

English Literature

Advanced Subsidiary GCE AS H071

Report on the Units

January 2009

H071/ /MS/R/09J

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This report on the Examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the syllabus content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the Examination.

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Chief Examiner's Report

The first January session for the new AS Level English Literature specification attracted a substantial entry of candidates for the examination but a much smaller number for the coursework unit. In both units, there was plenty of evidence that centres and candidates have been working hard to rise to the demands of the new Assessment Objectives and course structure, offering much which is worthy of praise and also showing some areas for improvement.

In the examination, there was clearly a premium on thorough knowledge of the text, and candidates entering in the summer will have had more time to absorb material and to ensure that answers are well illustrated with textual references (some candidates found the novel almost too much of a challenge in the time available, and others struggled to provide references to additional poems in Section A). There was no requirement under the legacy specification to read critical material in support of examination texts; however, most centres have been doing excellent work in this area for a long time and have moved into the new specification with little or no adjustment to their very good practice. In a small number of scripts there was evidence that candidates were struggling to show awareness of 'interpretations by other readers', and attempts to characterise Marxist, feminist or Freudian viewpoints were often awkward and simplistic; however, there were many sophisticated and well-informed answers which offered more detailed and thoughtful insights in this area.

Many candidates will benefit from more time to prepare for the examination; the same can be said for the coursework, which very few even attempted to offer in January. Here (with the move from six units to four), the demands are much greater than those in the legacy specification, and senior moderators have seen imaginative and interesting work done by teachers on course ideas and tasks which holds out great promise for candidates' summer submissions of. Many centres have made use of the coursework consultancy service, which is now also receiving queries about the A2 coursework unit.

F661: Poetry and Prose 1800-1945 (written examination)

General Comments

The first paper of the new specification was taken by a substantial number of candidates: some responses were outstanding, and the majority at least competent, but there was evidence that some candidates were not entirely ready after a term of study to attempt a written paper which does, after all, represent 60% of the marks for the AS qualification. Examiners were impressed by the energy and enthusiasm demonstrated by centres and candidates, and encouraged by the freshness and engagement of many answers. Overall, responses to this January paper provided a promising start for the new specification.

Candidates answered on nine out of the ten writers on the paper; *The Age of the Innocence* was the only text to receive no responses, although there was also very little work on *A Handful of Dust*. The overwhelmingly popular texts were Wilfred Owen in Section A and *The Great Gatsby* in Section B. A number of examiners felt that candidates were better informed and more secure in Section A than in Section B, possibly as a result of having the text of the set poem in front of them; some Section B answers were short and sketchy, suggesting only a partial acquaintance with the novel. Answers on *Wuthering Heights* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were especially prone to imperfect recall of the text; in some cases, candidates were hazy about events which occurred towards the end of these novels.

The increase in time allowed for the examination (two hours as against an hour and a half for each legacy AS paper) made a significant difference to performance. Candidates had more time to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, though sometimes their shortcomings were also accentuated, with the result that the gap between the strongest and weakest responses appeared greater than under the legacy specification. Weaker answers which were thin and brief showed that their authors had made little use of the extra time, and some middle-ranking candidates were perhaps more inclined towards repetition and padding; in general, however, examiners felt that candidates responded well to this change, one noting that 'the additional 30 minutes seemed a benefit to candidates, many of whom produced substantial, closely focused responses in the available time'.

Section A

Many answers approached the poetry question with confidence, making full use of the text supplied in the examination. However, most candidates are still working their way towards an ideal balance between Assessment Objective 2 ('demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meaning') and Assessment Objective 4 ('demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received').

AO2 is the dominant objective here, so candidates should focus primarily on detailed study of the set poem and should prioritise the part of the question which asks them to 'explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form'. Examiners found that, whilst some candidates offered intelligent AO2 analysis, others were inclined to identify features of the writing without discussing their effects, or seemed to have prepared a substantial general essay which took in a range of poems but minimised any detailed attention to the set poem. In this part of the specification, AO4 refers primarily to the context provided by the wider group of poems, but credit can also be given for other kinds of context. Some candidates - most notably those writing on Wilfred Owen - offered detailed historical context which at times became digressive. Good

answers focused primarily on AO2, and used references to (perhaps three or four) other poems to illuminate their discussion of the methods and concerns of the set poem.

Comments on individual questions

1 **Wordsworth: 'St Paul's'**

Wordsworth was studied by a minority of candidates, some of whom seemed a little disconcerted by the urban setting of the set poem. Good answers were alert to the pensive mood of the poem's opening, and charted effectively the change of tone from 'downcast' to 'anchor of stability' and then finally the 'visionary scene' of the cathedral. Many identified and commented on the religious language of the poem, and some made perceptive observations about the shared sense of awe with which Wordsworth approaches both natural phenomena and the man-made edifices of London. 'Upon Westminster Bridge' was a popular contextual choice, but many candidates chose to move outside the prescribed list of poems (as they are permitted to do), finding links with 'Daffodils' and the 'spots of time' passage in *The Prelude*, among others.

2 **Rossetti: 'Uphill'**

Again, Rossetti was a minority choice, but there was some impressive work in evidence. Weaker answers found some difficulty in moving beyond the apparent surface simplicity of the poem, but better ones offered a series of perceptive readings, commenting on the question-and-answer structure of the poem and its biblical echoes, and noting that the vision of heaven offered by the poem is unexpectedly quiet and dark. A surprising number of candidates saw the inn of the poem, with its 'beds for all who come', as a reference to the inn of the nativity story. The AO4 content of answers on Rossetti was often most impressive, offering a network of references to heaven in other poems such as 'Shut Out', and demonstrating thoughtfully that the poet's approach varied from poem to poem, even if her concerns were similar.

3 **Owen: 'Dulce et Decorum Est'**

Owen was easily the most popular choice of text in Section A, and there was a wide range of quality in answers on this poem. Weaker answers were often overloaded with contextual detail about Jessie Pope (mentioned in most answers) and Craiglockhart; these things, whilst not irrelevant, needed to be treated with economy. Essays sometimes became general surveys of the prescribed poems, with little in the way of precise argument and illustration. Good answers provided a balanced response to the three main elements of the question, offering incisive analysis of language, imagery, tone, pace and irony; a cogent argument which demonstrated that the description of suffering has a purpose (perhaps to give an ironic twist to 'The old Lie' given at the poem's conclusion); and well managed references to other poems such as 'The Sentry' which focus on individual suffering. Good candidates often pointed out that the suffering was both physical and mental, sometimes referring to 'Mental Cases' in support of their argument. One examiner noted that 'the poem generated very personal responses which, considering its prominent place in our cultural consciousness, was very encouraging. The candidates were clearly affected by Owen's language use and were confident enough to express their own feelings – very refreshing to read'.

4 **Frost: 'Desert Places'**

Frost was studied by a significant number of candidates, and again there was a wide range of response. Some weaker answers tended to stay with the surface meaning of the poem and struggled to develop a sense of the significance of the landscape; these answers became at times rather circular and repetitive. Candidates who found some of the more abstract aspects of Frost's work difficult to encompass tended to re-focus their attention on other poems in the collection that have a stronger narrative drive (for example 'Birches'). There were many

detailed, effective and mature responses, however, which moved quickly from the landscape outside to the inner life of the speaker, offering much comment on loneliness and isolation and the sense of nature as a hostile rather than a nurturing force; these qualities in the poetry were sometimes -and generally with appropriate economy - related to the problems and tragedies in Frost's own life. 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening' was a popular contextual choice, and candidates often drew effective comparisons between the two poems; other poems which deal with people and nature, such as 'Two Look at Two', were also in evidence.

Section B

There were many excellent and accomplished answers in Section B, showing a commendable achievement after only a term of study; in general, however, examiners found that, where papers were uneven, it was the Section B answer which was usually the shorter and the weaker; some candidates seemed to be in need of a longer period of study to become thoroughly familiar with their chosen novel and its contexts.

It was clear that centres and candidates had prepared carefully in connection with the critical reading which constitutes the third text for this paper, and which is designed to support study of the novel. A minority of candidates referred explicitly (and usually pertinently) to the recommended critical texts, mostly to David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction* and occasionally to Robert Eaglestone's *Doing English*; many more referred to other additional reading they had done, usually from critics writing specifically on their chosen novel. Sometimes this complementary reading was used to fulfill Assessment Objective 1 ('using appropriate terminology and concepts'), for example where candidates explained the concept of the 'unreliable narrator' in support of answers on *The Great Gatsby*; more commonly, candidates used critics' views of the novel to fulfill Assessment Objective 3 ('informed by interpretations of other readers'). A number of centres and candidates, remembering that there is no requirement to quote from critical reading, chose to fulfill AO3 by interrogating the terms of the question and demonstrating that it might be answered in more than one way. Another group of candidates chose to respond to AO3 by characterising different broad views of the novel, usually under such labels as 'Marxist', 'feminist', 'modernist' or 'Freudian'. This approach is clearly permissible and can be effective, but in practice often demonstrated a very confused or simplistic approach: for example, a candidate answering on *Wuthering Heights* wrote that 'A feminist take on this would be that Catherine has bettered herself and done well as she has improved her status. On the other hand a modernist would view this as a poor decision to marry Edgar as she did not follow her heart and her true love'.

There were no answers on *The Age of Innocence*, and very few on *A Handful of Dust*.

Comments on individual questions

Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

Most answers on this novel were to 5(a), about the social restraints on male and female characters in the novel. Good answers usually discussed marriage and entailment and often contrasted the different responses of Elizabeth, Lydia and Charlotte Lucas to society's restraints, comparing their experiences with those of male characters such as Mr Collins, Mr Darcy and Mr Bennet. Weaker answers were inclined to list the main features of male and then female characters in the novel; better ones focused more effectively on social restraints and arrived at some kind of synthesis in their conclusion. 5(b), based on Austen's own comment that her novel 'wants shade', was less popular and inclined to divide the candidature: some recognised the provenance of the quotation and wrote about it with some skill, often disagreeing with the opinion expressed; others were happy to accept that Austen wrote a 'happy ever after love story', as one examiner put it, and these candidates suggested that the inclusion of serious issues would have been quite inappropriate. Popular examples of 'shade' were the role of Wickham, the Bennets' marriage and the repressive conventions of the marriage market.

Brontë: Wuthering Heights

6(a) was the more popular question, attracting some excellent answers in which candidates explored in depth five marriages, discriminating in detail between the love matches of Hindley/Frances and Cathy/Hareton on the one hand and, on the other, the marriages which took place for more complex and sinister reasons, such as Heathcliff/Isabella. The marriage of Catherine and Edgar tended to attract the most detailed treatment, with good/very good answers interrogating Catherine's complex emotions and motivations contrasted with Edgar's naïve and uncritical passion for her. Weaker answers tended to list marriages and to provide little in the way of synthesis or textual detail. 6(b), on setting, was less popular but still done well by some, who usually took three principal settings, the moors, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, and explored ways in which Brontë constructs them in terms of their significance for the characters and for the emotional structures of her novel. Some responses used other Victorian novels as literary context for *Wuthering Heights*, which usually proved to be an interesting and effective approach; generalised historical context was often less successful, especially where candidates assumed that the novel is set in Victorian times, whereas its major action actually takes place between 1778 and 1801.

Hardy: Tess of the D'Urbervilles

There were fewer answers on Hardy, and again some candidates apparently needed more time to get to know this substantial text in greater depth. Answers to 7(a) on the lack of heroism in the novel's male characters all examined Alec and Angel and generally found them wanting; some also considered a wider group of characters including John Durbeyfield and Angel's father and brothers. One or two thoughtful responses considered different ways of looking at the term 'hero', which proved to be an effective way of fulfilling AO3; a good number went on to consider potentially heroic qualities in Tess herself. Answers to 7(b), on the countryside, its customs and superstitions, ranged from the sweeping to the detailed. Many included contextual details from other Hardy texts (especially - and interestingly - *The Return of the Native*). The three key words in the question were interpreted in a variety of interesting (and often apt) ways.

Fitzgerald: The Great Gatsby

This was easily the most popular text on the paper and 9(a), on Tom's view of Gatsby, was the more popular question. Some candidates seemed to have difficulty with the exact definition of the two terms 'swindler' and 'bootlegger' although it was never the case that candidates penalised themselves by making entirely inappropriate inferences about their significance. One examiner noted 'a large number of entirely competent character sketches of Gatsby (and also - sometimes - Tom Buchanan) but these rarely addressed the specific terms of the question and hence failed to meet the demands of the Assessment Objectives'. Another examiner found that 'better answers explored how a view of Gatsby is constructed in the novel, many making the distinction that Gatsby was likely to be a 'swindler' but was far from 'common' (responding to 'colossal vitality' and 'intense life')'. Material on Nick Carraway as an 'unreliable narrator' and Gatsby's cheerleader was often put to good use here. Answers to 9(b) on setting were sometimes impressive: one examiner's allocation included 'some quite superb answers which identified four significant settings in the novel - East and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes and New York City - relating them in close detail to the socio/economic/philosophical pattern of the novel'. Elsewhere, there was some less confident writing, where candidates picked up the 'light and dark' prompt in the question and wrote generally on contrasts or symbolism without adequately focusing 'setting' in the answer; there was also some confusion about the geography of the main locations. In general, however, answers suggested that candidates knew the novel well and had been gripped by its thematic concerns and contextual issues. Considerable detail (supported by apt quotation) often featured in answers across the ability range.

Waugh: A Handful of Dust

There were very few answers on this novel, and almost all candidates chose 10(a) on the 'frivolous and uncaring' nature of society. These answers were generally at least competent and most agreed with the statement in the question, citing Brenda's affair with John Beaver, her relief when she found it was her son who had died rather than her lover and the farcical nature of the trip to Brighton to provide evidence of adultery. The statement was challenged by reference to Tony's caring if naïve nature and Dr Messinger's genuine ideals.

Principal Moderator's report for F662 Literature Post 1900

One effect of the reduction of three modules down to two has been to make the business of preparing candidates more complicated as the units carry greater text demand and more ambitious task requirements; we are used to fielding two teams of moderators in January, but that situation will probably not arise for a few years yet. There was a very small submission of candidates this January, which was something of a pity. Nevertheless it was good to see submissions at this early stage, not least because the work threw up an interesting route through the specification.

In terms of a folder focus, what surfaced in the stalwart set of assignments this winter session was a study of Gothicism, which perhaps showed a debt to the thinking behind 2713, the legacy synoptic paper, as all the texts studied were integrated around the theme and there had been a wealth of related reading. It was good to see the Gothic sub-genre opening up; indeed, it is likely to be a feature of the specification - if coursework consultancy enquiries are an accurate measure of what is happening - that F662 will see many Centres moving away from the perhaps rather staid text choices of the last round of A Level. Also useful practice was the range of tasks. It is our strong recommendation that Centres do not teach to a single title as this can lead to repetitive answers and lack of ownership of essays on the part of the candidates. The small cohort this January discussed two different passages, one of which clearly allowed for wider text knowledge as it was focused on a second encounter with an apparition. Then, in terms of Linked Texts projects, four different assignments were offered. These are listed below to provide Centres with some formulations different from those suggested in the INSET pack, which of course are given in the spirit of guidance rather than instruction as a first round of specification assistance:

“I was delighted to realise what a ghost story needed above all was atmosphere and a sense of place.” (Susan Hill). How crucial is a sense of place, or locus, in ... and ..?

Compare the two texts in the light of the following quotation: “Among the many liberties that a creative writer can allow himself is that of choosing whether to present that which conforms with the reader’s reality or one that in some way deviates from it.” (Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*)

“The power of the past over the present is the defining characteristic of Gothic” according to Chris Baldwick. Compare and contrast the two texts in reference to this idea.

David Lodge states that “names are never neutral, they always signify.” How far do you agree with this statement in ... and ..?

Thus we see that quotations from writers, theorists and critics can make for rich pickings for Linked Texts; also, that context can be interpreted as genre and provide a number of shaping ideas for an essay as well as fruitful opportunities for background and ancillary reading. However, again, this is just one kind of response to the possibilities of the AS coursework specification; the Summer will, I’m sure, yield a multitude of profitable interpretations – many centres will not link all three texts under a theme, which is perfectly acceptable; and, of course, we are expecting many re-creative offerings too as a substitute for a close reading study, which will extend the range and interest of the work still further.

Report on the Units taken in January 2009

Issues that arose from the work moderated were:

- 1) the need on the Critical Piece for candidates to construct an argument if they are looking for a top band score (AO1) - to provide an overarching idea that links disparate discussion points in the analysis of the extract.
- 2) a recognition that AO2 is the dominant assessment objective for the Critical Piece and that really good answers, besides having plenty of comment, will probably take on all three components of form, structure, and language.
- 3) a sense in the Critical Piece that the whole text had been studied, rather than just a few pages deconstructed; this can be achieved by, say, four references to other parts of the text beyond the area covered in the extract.
- 4) that in the Linked Texts piece candidates often disclose themselves as good at either contextual (AO4) discussion or at comparison (AO3), but much less often at both.

These observations may guide Centres to address particular emphases in their teaching or at least to be aware of how the work of seventeen year olds might/might not meet the assessment criteria.

At this point it is useful to note that Centres should ensure that they cover the three texts required for this unit. One text should be studied for Task 1 and two texts for Task 2, to make the total of three texts.

The coursework consultancy is up and running, with experienced moderators every week receiving requests for approval of course ideas and task titles. It is to this quarter that Centres should head with a coursework enquiry rather than to the Qualifications Manager.

What has been observed in general terms is that Centres are using the opportunity of the new specification to take on new texts, that re-creative work is probably no longer going to be a minority interest and that word counts seem to be being sensibly managed. Whether the three coursework texts are all part of some unified mini-project within English Literature or whether the two tasks (response to an extract and Linked Texts) remain as discrete offerings is a matter for individual Centres. The INSET pack gives some useful banner headings and suggestions for themed investigation of particular subject areas, but these are not the only way to devise a course or the only set of ideas. Many of the enquiries via the consultancy service show schools teaching a text that they really want to offer to their students for the close reading/re-creative task and then coming up with an interesting pairing or fruitful undertaking for Linked Texts.

Some Centres have been wrestling with the idea of a critical work or a cultural study as one of the texts and, of course, at INSET, the possibility of a film/media text has been floated provided a script is available from a reputable source. (This last idea is nothing new: *Talking Heads* has been around as an A Level text for a good number of years now and I know will feature in some Centres' coursework schemes again.) The freedom here is liberating, although critical and cultural texts - if they are being counted among the three primary texts for the reading requirement in coursework - need to be treated as equal partners in Linked Texts, not as support reading,. Sometimes Centres have found this particular emphasis hard to calibrate so I offer some possible combinations so that teachers can consider this as an option for the future:

A study of advertising/consumerism in *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood and *No Logo* by Naomi Klein.

A consideration of teenage rebellion in *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind and *Disconnected* by Nick Barham.

Attitudes to contemporary England in *England People Very Nice* by Richard Bean and *The English* by Jeremy Paxman.

Report on the Units taken in January 2009

Orwell's approach to language in *1984* and a number of his essays.

A consideration of the role of the writer in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *Negotiating with the Dead* by Margaret Atwood.

Compassionate treatment of the gay experience in *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner and *Not In Front of the Audience* by Nicholas de Jongh.

A negative statement on David Hare tested against any one of his dramas and *The Plays of David Hare* by Carol Homden

An insight into a complex personality by a comparison of Hardy's later verse and Claire Tomalin's *Thomas Hardy The Time-Torn Man*.

The treatment of death in *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath and *Bitter Fame* by Anne Stevenson.

Attitudes to homosexuality in *Maurice* by E.M. Forster and *Brokeback Mountain*, the film by Ang Lee.

The new specification offers interesting possibilities for fresh approaches and rewarding research. The tasks above require students to treat criticism or biography or cultural study or film as texts deserving of study and analysis in their own right, rather than as background or support material. However, it would be equally valid to use film versions or accounts of lives or critical non-fiction or social commentary as secondary material for Linked Texts, to provide support for points made about two texts being compared and contrasted.

These and other exciting ideas regarding coursework will, I hope, be represented in the summer session; and I trust that, once Centres gain more familiarity with the course, the January option for submission will grow once more.

Grade Thresholds

Advanced Subsidiary GCE English Literature H071 January 2009 Examination Series

Unit Threshold Marks

Unit		Maximum Mark	A	B	C	D	E	U
F661	Raw	60	49	42	36	30	24	0
	UMS	120	96	84	72	60	48	0
F662	Raw	40	32	28	24	20	16	0
	UMS	80	64	56	48	40	32	0

Specification Aggregation Results

Overall threshold marks in UMS (ie after conversion of raw marks to uniform marks)

	Maximum Mark	A	B	C	D	E	U
H071	200	160	140	120	100	80	0

The cumulative percentage of candidates awarded each grade was as follows:

No candidates aggregated this series.

For a description of how UMS marks are calculated see:

http://www.ocr.org.uk/learners/ums_results.html

Statistics are correct at the time of publication.

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