



2009

Literature GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

In the 2009 Literature examination, students wrote on a wider range of texts than in previous years. There were excellent and highly competent responses. There were also many poorly written and superficial essays which were very short and lacked close working with the passages. Students cannot fulfil all the requirements of the task in fewer than 400 words and essays of this length are unlikely to offer the detailed analysis and close study of the text which is expected.

It is imperative that students base their response on one or more of the passages provided. A passing reference is insufficient and students who do not meet this requirement will not score highly.

Students who were able to express complex ideas with accuracy and assurance scored well. The ability to work closely with the language of the text and to analyse it was very important. The following six examples demonstrate this facility with language and a perceptive and sophisticated interpretation of the text.

In the first passage Shakespeare pits the binary opposites of Claudius and Hamlet against each other as Claudius – a lecherous murderer and ‘satyr’- in pompous, majestic fashion tries to compel Hamlet to ‘think of us as a father’. The use of the royal plural ‘we’ further exacerbates the contempt in which young Hamlet holds his Uncle ‘a little more than kin and less than kind’. Furthermore Gertrude advises Hamlet to ‘look like a friend on Denmark’ but to Hamlet Denmark has bred ‘things rank and gross in nature’ and confines him like a prison with the denial of his passage to Wittenberg.

As the Captain fervently pursues his desire to conquer the glacier in passage two, driven by his ‘one desire to stand upon it’ the reader gains an understanding of his mighty will to symbolically and metaphorically conquer Hannele. The physicality of this act and the visceral quality of his determination as he ‘kicks his heels’ into the flesh of the ice conjures an image of the bullying that has occurred in his relationship with Hannele as she concedes in an earlier passage of the text that he had ‘bullied her physically, mentally and from the inside’.

We see the speaker long for ‘dull opiates’ and ‘drowsy numbness’, the elongated vowel sounds lulling us into a state of longing to escape the pain and inevitability of human reality. The bouncing consonants of ‘beaded bubbles winking at the brim’ creates a buoyant sound as the notion of ‘vintage’ and alcohol can lift one out of despair.

Keats’s rich, sensuous imagery, common to all his works, is testament to a Romantic who understood the paradoxical nature of life- that beauty is bitter for its transience but that bitterness or sorrow allows us to appreciate life’s pleasures all the more..... While a ‘faery’s’ song transports us beyond the mundane, doubts, as in life itself, remain. Is the lady’s love true? Can the Knight be sure she loves him, for she says so ‘in language strange’? Even in the midst of passion love’s fleeting nature and its intertwined pain can be sensed by all except those in its grasp.

Hamlet’s former words of love, issued before the play takes place, seem to hint at an elusive former time, a Hamlet with whom we are not acquainted. In the description of ‘words of so sweet breath composed’ Shakespeare creates an image of frail beauty, of a delicate and insubstantial remnant of the greatest mysteries and regrets- what might have been.

The idea of a ‘life sentence’ lamented in ‘The Twins’, the allocated roles to which different people are assigned and constrained by, are all made apparent through subjects largely unaware of this. The ‘farmer’ of ‘A Kitchen Poem’, comfortable in this ‘plain spoken room’, which is his accepted setting, relegates his wife, however unintentionally or however tenderly, to just that role- his wife. Unnamed, silent, the object of surveillance, the farmer’s wife in her demure attitude ‘by the window’ is something of an enigma, known to the audience only through Harwood’s use of her husband’s voice... They are ‘used to each other as to air’ but what of the woman, silent, spoken for, unconsulted? In the ‘ripening fields and orchards’ she is queen, made so by an adoring husband and children, her ‘children and work and daily bread’ imbued with reverence and beauty, the mistress of ‘royal skies’. But this remains a role she has been assigned, for all that it is a gift, given with love and appreciated, one determined by society.

Unfortunately many students struggled to use expressive or accurate language. It is important to acknowledge the audience for whom the students are writing. Language that might be appropriate in an informal classroom discussion is not appropriate in a formal examination. Students should avoid using jargon.

Some responses were too fragmented. Students were asked to write a coherent response but many tended to discuss each passage in isolation, sometimes with very little reference to the text as a whole. Some students commenced their discussion of each passage on a new page. Better responses made links within and between the passages and the following were examples of this.



The metaphor of the glacier in the second passage has a similar role to the sea in the first. The sea imagery implies the disunity and separation between March and her husband, Henry, just as the glacier attests to the distance between the Captain and Hannele, as he is determined to conquer its 'flesh' and take possession of it and Hannele can only watch from below.

Indeed, James's assertion in passage one of Catherine Sloper's innate moral purity presents a pitiable vulnerability which is so cruelly assaulted by Morris in passage three.

Students are asked to provide a plausible interpretation. Not all students will read a text in the same way but they must be able to support their reading. Clearly this goes further than a discussion of what the text is about. There needs to be a sense that the student has engaged with the text, and thought about its concerns and how they have been conveyed to the reader. An interpretation should be drawn from the text rather than imposed upon it as was often the case, particularly with the Harwood poems. Students were often able to use their introduction to indicate how they had arrived at an interpretation, to show how they planned to develop their essay and how they were going to support their ideas from the passage(s).

It is through the complete exploitation of the landscape that Astley conveys the idea of a 'search'-of seeking in nature a solution to human fallibility. These 'lotus eaters'- the hippies who attempt to manipulate the ferocity of nature in order to transcend the troubling aspects of their own lives, are viewed with gentle satire. The 'newness' of their language -their own language of delusion and exploitation - then becomes a defining characteristic, placing them ultimately within a hierarchy of discourse, a hierarchy in which Astley places the voice of natural yearning above all. This rhetorical interplay between the language of the 'new breed' and the discourse of natural human emotion is seeded throughout passage two.

Pungent, visceral imagery underscores the dichotomies inherent in nature and the state; the Gods and Man, Antigone and Creon, ultimately affirming man's inconsequence in the face of forces greater than he: the Gods.

Throughout 'This Boy's Life' Tobias Wolff aims to dispel any romanticised images of childhood and instead to present an exploration of the raw, convoluted reality of adolescence. Toby struggles to forge a comfortable identity for himself and finds it easier to slip into delusions of success and stifled truth. Passage two describes him attempting to portray himself as a 'boy of integrity' but the description of 'the splendid phantom who carried my hopes' suggests how grandiose and unreachable Toby's dreams were in reality.

Many weaker responses revealed difficulty with discerning the narrative voice in poetry and prose texts. Students writing on *Stasiland* needed to realise that this text was edited and arranged by the writer over a considerable period of time and is not simply a casual record of various interviews. While some students struggled with the role of the narrator in *Washington Square*, others showed an excellent understanding.

A frequent device of James is narrative unreliability-perpetrated from the first. Whilst describing Catherine in her younger years, the author paints a seemingly none too complimentary picture of a 'glutton' a shy girl who lurks 'in the background' and one who is 'decidedly not clever.' In contrast, Austin is portrayed as 'the cleverest and handsomest and most celebrated of men'. The author's sympathy seems already to lie with such a local celebrity; the 'brilliant' Austin Sloper, whereas the 'most' that could be said for Catherine is the description 'nice'. But within this passage runs the deepest irony. For observed beneath such seemingly derogatory comments as 'not quick with her book nor, indeed with anything else' James inserts the clause 'her deepest desire was to please him'. This young woman, underestimated by all, including her family, is yet selfless, concerned only with pleasing others- a quality of 'moral purity' that James quietly proceeds to laud.

Most students made some attempt to discuss some of the features of the text. However, students should avoid a simple listing of the features without demonstrating why and to what effect the author has used them.

Students must be careful to avoid errors when analysing poetic meter; many confused Keats's use of iambic tetrameter in *La belle dame sans merci* with iambic pentameter.

The following example shows a student making thoughtful comments about the first passage from *Emma*.

Emma's beautifully structured language is juxtaposed against Harriet's disjointed speech, indicating Emma's authoritative role in proclaiming her views on the topic of marriage and her own belief in her importance in her society.

Higher-scoring responses commented on the views and values of the author as part of their general discussion and analysis of the text, whereas weaker responses tended to add a paragraph, often at the end of the essay, in an attempt to meet this requirement.

The following is an excerpt from a very competent response to *This Boy's Life*.



Temptations of wealth and prosperity are a product of the image of the American Dream fostered throughout 1950s America. Wolff describes Toby wandering downtown to stare lovingly 'at the merchandise' and he lusts to present a prosperous image. In Passage three, Toby is exposed briefly to such a life. Wolff describes Mrs Howard 'wiggling her fingers like someone deciding on a chocolate' which elicits a sense of frivolous luxury, contrasting significantly with the harsh conditions of Toby's life in Chinook and driving through deadbeat towns with his Mother where 'people spoke in thick strangled tongues under low hanging skies'. As Mrs Howard 'arranged the scarf so it hung casually between the lapels of the overcoat' we see the ease of wealth in comparison with the hardship felt by those who live in the stagnant backwaters of the American Dream.

A fairly common error with weaker responses was to confuse the genre of a text or the form of a poem. Another problem was the lengthy discussion of the biographical details of an author's life. The tendency to impose reductive biographical details haunted readings of Keats, Larkin and Donne. Some students are still placing some texts in the wrong century and there were sometimes quite alarming errors of interpretation; for example, some students argued that Harwood's farmer was writing to a dead wife and others thought that Donne was about to die in the 'Valediction'.

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	0	1	1	2	4	5	7	9	12	14	14	10	9	5	3	2	1	12.8

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	1	2	3	4	6	7	9	12	12	12	10	7	5	3	2	1	12.3

Novels

There were some excellent responses on all the novels, with *Emma* being among the most popular. Strong responses noted the humour in the passages and wrote well on Austen's use of irony and underlying values. The *Washington Square* passages gave an opportunity to look at the narrator's role, although it was of concern that many students saw the story as having a very happy ending which seemed to overlook the irreparable damage done to Catherine by her Father and Morris. There were excellent and perceptive responses to *A Passage to India*, although weaker students tended to look at the passages in isolation. *Regeneration* was popular, with students tending to concentrate on the third passage. There were some thoughtful responses on *The White Earth*. There were not many responses on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* or *Bleak House*, but some of the essays on *Bleak House* were very good. Of the two new novels offered this year, *Sixty Lights* and *Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein* was more popular. Students tended to concentrate on the second *Frankenstein* passage and did not explore the opportunities offered in the first.

Plays

Most students wrote well on the play texts and there was often a pleasing sense of engagement. Many students needed to demonstrate more of a sense of the text as a play, and to be aware of setting, positioning of the characters on stage and other dramatic effects. The following response demonstrates a good awareness of these aspects.

The image of a tomb is a stark and lonely one, reminiscent of Hamlet's lament that 'Denmark's a prison' in which he is confined. One cannot help but be aware of the irony that 'Hamlet' is after all a play with predetermined outcomes, actors on a stage. It is something of a prison for its characters too, who play out events with both a kind of resigned acceptance and a fleeting spontaneity, their struggles and machinations little more than the prelude to their awaited execution.

Hamlet was the most popular play text and, although it is a challenging text, most students found plenty with which to engage and were well able to analyse the language. Weaker responses tended to oversimplify the concerns of the text and criticise Hamlet for 'dithering around' and not 'getting on with things' like Fortinbras. Better responses showed a sure grasp of the play's larger concerns and discussion ranged over the play as a whole. The crafty unctuous speech of Claudius to Hamlet in passage one, and Hamlet's stiff formality in reply, alerted more perceptive students to the simmering deep family rift at work, even before the ghost's appearance to Hamlet. Some students thought that the ghost had in fact appeared to him before passage one.

Antigone was another popular choice and some responses were of a high standard. Generally students concentrated on the opposition of the Gods and the state, using this idea to comment on Sophocles's views and values. Too few students took the opportunity to explore the language in the second and third passages. The use of Greek phrases is still causing a great many problems. If students do not know how to use them, they would be advised not to do so. For example,



students referred to 'Creon's hubris nature', and wrote that 'Creon has a hubris' and that 'The play is about Nomos and Diki'.

There were some very good responses on *Hedda Gabler*. Students seemed to be aware of it as a drama, of the movements of the characters on stage and the underlying tensions within and between characters. Weaker responses tended to paint a one-dimensional picture of Hedda as a suffering bored housewife, ignoring the complexity of her character – the guile and manipulative power, and her ultimate conservatism.

The responses to *Three Sisters* were generally of a very good standard while those on *Hotel Sorrento* were usually disappointing. Students concentrated on the family dynamics and, to a lesser extent, on cultural conflicts. There was perhaps less opportunity to explore linguistic devices and students found it difficult to link the passages. These responses were often very short or lacked coherence.

There were some competent essays on *Much Ado About Nothing*, although these were rarely of the standard of the best *Hamlet* responses. Some students seemed unsure how to use the first passage. There were not many responses on *Honour* or *Under Milk Wood* and very few on *Copenhagen*.

Short Stories

The responses on the Astley and Lawrence stories were generally very perceptive and showed an ability to analyse the language of these texts. This was particularly true of the Lawrence stories where students were able to write on the passages in an integrated way, picking up the thematic and literary connections between them. There were few essays on the Byatt stories.

Other Literature

Stasiland proved to be a popular text, although the narrative position and the circumstances of its writing were not always understood. Stronger responses drew interesting parallels with Funder's own reflections of her past and her descriptions of the various individuals in the passages, and also commented on her strong dramatic use of the environment. However, the dilemma for Stasi workers – to reconcile their idealism about what could be achieved by the GDR with the system's patent attack on civil rights – was seldom explored. The second passage, focusing on the figure of Koch, invited such a discussion but many students chose largely to ignore this passage.

This Boy's Life is an accessible text, and many responses showed a lively sense of engagement. The passages gave stronger students an opportunity to consider the two narrative voices and explore some of the images. The text also lent itself to a discussion of the author's views and values.

There were not as many responses on *Bypass: The Story of a Road* as in previous years and several students seemed unsure of how to handle the passages. Most concentrated on the second passage, where they could discuss McGirr's personal relationship, and found the historical and philosophical comments in the other two passages too challenging.

Poetry

Many poetry responses were very disappointing. The main problem was students' inability to compose a connected and cohesive interpretive perspective on the poems. Too often the poems were considered in isolation without sufficient awareness of the poet's concerns and techniques. Many students paraphrased the poems. Others wrote only briefly on one passage. The question asked students to discuss the work of the poet they had studied and it was difficult to see how students could attempt this when they looked superficially at one passage. Another concern was the predilection to list techniques and characteristics rather than argue a developed reading. The complexity of Auden's poems was obviously very challenging. While there were some very polished responses to the Donne passages, weaker students tended to reduce the poems simply to a development from secular/physical love to spiritual devotion. Those who wrote on the Beveridge poems did better, although many omitted the third passage. Students responded well to the imagery and mood of the first two poems. The fact that *Woman and Child* was without its final four and a half verses seemed not to have been noticed, with some students commenting on the shortness of the sixth stanza and the abrupt ending. Larkin's poems also proved challenging for many students. The use of the word 'almost' in *An Arundel Tomb* seemed to have been overlooked by many students, which made their interpretation of the poem often somewhat implausible. The Keats poems proved much more manageable and many students analysed the language well. Harwood's poetry was by far the most popular choice and there were some excellent responses. Students sometimes seemed to twist the poems, particularly the first and second extracts, to fit their predetermined interpretation.