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Examiners' Report June 2010

GCE English Literature 6ET04

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June 2010

Publications Code UA023855

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6ET04: Reflections in Literary Studies

General Overview

One moderator commented that she spent longer than she should have done moderating her samples of Unit 4 coursework - they were just so good to read, and this is a view common to all who had the privilege of looking at students' work in this series. The range of activities was considerable, with teachers and candidates exploiting the considerable freedom offered by this unit to suit their own particular needs. Students in Sri Lanka wrote about local writers, others pursued their own special enthusiasms, some who were probably using *The Kite Runner* for Unit 3 looked at *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for Unit 4 to widen their experience of the author. Many, mindful that the rest of the course has involved quite a lot of novel reading, turned their attention to drama, often modern drama.

There were only a few concerns. Schools are free to use any texts that are on the examination syllabus, with one proviso - that the students do not write on those that have been studied for exams. We are monitoring the use of exam texts for coursework in order to ensure that candidates do not fall foul of the requirement made clear in the opening paragraph of the unit description in the specification (page 35).

Another is that occasionally schools appear to have set their students identical tasks on the same texts with instructions of how to structure their argument. Centres are free to choose how they approach this unit, either by teaching texts, suggesting texts, or leaving choices open to candidates. Whilst absolute freedom means that in some cases candidates flounder through unwise choices, over restrictiveness tends to mean that they cannot access the top bands which require "independent research" (AO1), "an independent response" (AO2) and "original literary connections and comparisons" (AO3). Occasionally when all the students in a centre wrote on the same topic based on the same books following the same structure it felt as if the moderator was reading the same essay over and over again. This is not in the spirit of coursework which owes its survival in English Literature to the compelling argument that it enables us to assess skills that cannot be assessed by examination alone. One moderator put it well:

"The best work tended to come from those students who had selected topics and texts from within their own specific interests and this was good to see. This is not to say that there wasn't some very good work from centres who used set texts and topics. The best work showed a balance between the texts chosen and an equally secure knowledge and understanding of all of them."

Some candidates need reminding that the unit requires the study of three texts. Although they are encouraged to study one text in detail, "drawing upon their knowledge of a further text(s) and/or exploring relevant critical reception" (page 35 of the specification) the folder needs to reflect this study. If the third text is critical reading for example, this needs to be listed in the bibliography and should be drawn into the argument in the essay just as it would if the third text happened to be another literary text.

It was a pleasure to read work from students who had chosen the creative response and some examples of these are given later in this report. It provides an excellent way into the critical essay itself. When choosing this option however, it is important to remember that the AOs are *directly* addressed mainly through the commentary, the creative piece acting as a springboard for the ideas that will be developed there. From work seen this summer, somewhere between 500 and 750 words appears an ideal length (if writing in prose). Students can always write more,

then edit what they have written, or use an extract that best illustrates the points they want to make in the commentary. There is advice on the website about assessing the creative piece. It is not given a separate mark and although AO1 is the AO most obviously addressed by it, successful pieces will be making points about structure form and language for example by actually *doing it* themselves.

It is important to realise that the three texts used in this unit need to be published texts. In other words the student's own creative work cannot count as one of them.

A few quick reminders:

- Please ensure a cumulative word count appears at the foot of each page
- It is very helpful if pages are numbered
- Remind students of the need for a bibliography
- Evaluative comments from teachers enable moderators to understand why marks have been awarded
- Treasury tags are the ideal way of keeping the pages together
- Please insist that students use a reasonable font size (10 is too small)

Performance by Assessment Objectives

This is a synoptic unit, gathering together skills and understanding that have been acquired in other units. All four assessment objectives are weighed equally here and so it is essential that tasks are set which enable (or, even better, *require*) students to respond to them. It would be perfectly possible for example for a student to write a very sound essay in excellent English, comparing texts, weighing up different readings and analysing the language but paying little heed or no attention at all to context - the requirement of AO4. As performance under each assessment objective is calculated separately, the mark out of 20 for AO4 in this case would have to be very low and the overall mark out of 80 consequently would not reflect the otherwise first rate quality of the answer. Sometimes centres give a mark which would seem to reflect an overall opinion of the folder's worth - perhaps thinking an essay so good it *has* to get top marks - when the individual AO scores, applied properly, would not add up to this figure.

AO1

Articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression.

Occasionally centre comments suggest that this AO is interpreted simply as getting the spelling and grammar right and using appropriate literary terms. However, it does go deeper than that. Central to this AO is the sense of a well constructed and relevant argument. Accuracy is nevertheless important and the most common area where moderators have seen fit to reduce centres' marks have been in the case of this AO1, where misuse of the comma as a kind of splice linking what should be two sentences, failure to write in sentences containing finite verbs and slipshod proof reading (occasionally essays are littered with uncorrected typos) cannot justify a mark higher than bands 1 or 2 for this AO.

A note about word length:

A candidate who has failed to comply with the 3000 word limit will not have shaped and organised material in a way which another candidate, mindful of this requirement, will have done; the latter could possibly be rewarded under Assessment Objective AO1 for “fluent, cohesive and controlled writing”

whereas the former is unlikely to reach this top band requirement. Please remember that assessors stop reading once the 3000 word limit has been reached.

Here is a very readable opening of an essay from this summer’s submissions which gives the reader a clear sense that this AO will be highly rewarded. Not all candidates use the first person well - it can sometimes be too subjective and too colloquial for a critical essay. The essay below reads in a fresh way, with original thinking. All assessment objectives overlap of course; when the student writes “it could be argued...” not only is this a finely expressed tentative approach, it also scores under AO3 for awareness of the existence of other points of view.

“Imperialism has the power of a system representing, as well as speaking for, everything within its dominion.” (Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, CHATTO 1993)

Said sums up the enormous power of imperialism over the minds of individuals. Simply by being caught up in the historical event of imperialism, the colonizers and native Africans were forced into situations and ways of thinking from which there was no escape. Under the circumstances, people were forced to look with what Falcon termed ‘the ethno-centric gaze’, which separated ‘us’ from ‘them’ and emphasized physical and cultural differences. It could be argued that Things Fall Apart and Heart of Darkness are harmonious accounts of imperialist brutality seen from different sides of the cultural and racial barrier. I say ‘harmonious’ because the utter incomprehension of the protagonists is evident in both texts and I intend this essay to be an exploration of the roots and consequences of this incomprehension which shapes the fate of the protagonists...’

AO2

Demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meanings in literary texts.

This essay really unpicks the way the play in question works. The student is totally aware of the writer’s craft. It is also good to see that, in talking about a play, the essay is aware of the play as a play, not just another “book”.

In Edward Bond’s Lear violence and nature are presented as almost one and the same. Bond’s argument is that, in contemporary society violence is an integral part of natural behaviour and he writes in his Preface that it ‘shapes and obsesses our society’. In the first scene, the audience is presented with a construction site where a worker has just been killed by accident. What immediately strikes us is Lear’s response to the death: he is abnormally unfeeling towards the tragedy and is more concerned with punishing the man who has caused the subsequent delay in the building.

“It’s a flogging crime to delay work.”

However, Lear does more than just flog the man - he shoots him mercilessly. It is not instinctive for humans to kill other humans and the act is disturbing to watch on stage. Yet Bond says in his Preface that we are not designed for the ways in which we now live. This existence, 'interferes with our natural functioning and this activates our natural response to threat - aggression.' He is suggesting that unnatural conditions force people to behave violently and emphasises this dramatically by having Lear create his own hostile environment through the building of the wall.

"My wall will make you free."

The language here doesn't hang together. A wall is a blockade; it incarcerates you and stops any movement across it. It cannot free you. Bond's juxtaposition of ideas presents an early quandary for the audience and invites us to consider his argument. The image of entrapment is a recurring one - Lear later talks of animals being trapped in cages. It becomes an extended metaphor for, not only imprisonment, but confinement of mind and spirit too...

A03

Explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts, informed by interpretations of other readers.

There are two major considerations here: comparisons between texts and interpretations by other readers. The best work engages with critical opinion rather than just cites it: here the student quotes Colin Duckworth but then adds 'however' and develops the argument by applying it to other plays.

The tragicomedy of the Absurdist plays also accords with the concept of an indefinable, subjective reality. The playwrights present this idea by interweaving the tragic and comic genres to show the pluralistic nature of reality. On the side of tragedy, the protagonists of all three plays appear to suffer a tragic fall. However, it is not a tragic fall as outlined by Aristotle, but rather one that can be associated with Arthur Miller's view of tragedy that 'the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.' Thus, the characters start off as mundane figures and deteriorate to a more severe state of decline. Colin Duckworth argues that in *Waiting for Godot* all the characters degenerate- 'Although the pattern is cyclic, there is an accompanying downward movement'. However, if *Godot's* movement is both cyclical and linear, Stoppard's and Pinter's plays have more obviously linear structures. The linear degeneration in these plays demonstrates the inexorability of human decline. Pozzo becomes blind; Stanley suffers and deteriorates under pressure from Goldberg and McCann. Beckett's characters, however, can only fulfil the play's title...

AO4

Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

Sometimes, students present contextual material as facts, that are quite unrelated to the texts they are studying. In this example, contextual awareness leads to a heightened appreciation of the texts. Context is of course a huge area - generic, cultural, psychological, social, intellectual, spiritual... it can be tackled in many different ways. This candidate is aware of this.

*We have seen how James in *The Turn of the Screw* plays with the Victorian reader's sensibilities to construct a text pushing the boundaries of a genre and even a time. In her book, *The Woman in Black*, Susan Hill similarly attempts to capture the same fin-de-siecle angst. She, however, faces an audience familiar with intrinsic ambiguities in texts. What's more, she consciously seeks to imitate the direct ghost story with its central tenets of a veridical ghost, atmosphere and place. Unlike James, she cannot toy with the scientific spiritualism of a readership. Instead she faces the brutal reality of Thatcherism. She therefore writes for an audience unlikely to take ghostly phenomena seriously. Kipps is an archetypal product of Thatcherite culture - reacting with derision to Crythin Gifford's superstition. The reader, likely to hold similar opinions, is forced to re-examine this prejudice as the text progresses. The result is that, much like the canonical Victorian ghost story, the reader is visibly being directed towards a truth by the author.*

Marks and grades

Most centres are aware of the difference between raw marks and UMS marks (there is a helpful guide online, or you can use Ask the Expert to ask a more specific question). The specification (on page 44) gives details of minimum uniform marks (UMS marks) required for each grade at each unit, but these only relate to the fixed 80%=A, 70%=B, etc. UMS scale. The actual raw marks out of 80 required for each grade are published at the end of this report, but it is important to realise these can change from one examination series to the next, depending on the quality of the work seen. It is important to assess by the criteria (pages 40 and 41 of the specification) rather than attempt to pre-judge the grades.

The fact that the UMS mark and the raw mark are both out of 80 can lead to confusion on results day (when raw marks may appear to have been adjusted down when in fact they have not) so it is important that both teachers and students are aware of this.

Popular topics and texts

One moderator helpfully listed a few popular combinations which were as follows:

- Selection from *Heart of Darkness*, *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, *The Jacaranda Tree*, *Things Fall Apart* - pilgrimage; colonialism; 'the other'
- Gothic Literature: selection from *Castle of Otranto*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dorian Gray*

- War literature: *Journey's End*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and selected poems
- Characteristics of Romantic Poetry: selection from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley
- Characteristics of Dystopian Literature: *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Road*, *Lord of the Flies*
- Ireland: *Angela's Ashes*, *Portrait.....* and critics
- Identity and sense of self/ role of artist: *Portrait.....*, *To the Lighthouse*, associated critical opinions, letters, extracts from Virginia Woolf *A Writer's Diary*
- Presentation of women / theme of jealousy: *Othello*, *Death of a Salesman*, *View from the Bridge*
- Various aspects of the presentation of the American Dream; male-female relationships; illusion and reality: *Salesman*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Streetcar...*
- Evolving role of the 'tragic hero': *Oedipus Rex*, *Death of a Salesman* and Miller's essay on tragedy
- Presentation of women: *The Doll's House*, *The Color Purple*, *Ghosts*
- Lost past v harsh present: *The Great Gatsby*, *Streetcar*, *Death of a Salesman*

Examples of students' work, using the creative option

It was good to see a number of students opting for the creative response. The three examples which follow show how successfully the creative and critical aspects of the folded can work together.

EXAMPLE ONE

One student included a mention of her teacher's own creative writing (along with Angela Carter and the Brothers Grimm). This is a positive sign that creative approaches have found their enthusiasts: the communities pages on the website would be an ideal place where those wishing to take this further might exchange their ideas.

Here a student has rewritten *The Princess and the Pea*, under the influence of Angela Carter, developing the character of the prince's mother. In the commentary the student writes:

The prince's mother is extremely demanding and jealous of the princess; it is obvious she will stop at nothing to destroy her perfection. This challenges clichés, as the Prince is not rescuing the princess at all "like a ventriloquist she led her puppet."

In the student's reworking of the story, at a crisis moment in the seduction of the girl, the mother's voice is heard:

After this barbarous fulfilment a cry came from another chamber. It was the Queen. Like a leashed lap-dog the boy followed the voice. "Extinguish that little rodent's stainless body or I shall destroy yours." Like a ventriloquist she led her puppet back into the chamber.


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Examiner Comments

This example shows that the student enjoyed writing, and the way the exuberance and eroticism of Carter's writing is captured in her own.


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Examiner Tip

Writing in the style of one of your authors is a good approach. You need to immerse yourself in that author's work first to get the style and tone right. You do not need to write too much (500 words is probably enough). If you have written much more, edit it or use an extract that works best with your critical commentary.

EXAMPLE TWO

This student compares Sylvia Plath's poetry, her novel *The Bell Jar* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The critical essay begins:

*I have chosen to study Sylvia Plath's poems and novel *The Bell Jar* because of her dramatic imagery, the use of a first person character and because of the post-war period in which she wrote. I was initially struck by the frank statement "I lie on a world I cannot touch" in her poem *Paralytic* because of the isolation and desolation that it conjured up. I have also looked at *A Streetcar Named Desire* because of Stanley's brutal, almost fascist, character and his terrorising of Blanche who is subsequently forced into a mental institution after he rapes her.*

**A Streetcar Named Desire* examines post-war America and fleetingly looks at the returning officer - Stanley - who now needs to be reintegrated back into civilian life. It was this that inspired me to write my creative piece from the point of view of a WW2 soldier, as when veterans returned they faced jobs that were unrewarding and impersonal as well as a society that had no system in place to offer support; "their new lives appear closer to drudgery than an opportunity to reap the benefits of the American Dream they fought to preserve and protect" (Alder, Thomas P. *A Streetcar Named Desire, The Moth and the Lantern*). Stanley was a Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps and continues to act as though he is still in the military; he immediately takes control whenever he appears and is quick to give orders to those around him. When he first meets Blanche the scene is like an interrogation as he questions her on where she's come from and this kind of exchange between them is repeated throughout the play.*

The period in which Plath wrote and the war imagery she used is also what inspired me to write my creative response from the point of view of a soldier who has been interned in a POW camp. Like many of Plath's characters he suffers from a sense of isolation and detachment from the world he fought so hard to save. "There is an emptiness. I am so

vulnerable suddenly. I am a wound walking out of hospital” from Three Women, A Poem for Three Voices sums up the feelings of my protagonist. Like the woman who has given birth and lost the experience of nurturing the child that grew inside her, my protagonist has been taken from a war in which he spent four years fighting and now is almost bereft as he has suddenly lost his sense of purpose.

What is remarkable here is the range and flexibility of ideas, as the student moves effortlessly between texts and also incorporates reference to her own creative piece. The idea of Stanley as a returning soldier fits the argument perfectly.

The short creative piece ends in this way:

I don't even feel the cold anymore. I know the wind of the desert at night is chill on my skin, but I barely register it. The same way that I know the stars above me are beautiful, but it's a beauty I feel detached from.

It's this sense of disconnection that has led me to my decision. I would rather die than face an existence watching others live a life I can no longer participate in, or even comprehend. The kiss of the ring of metal against the fragile skin of my temple is absolution. My eyes flutter shut and the tension falls from my shoulders. I can go quietly now, like a whisper. Just a murmur in the ether, a faint sigh in the womb of the world to carry me to oblivion.

The centre comment here is: “The ending is particularly subtle and moving. You have used these images very imaginatively here. This echoes what you analyse later but is also original in its own right.”



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Examiner Comments

I agree with the centre comment. The texts studied are blended with critical reading and the student's own work to achieve the top band skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis.



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Examiner Tip

Think about how you are going to use your texts. In this case, the student thought of the returning officer approach in dealing with Stanley, so finding a context, and the sense of isolation in Plath's work, linking this back to the isolation felt by a war veteran in her own creative response. All this needs careful planning; you need to read the books with possible approaches in mind, make your decision, then read them again and construct a title for your assignment that matches your needs.

EXAMPLE THREE

The student's own writing is based on Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and therefore relies heavily on typography and layout (very imaginatively - because of space the extract reproduced here does not really do it justice). The commentary however moves far beyond writing about experimental ergodic texts - the ones that force the reader into doing more work than is normally required of a reader by their unconventional appearance on the page - and explores the narrative techniques of James Joyce, Jeanette Winterson and Kurt Vonnegut with the relationship between reader and text foremost in mind.

The student writes from personal experience in the commentary:

I wanted to use a motif as something that is carried with a person: the feeling of sawdust; a colour; an itch. When I first began to write, motifs began to become clear; a feeling of slipperiness, the "cool, shiny blue bars" of my bunk bed. I felt these represented a lack of control. In some memories I was conscious of feeling "too hot and itchy to be comfortable" - emotional anxiety translated to physical discomfort. Joyce uses a similar idea in Portrait: Stephen's fixation with texture. He wonders "whether all things were cold and damp"; traumatic experiences remind him of feeling "as if he had cold slimy water next to his skin".



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Examiner Comments

I like the subtlety of this. The student has not simply imitated James Joyce (which would of course have been a perfectly acceptable course of action) but arrived at comments on Joyce via a broader investigation of narrative technique. The use of the Joyce text, and links with the student's own are striking and relevant to critical analysis.



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Examiner Tip

Have a go at the creative writing approach, even if you don't use the creative piece in your final submission. This example shows the way it enables the student to get "inside" a writer and investigate how writing actually works by doing it her/himself.

Example continued:

Climbing into the car, she squirms in the dull yellow coat her mother made her bring, too hot and itchy

to be comfortable; eating the hastily made ham sandwich. She is careful not to spill crumbs, clutching the small daisy-shaped plate beneath the bread,

*but in anxiousness
does so anyway.*

*The seats feel cold and oily, scratchy with flakes of bread, and the
seatbelt digs into her left shoulder.
Silence fills the car.*

*She dislikes that at four o'clock it is already dark, and that the
weather is more winter than early autumn.*

*She presses her forehead against the cool, smooth window
and watches the rain,*

blinking

in time with the sound of the windscreen wipers.

*She can see the reflection of her eyes, serious in the glass, and
outside, where a girl and her boyfriend walk awkwardly, hand in
hand under an umbrella, trying to avoid the rain. As they sit at a
red light - as they have done at every set of traffic lights - a man
sitting at a bus stop leers back at her, and then*

winks.

She closes her eyes.

You sat beside your grandfather on the cold, hard bed and thought of how your mother told you he might not recognise you. The covers were tucked tightly around him, so tightly that you could see how small he is. He is barely recognisable as the wiry, determined man who rolled logs from his axe in the woods, still covered in sawdust and sap, to your tree house to make your own dining table only a year earlier. You felt vaguely embarrassed for him, though you're not sure why. You watched your brother fidget, too young to understand that this is a goodbye rather than a visit; you'd only half understood this yourself. You leant over and gave him a tentative hug, scared, that you might hurt him, and a kiss on the cheek.

Grade Boundaries

Grade	Max. Mark	a*	A	B	C	D	E	N	U
Raw boundary mark	80	75	70	61	52	44	36	28	0
Uniform boundary mark	80	72	64	56	48	40	32	24	0

a* is only used in conversion from raw to uniform marks. It is not a published unit grade.

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Order Code UA023855 June 2010

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