how the culture and values in Afghanistan are based on a lot of trust, as Amir explains, 'In Kabul, we snapped a tree branch and used it as a credit card' and 'at the end of the month, my father paid him for the number of notches on the stick' making it hard for Baba to adapt to the American values, ultimately causing them to clash. Baba asks, 'Do*

*they think I'm a thief?' 'What kind of country is this? No one trusts anybody!' Hosseini's use of rhetorical questions allows tension in this situation to heighten, allowing for the idea of cultures clashing to be further communicated. Even on the way to America, when the Russian soldier attempts to rape a woman before Baba stands up to her, a clashing culture can be seen as the soldier sings 'Ahesta Boro', a song used in Afghan weddings.*

Question 4 which asked about "Hosseini's vivid and descriptive prose" was not as popular as the first question. Some candidates tended to focus more on characters even though the question was clear and specific. Others looked particularly at places but did not always link it to Amir's viewpoint of Afghanistan and the United States. Those candidates who successfully focused on place were able to offer close textual analysis which addressed AO2.

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

Both questions (one on the novel's 'universal significance' and one on 'cruelty') were answered. It was pleasing to see that most candidates had made an effort to move away from a purely narrative approach and focus on the thinking and philosophy behind the work. There were some excellent discussions on philosophical ideas, as well as on context. Some candidates mentioned Martel's other works to substantiate their ideas about the author and his intentions. However, analysis of language and structure was not always addressed. What follows is an extract from an answer to Question 5 ('The story of Pi is not just about one individual, but it represents the challenges faced by all of us') shows us a candidate at ease with context and able to use the text for support:

*The most controversial reviews of the book were regarding the themes of religion and faith in the novel. These themes elevate the novel to its universal significance since in modern society there are no definite answers to our existentialist questions. The challenge of struggling with keeping one's faith or finding something to believe in is extended from just Pi and can apply to all of us through the symbolism of his story. The mention of Gandhi's 'all religions are true' and Pi's 'I just want to love God' can be seen as a challenge faced by him in relation to societal expectations he is facing to be 'a good Hindu boy.' Pi's challenge is to be accepted by his family, including his father who is described as 'modern, rich and secular as ice cream' - the use of a simile adds humour but also shows the contrasting ideas that challenge Pi's world view. This can be seen as representing the challenges of everyone to be accepted by society and adds to the novel's universal significance.*

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

There were insufficient answers here to justify inclusion in this report.

### **Questions 9 & 10 Brooklyn - Colm Tóibín**

Only one candidate answered Question 9 which focused on Tóibín's use of humour. The rest chose Question 10 which dealt with the presentation of Mrs Lacey in the novel. Context of the role of the matriarch in 1950s Ireland was well understood. Some candidates focused a little too much on the film version of the novel and not on the text itself (and of course there are substantial differences between the film and the book). However, the nature of the question allowed candidates to focus on Mrs Lacey, with one candidate taking a different slant in that she was the one who deserved sympathy rather than Eilis. As with the answers to other questions, the main weakness was in the lack of AO2. Candidates did not always note the way Toibin had shaped the novel, preferring instead to offer a character study.

This extract is from the conclusion of an essay which shows some sensitivity and understanding:

*Finally, in the concluding moments of the novel, Tóibín brings forth a new light that was previously not mentioned towards Mrs Lacey. Eilis' confession of 'I am married' tears Mrs Lacey apart. The author uses this as another symbol of loss through betrayal, possibly similar to the 'coming out' of the author himself. Tóibín's craft of such a revelation brings forth the true role of Mrs Lacey. Her sincerity in the silence signifies the continuation of grief as she expresses her care and love. Through Mrs Lacey, the author presents a new perspective through her character: silence. In the statement 'Eilis closed her eyes and tried to imagine nothing more'. Tóibín uses silence once again to emphasise the lasting effect of Mrs Lacey as a character in the book.*

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

There were not many answers to either of these questions, one on the use of symbols and figurative language and the other on Adichie's presentation of suffering. Although knowledge of the book was evident, a weakness tended to lie in simply listing symbols or retelling the story of suffering. Successful answers heeded the wording in the statements – 'the power of the novel lies in the use of symbols' or the claim that the novel is 'relentless' in its presentation of suffering.

### **Paper Summary (repeated from reports 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.