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Examiners' Report January 2010

GCE English Literature 6ET04

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GCE08 English Literature Unit 4: 6ET04

Reflections in Literary Studies

Overview

Although the entry this January was understandably small, the candidate responses made a distinct impression with their variety and thoughtfulness and also gave promise of good things to come in the summer series.

There are three possible ways in which this unit can be tackled – one long critical essay, two shorter pieces or a creative piece plus commentary – but nearly all candidates took the single essay approach. The unit requires the study of three texts, one of these being the main focus, and allows for the possibility of one or more being works of criticism or cultural commentary.

The word length is given as between 2,500 and 3,000 words, including quotations. Candidates exceeding the word limit are penalised by not having their surplus words marked.

It is left to the centres' discretion as to how, in terms of teaching texts, they approach this unit. Many centres appear to have reached a compromise between teaching and allowing students free choice, with students having one or two texts in common that one can presume have been taught, then finding additional material for themselves.

Task setting seemed to work best of all when it challenged the candidate into undertaking an investigation of some sort.

"I am delighted how this essay feels like a hypothesis being considered, worked out and answered," wrote one teacher at the end of an excellent folder. *Othello*, *The Tempest* and Darwin's *Origin of Species* had been the texts under consideration. Many highly rated folders took the hypothesis route, often starting with a challenging statement then setting out to see how far it could be justified or contradicted. As in the example quoted, a number of centres took the opportunity to balance up the poetry and novel reading side of the course by studying some drama in this unit. Shakespeare made a frequent appearance as did modern drama. An interesting example was a folder based on *Othello*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the screenplay of the film *Brief Encounter*. Screenplays or librettos have the potential to make a good choice – providing of course the study is focused firmly on their qualities as literary texts. In fact it was good to see a variety of literary forms appearing. There were essays, memoirs, pieces of high quality journalism and works of cultural and critical commentary. Several centres had compiled their own anthologies of critical and source material which students then dipped into.

There was much variety in the choice of a third text. Occasionally, and disappointingly, the third text only made its appearance as a random and unqualified reference to a critic. Even if the third text is critical reading it needs to be drawn into the equation as a text to be evaluated and considered alongside the others. Occasionally this exercise was approached as if the only task were to compare two books. Although comparison is a significant part of the assessment criteria (a part of AO3) it is not the only thing that candidates have to do when all four assessment objectives are equally weighted.

Several centres ensured that their students did the right amount of juggling between comparison (AO3), exploring differing viewpoints (AO3 also), textual analysis (AO2) and awareness of context (AO4) by providing a catch-all title. An example would be something like: *A comparison of the ways that writers, at different times, could be interpreted as ... looking closely at language ... etc.* Though this might be cumbersome it shows that both teachers and students are thinking along the right lines. Others set a more quirky or individualised title – *Falling for the Tragic Flaw* was probably the most extreme of this genre, although in this case it was followed by more explicit instructions about comparing and contrasting the writers' methods in *Paradise Lost*, *Macbeth* and *Dr Faustus* in the light of the times they were written in, recognising the validity of various viewpoints.

Cultural commentary texts came in various forms: one candidate used Gwen Adshead (consultant psychiatrist at Broadmoor Hospital) on the woman's right to be evil (originally a radio 3 *Night Waves* but now on the web) and another articles from *The Economist*, for example.

The marking overall was very accurate with centres using a good range of available marks. The value and usefulness of centres' comments on work was high on the whole: at its best, teachers demonstrated exactly why they had awarded certain marks against the requirements of specific assessment objectives. Occasionally comments were minimal and failed to be evaluative (if this were the case, a comment was made to this effect in the report to the individual centre).

Ask the Expert is sometimes asked: what makes an A* folder? Beyond giving the technical response - the A* grade will be awarded to a candidate who manages to score 90% or above of the available UMS marks as totalled in the two A2 units - the answer has to be that the candidate will achieve the high order skills that appear in the specification's assessment criteria. These include analysis, evaluation and synthesis.

These skills were demonstrated in the work of candidates who never lost sight of the texts they were studying and the writers' craft. If they were commenting on characters, they were aware of the characters as constructs, not real people, and that the writer had created them. They made judgements about how the texts worked to produce their effects, with close analysis of language, structure and form. The most exciting work was when a candidate seemed to create something new and "original" out of the material. Of course, nothing is ever entirely original: doubtless something like it will have been said by someone somewhere before. But the candidates who could synthesise were the ones who could put ideas together and come up with arguments that were fresh and not jaded, that showed they had really entered into the spirit of enquiry and investigation to produce their "reflections in literary studies".

It will be interesting to see how many candidates chose the creative response option in the summer. Some guidance on how the creative piece can be assessed in terms of the assessment objectives has been placed on the website. It provides a real opportunity for candidates to explore what writers are doing by utilising those methods themselves, whether in imitation, parody, using textual intervention or transformation. Their experience of original writing in the AS coursework unit (with the creative critical response) may have given them the confidence to develop their skills here.

It is for centres to ensure that candidates are not using the same text in their A2 coursework as in any of their examination responses either at AS or A2, or that have been used already in their AS coursework. To do so would infringe the regulations as stated in the specification (page 35: "The three texts chosen ... should not be texts that have previously been assessed in any other unit").

Thanks to centres that managed, in spite of atrocious January weather, to meet the coursework deadline. A few centres seemed not to realise that work must be with the moderator on or before the published deadline date, this being a date for the arrival of the folders, not for actually sending them. As with the AS unit, centres which presented folders fastened with a treasury tag, with numbered pages, with cumulative word counts at the foot of each page and bibliographies clearly in place made the moderator's task a pleasant and manageable one.

It is hoped that the following examples of students' work from folders submitted in January 2010 will illustrate good practice.

Example One

Cormac McCarthy's The Road and Philip K Dick's The Man in the High Castle are 20th century American novels which represent worlds that are broken. The Road is physically desolate, shaped by some undisclosed catastrophe leaving it "largely populated by men who would eat your children" – a similar populace to that of post-war The Man in the High Castle. Dick's sophisticated, civilised universe is, correspondingly, controlled by Nazi psychopaths led by "the Sick One. Old Adolf" and clearly inspired by modern events.

From this outline it might seem that the novels are pessimistic and that reading them is a worthless experience. Through looking at the reader response perspective closely, however, and analysing the reader's expectations, I aim to demonstrate, this is not the case.

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Moderator's Comments

This is a clear setting out of the direction in which the essay intends to go, without being too heavy-handed or laboured. It is also clear that the candidate intends to investigate the reader's response which suggests standing back, analysing and evaluating.

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Moderator's Tip

It is a good idea to set out to prove or show something. In this case the candidate seeks to prove these are not simply depressing novels as they may appear to be at first sight. The essay then becomes an investigation.

Example Two

Task: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction" (Matthew 7.13) Compare and contrast the routes to destruction in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night and Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire.

Rarely can the ruin of a character be attributed to one reason alone. It is the complexity, the diversity, in these routes that "leadeth to destruction" that make the concept so interesting to investigate. In their respective works F. Scott Fitzgerald and Tennessee Williams explore the elements within the psyche of their protagonists – Dick Diver and Blanche DuBois – which lead them to their destruction.



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Moderator's Comments

It is not often that we find a biblical quotation as a starting point, but this one works well especially in the way the candidate keeps it in mind throughout the essay and, as the example shows, is still thinking about it in the final paragraph. It is good to see that, though the source is the bible, the writer has not taken its iconic status to mean it cannot be queried – it is seen as a "concept" that can be "explored", not a statement to be accepted without question.



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Moderator's Tip

Never "let go" of a starting point assertion if you used one in your title. Explore it and investigate it. It makes for a neat conclusion to come back to it at the end.

Example Three

Teacher's comment at the end of a folder:

"This is an incredibly sophisticated piece Your analysis is fluent, perceptive and original throughout. Your points of comparison and connection appear effortless, as does your integration of critical and contextual material. I hope you are very proud of your work. Well done!"



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Moderator's Comments

Although it is usually most helpful to have comments addressed to the moderator rather than the candidate, it is sometimes good to see both. In this case we have an example of the kind of comment that everyone would love to find at the end of their work!



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Moderator's Tip

Think back from this comment to imagine the kind of essay it was describing. Even if you cannot quite manage to be "incredibly sophisticated" yourself, some of the other qualities listed here are possible for everyone to aim for. The teacher has praised comparisons that arise naturally, rather than being contrived, and critical and contextual material that is "integrated." In other words, this material is not simply "bolted on" but related clearly to the texts being studied.

Example Four

The concept of women as objects is reiterated in *The Taming of the Shrew*, particularly with reference to Bianca who is her father's "treasure". She is presented as a "precious" creature and Baptista's language towards her is different from that towards Katharina. He will "bestow" Bianca onto one of his suitors, and this has particular connotations of handing over a "prize" – contrasting his desire to "cart" off Katharina. Bianca's main attribute is her appearance.

**ResultsPlus****Moderator's Comments**

There is excellent close study of language here, with the candidate picking out certain words for special attention and aware of their particular nuances.

**ResultsPlus****Moderator's Tip**

Use quotation, but do not use great chunks. An individual word may make a good quotation. In this case the word "treasure" shows us that Bianca is her father's valued possession who will be "bestowed" on someone in marriage.

Example Five

Bianca in *Othello* explicitly embodies the idea of sex as a trade as she is a courtesan. A common insult for women used throughout the play is "whore" yet courtesans were socially acceptable. Remarkably Bianca is the character least referred to as a "whore" – showing it is not the profession that angers men but the thought of their wives being unfaithful.

**ResultsPlus****Moderator's Comments**

Awareness of context really enriches this response together with a clear semantic understanding of the terms "whore" and "courtesan" and the social attitudes towards them.

**ResultsPlus****Moderator's Tip**

Always be careful about making sweeping generalisations about attitudes and beliefs in society at certain times in history. This consideration of attitudes to women, however, is very carefully considered and linked closely to the use of particular words in the text. It is an excellent

Example Six

Task: Using The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, 1984 and Animal Farm by George Orwell, analyse the treatment of oppression by authors with focus on their dystopic vision, and investigate how the respective authors deal with power and corruption in each novel, making use of wide critical reading.



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Moderator's Comments

This is a clearly stated assignment that sets out the task. The words "Treatment... by the authors" and "investigate" are particularly helpful.



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Moderator's Tip

Aim to include words and phrases in your title that show you are going to look at what authors are doing, rather than just how characters are going to behave. It is also a good idea to see your work as some sort of "investigation" - you are on a mission to find something out.

Example Seven

The women in Poe's short stories are generally depicted as frail or suffering from a deadly disease. Since both his mother and wife had died prematurely, this depiction may be a reflection of Poe's own life and therefore his portrayal of women may be based on his own experiences rather than a belief that women are weaker individuals. Poe himself believed that "the supposition that the book of the author is a thing apart from the author's self is, I think, unfounded."

However, modern criticism suggests that "A free standing object, the literary work, is independent to its creator and answerable only to itself ... it has become a virtual heresy to retrace a novel to its author,, the work is to be judged in terms of internal coherence, rather than external motivations." (Literary Theory & Criticism, An Oxford Guide, Patricia Waugh.)



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Moderator's Comments

There is a really contentious issue here – the fascinating debate of whether or not a work of literature can ever stand apart from its author. This candidate shows an awareness of this debate and uses Poe's own comments very usefully to contrast with a modern point of view. This scores highly under AO3.



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Moderator's Tip

There is never one fixed opinion that is absolutely right in the study of English Literature. This candidate shows the ability to weigh up one point of view alongside another.

Grade Boundaries

Paper No.	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
6ET04/01	80	70	61	52	44	36

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