



2005

Literature GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Again this year there were many excellent papers, which demonstrated that the comparatively loosely structured nature of the task gave students the opportunity to develop interesting and often very varied responses. However, it is important for all students to realise that they **are** being asked a question and, as is the case in any other examination, this question must be addressed in their response. Students are required to use one or more of the passages selected as the basis for a discussion of their chosen text. Too many students persist in ignoring the passages, or making only a passing reference to them. Such responses can not achieve high marks.

Broadly, there were three main expectations of students:

- to read closely through an appropriate selection of textual material
- to explain the way aspects of texts contribute to interpretations of texts
- to develop an overall understanding of the text and its concerns.

Students were required to write coherently and expressively. Their responses also needed to be plausible.

One matter of concern was those students who wrote two responses on passages in the same section of the paper. Although the number who did this was very small, it should not happen at all. If teachers choose to offer two texts from the same part of the course, among others, they must make it very clear to students that they cannot write on both in the examination.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Essay 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	5	5	7	10	14	15	13	9	7	4	3	2	1	12.6

Essay 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0	0	1	1	2	3	3	5	6	8	10	13	13	12	8	6	3	3	2	1	12.0

Novels

The most popular text was *The Great Gatsby*. Many students had enjoyed the novel and there were some very good responses. However, it may be an unwise choice for weaker students as there were a number of poor essays. In these, little attention was paid to the way Fitzgerald deals with his concerns through Nick's story as well as Gatsby's. Some students over-interpreted references to colour in the novel: Daisy was seen as white on the outside but with a yellow (corrupt?) centre, and Gatsby's blue lawn and Eckleburg's blue eyes were linked, as were Myrtle's yellow dress, Gatsby's car and Eckleburg's glasses, but it was not clear why or to what effect.

There were some excellent responses on all of the other novels, including some on *Ragtime* and *The Children's Bach*. There were very few answers on *Conditions of Faith*, *The Last Life* or *Howard's End*.

Plays

Generally students handled the plays well and there was a range of texts discussed. It was pleasing to see that many students did have a sense of these texts as dramatic pieces. There were some excellent discussions of *The Women of Troy*, although some students needed to discuss the poetry in the second passage in a little more detail. *The Cherry Orchard* was again a popular choice, but *King Lear* accounted for the majority of answers in this section and there were some wonderful answers.

Short Stories

Again, there were good answers on all three collections, with Farmer's being the most popular choice. There were particularly competent responses on the Carver stories. Generally, students were able to link the passages effectively and comment on the collections as a whole, although weaker students tended to paraphrase and treat the passages in isolation.



Other Literature

Virtually all answers in this section were on *The Shark Net*. Middle-range students seemed comfortable with this text and generally students were able to link the passages well and discuss the concerns of the text. The passages set allowed for a pleasing range of approaches.

Poetry

This year many students found the poetry questions difficult and some weaker students had trouble even paraphrasing their chosen poems. This was particularly evident with the Wright selection. The Shakespeare sonnets were not a good choice for weaker students. In general, many students were unable to move beyond their discussion of the given passages to show an understanding of the poet's wider concerns. Alternatively, some students tried to show an understanding of what they perceived these concerns to be and largely ignored the selected passages or twisted the given extracts to suit their general reading. This was particularly true of the Rich poems, where there was often little evidence in the passages to support the reading offered. One student totally ignored the three set passages for Yeats and wrote instead on three other poems. Weaker students often wrote on only one passage. Other students, particularly those writing on the Shakespeare sonnets, concentrated almost exclusively on the structure of each and their linguistic devices, and did not write about the poems as a whole. There were very few responses on the Adamson poems.

Student examples

Note: Student responses reproduced herein have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

Below are some excerpts from excellent responses that showed the students working closely and perceptively to achieve a close reading of the text.

This following response from *Heart of Darkness* demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the text.

Passage two shows the personification of the inefficient 'flabby weak-eyed devil', that 'impression of pale plumpness in a frock coat', the satire emphasised by the contemptuous plosive alliteration of 'pale' and 'plump' and the repeated 'k' sound in 'frock coat'. Here Marlow experiences the European equivalent of the 'weird incantations', signing 'some document', although he is not used to 'such ceremonies'. The two knitters [the Greek Fates?] oversee his departure, the grotesque description of the older woman 'a wart on her cheek' suggesting a moral as well as a physical deformity, indicative of the morally bankrupt approach of the whole company. Although knitting black wool, she wears a 'starched white affair' on her head. This dichotomy of black and white, light and dark, continues throughout the tale [the black slave with the 'white worsted' around his neck, the 'white line of teeth' in the 'black shrunken visage' of the impaled heads]. But these seemingly traditional colonialist contrasts [light as the force of good in the darkness] are subtly undermined; white mist almost blinds Marlow as he approaches Kurtz's station, echoing the blindfolded woman carrying a candle in Kurtz's painting.

The following excerpt is taken from the start of an essay on *King Lear*.

Passage two immediately assaults the audience with the image of Lear's spiralling descent into madness. Lear's staccato cloudburst of emotion 'Rage! Blow! Spit! Fire! Spout! Rain!' is analogous to the raging of the storm. The audience acknowledges that Lear's reduction to monosyllabic language 'blow winds and crack your cheeks' is indicative of the reduction of his sanity. The sheer intensity of the language, as Lear and the storm become one, as both rage to 'crack nature's moulds' and howl at the world, ruefully reminds us that it is Lear's own fault, that this terrible destruction has been unleashed.

The following is an example of a student who worked very well to explore the image of the valley of the ashes from *The Great Gatsby*.

*The dark result of a society with no spiritual aim is most powerfully explored through the symbolism of the valley of the ashes. Drawn perhaps from the valley of death in psalm 23, and most probably from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, this hideous setting shows both the wasted existence of a lower class unable to aspire to anything, and the flip-side to the flashy materialism of the wealthy classes....Tom's infidelity and violence....the outward expression of a malnourished preemptory heart.*

Excellent passages such as those above are in stark contrast to the following statements.

'Breast' has a double meaning; the green breast and Myrtle's flapping left breast which symbolises the downfall of American society.

So many describing words in one sentence really drives home the point that lust is not beautiful.

*Passage one is an example of Austen's use of free direct discourse in *Sense and Sensibility*. This is shown by the quotation marks and paragraphing - every time speech switches from John to Fanny a new line is started.*

Fitzgerald uses symbolism in this novel very well.

In the following examples the students demonstrated their ability to use the given passages to develop an interpretation of the text.



The irrevocable disturbance of the natural order of society and familiar relations drives the tragedy of King Lear, turning 'sleep to wake' and is begun by the very men in control of this order, Lear and Gloucester....Edmund's embrace of his status as a natural child born in the 'lusty stealth of nature' with 'nature' herself as his goddess, gives him the agency to challenge the constructed order.

After commenting on passage three, this student continued:

Albany's attempt to moralise about the future of the new society grates terribly with the reality of the human action depicted in passages one and two.

Writing on *Measure for Measure*, one student concluded:

The crux of Measure for Measure lies in the need for balance; and, as Escalus reveals in excerpt one, it is law and mercy combined which then produce justice. 'Heaven forgive him and heaven forgive us all' serves to illustrate that no one is immune to sin, yet it is how we handle temptation which will deliver us from evil.

In a particularly lively introduction to an essay on *Sense and Sensibility*, one student had this to say:

Sense and Sensibility describes a social menagerie peopled with 'delightful women' and in which the language of money is spoken as a common tongue. Faced with the repellent focus on finance demonstrated by Mr and Mrs Dashwood in passage one and with the evidence of money's influence in Lucy's insipid tones in passage two, we can appreciate Austen's warning, explicit in passage three, that it is this financial culture which is responsible too for Willoughby's dissipated character.

In contrast, weaker students tried to hazard an interpretation, often falling back on phrases like 'Age, love and dreams are Yeats' specialty' or 'Shakespeare was aiming to show us that we are all equal and that power should be distributed evenly'.

Students sometimes tried to base some sort of interpretation on a discussion of themes. Those who attempted to adopt a theme such as 'trust' in *King Lear*, 'desire' in Harwood's poetry, or a battle between new and old west in *True West* often limited their discussion unnecessarily.

Good students were able to move comfortably and smoothly within and between the passages, as the following examples illustrate.

In the following response, the student was able to move easily from one passage to the next as well as being able to demonstrate an impressive wider knowledge of the Yeats poems set for study.

While Yeats explores the physical collapse of old age in 'When You are Old', in 'Long-legged Fly' he shifts to contemplate the collapse of civilisation, as he does with the coming of the Anti-Christ in 'The Second Coming' and through the howling storm threatening to tear the world apart in 'A Prayer for my Daughter'.

The essay continued:

Unlike the refrains 'O honey bees' ('The Stare's Nest by my Window') and 'All's changed, changed utterly ['Easter 1916'] the refrain here is puzzling and yet mesmerising in its stillness and poise. It draws on something wondrous and miraculous in nature; the illusion of a fly being able to remain balanced on water. This implies a comparison with the swans in 'The Wild Swans at Coole', who are at home in both water and sky and with Major Robert Gregory in 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', who is in his element in the air. The fly's perfect balance parallels the ability of the three historical figures to affect civilisation without being submerged, beautifully balanced in a moment of time.

The following introduction to an essay on *Measure for Measure* was able to refer to all three passages in a coherent manner.

Isabella's fiery, passionate denunciation of Angelo's 'seeming seeming!' presents her at her most lucid, having summoned the strength to confront the darkly corrupt deputy directly. Indeed, such a frank confrontation of authority is not seen again until Barnadine comically reproaches the Duke, having been drinking hard all night. While 'Master Barnadine' ultimately succeeds in his quest, Angelo's assault on Isabella rapidly strips her of our sympathy. Her chilling promise to 'fit Claudio's mind to death' reveals the danger in a harshly absolute religious dogma, as she is ironically transformed into the self-righteous Angelo of the first passage.

This introduction to *The Shark Net* was also able to provide an excellent basis for the essay.

The 'underlying anxiety' of passage two, one that simultaneously captures Robert's fear of 'intruders' and also his nagging sense of alienation, finds its domestic manifestation in passage one. Robert's parents, Dorothy/Dot and Royce/Roy with their conflicting identities, deny him the 'certainty' in his home life that he so desires. The 'human bodyslick' of 'sweat and suntan oil' as well as the 'rich greasy groundbait' evoke immediately sunny easy-going Perth (the great unknown) yet also suggest a darker potential, one concealed beneath the suburban and mundane.

Students who limited themselves to a discussion of a single passage often produced only superficial responses, showing little understanding of the wider text.

2005 Assessment Report



Students' language skills and poor handwriting continued to be a problem. Teachers should work to develop the vocabulary of their students throughout the year, perhaps helping them to build up a database of useful words. Students who are confidently able to use phrases such as 'further the concept of', 'made explicit by', 'retributive justice', 'Austen positions the reader', 'the infallibility of the American dream as a sustaining ideal' and 'Lear's debilitating narcissism' will be better able to convey their ideas to the examiners than those who offer little more than cliché and anachronisms. The following comments are examples of some of the less adequate writing.

The imminent loss of the cherry orchard didn't go down well.

Patchett describes the vibe of the household as being slack.

Shakespeare was obviously going through a mid-life crisis.

Often there were alarming historical comments:

Great Britain was in control of the Congo, where Marlow makes his journey.

Measure for Measure is set in eighteenth century Elizabethan Vienna.

It is best not to cite historians when discussing the passages, for example, 'as the well known historian Michael Wood said of Shakespeare' as these comments tended to draw the student away from the poetry and into a vague biographical discussion.

Overall, the Literature examiners found the experience of marking the students' responses an interesting and rewarding one. The best papers were wonderful and made markers feel quite humble. Obviously many teachers had helped students to respond enthusiastically and with real insight to their texts.