



GCE A LEVEL EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE A LEVEL

SUMMER 2019

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ENGLISH LITERATURE
GCE A LEVEL
Summer 2019
COMPONENT 1: POETRY

General Comments

This is a paper which makes significant demands upon candidates' ability to plan and time their work very carefully. The advice on the front of the question paper offers a useful guide to timings and mark weightings, but it is up to candidates to make best use of the time available and to pay careful attention to which AOs are being rewarded in each section.

As a reminder, in **Section A part (i)** questions, candidates are expected to spend a total of about 20 minutes planning and writing their responses while keeping the focus upon the designated extract or poem. Every question contains a clear direction on how to shape the response. For example, emphasis might be upon imagery, technique or the ways in which a poet engages the reader in some specific way by, say, appealing to the senses or triggering a range of emotion. Every candidate who has prepared carefully for this paper should be clearly aware of two points:

- Section A **part (i)** responses are assessed under AO1 and AO2 only.
- This is a **directed and not a free writing exercise**. Successful responses will demonstrate that they have engaged with both the given text and the approach specified in the question.

On the evidence of this year's cohort, candidates would benefit from more time spent interpreting the specific demands of these short questions and then using a sensible proportion of the 20 minutes suggested response time to plan a relevant and coherent response. Descriptive general commentary or answers which rely upon a discussion of context (AO3 is not tested here) cannot expect to score well. It is strongly recommended that candidates take the emphasis off producing as much writing as time will allow and place it firmly upon planning a few relevant, carefully supported points and expressing their ideas in a clear register which draws upon the technical terminology relevant to English Literature.

Here, and elsewhere in the paper, candidates should be made aware of the limited usefulness of terms taken from the study of English Language: pre-modifiers; noun clauses; adverbial phrases and so on are frequently identified by candidates as a substitute for literary-critical analysis and this is a practice which must be discouraged.

Previous reports have drawn attention to the design of Section A and to the fact that the shorter questions provide a "springboard" for consideration of the issues contained in the part (ii) questions. There is increasing evidence of candidates taking a "tariff-driven" approach to the paper by answering Section B questions first then Section A part (ii) and finally Section A part (i) which often appears as an unfinished response. While it is up to the candidate which section of the paper is answered first, this approach is producing distorted responses with over-long Section B answers (often repetitive and descriptive in nature) which do not seem to have benefitted in any way from the candidate's investment of extra time. This is a high price to pay when many of the 20 marks available for Section A part (i) responses are sacrificed. In addition, the advantage of using part (i) questions as a "warming-up" for part (ii) is lost.

In **Section A part (ii)** responses there is the same need for careful reading of the question and planning before launching upon an essay. Candidates must be made aware of the need to tease out the critical and contextual focus in the question and they should be clear that a detailed analysis and application of that critical view will almost certainly be worth more to them than the indiscriminate inclusion of pre-learned, critical quotations which may not be relevant to the task in hand. Please see notes on questions 1 and 2 below for a more detailed treatment of this issue.

Careful thought about the precise focus for the consideration of context should also help candidates to avoid the urge to reproduce large sections of their unshaped notes on contextual issues which in many cases are presented as a token response to AO3 and tend to replace writing which should demonstrate engagement with and appreciation of the texts. Once again, the emphasis should be upon reading-thinking-planning and then the production of an essay which might be shorter than those we commonly see, but is likely to be much more effectively focused and therefore higher scoring.

Here and in **Section B**, raw and often inaccurate biographical data was frequently offered as valid contextual material and it is vital that candidates understand that “facts” about a poet’s life which might offer good material for a speculative television documentary do not readily translate into relevant or valid comment on a poet’s work. A poet’s biography is valid insofar as it encapsulates the ideas and concerns of a particular stage in history or cultural development but as soon as it elicits a descriptive or narrative approach from the candidate its value disappears as the essay loses sight of the principal objective of literary study which is an analysis and evaluation of texts. “Task-text-context” remains the reliable guide to the ways in which candidates should make use of their knowledge.

As they respond to Section B tasks, candidates should regard the need to make connections between the texts (AO4) as the “scaffolding” in their essays and not see comparing and contrasting as a detached aspect of the response coming at either the beginning or the end of their work. Responses which are infused with connections achieved through analysis of subject matter, poetic devices and language, form and structure were the most successful. Those which attempted to draw connections between the poets on the basis of their biographies much less so. Indeed, a good deal of valuable time and space was taken up with non-productive descriptions such as the problems Eliot and Hardy had within their marriages; the courtship of Hughes and Plath or the respective childhoods of Larkin and Duffy. It is worth saying again that asserted biographical details used as a substitute for analysis or analytical connections between texts are characteristic of very low scoring essays.

A key observation from several examiners was that candidates seemed to have had experience of a very limited number of poems in both sections of the paper and, in some cases, this had the damaging effect of candidates attempting to force unsuitable material into relevance causing distortion and error. Centres are reminded that an A level course preparing for an open-book examination should expose candidates to a wide range of poems and enable them to respond flexibly to an equally wide range of possible tasks.

As a final general note, please monitor the handwriting of your candidates. If candidates intend to hand write responses they must have regular practice of writing in timed conditions and teachers must be satisfied that the results are legible to those who will be seeing the candidate’s work for the first time. Where this is not the case, it is the responsibility of centres to make appropriate arrangements for the use of word processors.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A

Q.1 Chaucer

Part (i) responses to Chaucer were sometimes off target as candidates who had prepared to write about the Januarie/May relationship were determined to do so and consequently missed all of the rich imagery relating to Damian which is present throughout the passage but especially towards the end. Close focus on the selected lines and the designated task is of paramount importance.

In planning their responses to part (ii) candidates should have taken careful note of the AO3 and AO5 triggers in the question which are expanded here as an example of the best approach to this and other questions of the pre-1900 poetry collections. “Beneath the surface of this entertaining and bawdy tale we find a serious examination of obligation and loyalty.” Explore this view.” Apart from the obvious invitation to consider implicit meaning “beneath the surface” (AO2), for AO3, candidates should have seen an opportunity to draw upon what they knew about medieval entertainment – court life; oral tradition; moral values then and now . “Bawdy tale” leads into French, Italian and classical literary models. “Obligation and Loyalty” refers to medieval values of service and master/servant relationships and marriage customs. From here, essays could have branched out into courtly love and the distortion or possible parodying of this tradition as part of the robust entertainment on offer to Chaucer’s audience, and how ideas about any or all of these matters might be seen differently by a modern audience. To have identified and isolated these issues and then approached them selectively via the text itself would have provided a relevant framework for addressing AO3.

Similarly with AO5, careful reading of the question should reveal where there are different possible readings of the material. For instance, some might argue that there is no “serious examination” which some readers have claimed but the driving force of the Prologue and Tale is consistently comical and satirical. Others might see the Prologue and Tale as primarily didactic rather than simply entertaining and so on. Close consideration of the view that is offered in the question will always be preferable to imported, irrelevant material.

Q.2 Donne

Part (i) answers to Donne were often marred by a systematic, line by line explanation of what the poem “means”. Descriptive or narrative responses fill pages but, however fluent and accurately written they may be, they are unable to move above Band 2 unless there is an attempt at relevant analysis rather than descriptive commentary. In this case, a few minutes planning and selection of the key images would have paid dividends. Many candidates could not restrain themselves from talking about Donne’s “sinful” youth (often with colourful asserted detail) and his abandonment of his Roman Catholic faith. AO3 is not rewarded here.

In the second part of the question relevant AO3 material was clearly signposted in the idea of “passionate feelings, whether sacred or profane.” This wording opens up opportunities to consider C16/17th attitudes towards romance and courtship; the Petrarchan tradition; moral values then and now and so on. The wording allows these to be held-up against religious belief and conventions of worship which applied in Donne’s time.

For AO5, candidates have the opportunity to argue that some readers might consider that intellectual rigour is the actual driving force of Donne's poetry and that passion of whatever sort is secondary.

Chaucer and Donne are by far the most popular choices on this paper and so the examples above, which can be adapted to apply to any of the poets below, have been developed at some length. It is hoped that these examples might prompt practice exercises in the classroom on any of the poets, so that candidates can be better trained to read tasks attentively and plan their responses appropriately, rather than embarking too quickly upon over-long, repetitive "hit or miss" responses.

Q.3 Milton

Most candidates realised that in this extract there is a serious falling-out between Adam and Eve but it was *the ways in which* Milton presented their aggressive strategies which required analysis. Many candidates spent far too long contextualising the episode and too little time on the techniques employed.

In part (ii), candidates should have registered the AO2 triggers in "dramatized and humanised" – understood that the issues under consideration in *Book IX* constitute some of the most common themes in abstract sermons but here Milton's art brings both entertainment and immediate relevance to his readers of whatever period i.e. "Timeless". "Revolt and disobedience" open up a range of AO3 approaches with the opportunities to consider the relevance and applicability of the comment as a starter for AO5.

Q.4 Keats

Part (i) here is a very good example of the specific directions in questions of this sort. The extract was chosen for the rich sensuousness of the imagery and candidates were asked to consider the ways in which Keats engages the reader's senses. This is asking for responses to focus on the pure pleasure of reading and over-contextualising or seeking obscure symbolic significance was a distraction from the designated task.

In part (ii), candidates should have been careful and selective in the ways in which they addressed the age of "intellectual enlightenment" – some grasped an opportunity to write extensively about science and medicine (linking to Keats' occupation) without sufficient reference to the texts to allow them to balance the appeal to readers' emotions rather than their interest in ideas – moral, philosophical, theological and so on. Some responded thoughtfully and made good use of Keats' interests in time, mortality, antiquity and literature to challenge the premise of the task.

Q.5 Rossetti

This is possibly one of the best poems to demonstrate the mercurial twists and turns which Rossetti often brings about over a very short space. Careful planning was essential here – candidates needed to have identified the "range" of emotions and how one shifted into another before they started to write. Without planning, many responses simply worked through line by line trying to identify different emotions – this is descriptive commentary and quite different from the analysis of technique.

In part (ii), the AO3 triggers are clear in the mention of Christianity but also in the great age of sermons candidates might have been expected to understand how Rossetti takes her place amongst persuasive religious writers but approaches moral teaching in a different and distinctive way. From an AO5 point of view, “primary intention” might have been challenged with the widely held belief that so much of Rossetti’s writing is more prayer than instruction so some readers would not be inclined to apply wholesale the assertion in the task.

Section B

Q6/Q7 Hardy/Eliot

Question 6 proved to be the more popular choice and the best answers were extremely well-informed about both poets’ knowledge and understanding of the both the recent and distant past whether this was applied to the history of families and relationships or the much larger issues of religion, mythology and human conflict. ‘The Waste Land’ and poems such as ‘The Darkling Thrush’ provided useful connections. Weaker answers tended to assert points about the personal histories of both writers or to reproduce badly digested notes on Victorian culture and Modernism.

There were very few responses to Question 7 but those that were seen had some mature and well-informed ideas about religion and the supernatural. The best responses to Hardy moved beyond the very popular poems of 1912–13 and obvious choices such as ‘The Haunter’ and “The Voice” and were able to demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which the imagination gives new life to departed people and past times. Good connections were made between this and Eliot’s ability to present religious miracle and other supernatural experience in poems such as “Journey of The Magi” or “The Hollow Men” in terms of common human experience.

Q8/Q9 Lawrence/Clarke

Lawrence and Clarke are studied by too few candidates to support comment.

Q10/Q11 Hughes/Plath

This is the second most popular pairing on the paper and there is a very broad range of quality in the responses. The task in Question 10 invited an analysis of the presentation of “personal experience” by the two poets and those who built their responses around contrasts between the deeply personal, confessional style of Plath and the more objective, implicit presentation of personal experience/feeling in most of Hughes’ poems were very successful. Those who told detailed tales of Plath’s suicide and Hughes’ infidelities left themselves little or no time to analyse the poems or to make valid connections.

There were very strong responses to Question 11 too but “disturbing” was taken too much for granted and many candidates did not attempt to anatomise what might be meant by a reader’s disturbance – moral? aesthetic? intellectual? discussion of this element of the question might have helped to keep responses on track, open up a wider range of poetry and avoid the pitfall of an over-emphasis upon biographical gossip.

Q12/Q13 Larkin/Duffy

Larkin and Duffy are by far the most popular pairing on this paper. But, as mentioned above, many responses are marred by an over-emphasis upon biographical detail which is asserted and often misapplied. Examples are too numerous to detail, but there is an urgent case here for candidates to be persuaded not to indulge in extensive writing about the lives of poets and attempt to draw equivalences between issues such as sexuality and marital status and the voices presented in the poems. There may be such equivalences but these need to be considered tentatively and while 'A Study of Reading Habits' might be an autobiographical poem it is very much more than that and candidates must resist the urge to reduce and simplify great art into a cipher for a poet's actual experience. Those who concentrated exclusively in their responses to Question 12 upon the changes in the historical lives of Larkin and Duffy missed the point and largely failed to consider the ways in which "Larkin and Duffy present *ideas* about change." which requires a much more conceptual and analytical approach than is possible when asserting biographical "facts".

There were some very strong responses to Question 13, the presentation of human relationships, and it was pleasing to see candidates offering a broad range of material covering family, romance, professional relationships and more abstract ideas about relationships between people and places and how one reflects the other.

Q14/Q15 Heaney/Sheers

Very few centres choose this pairing but those that did produced some strong answers on human relationships and the "presentation of human intimacy" (Question 14). It was pleasing to read some mature responses which did not interpret intimacy only in terms of sexual relationships but also in terms of the intimacies enjoyed by relationships across the generations or between friends and family. There was some very well informed and sensitive writing on these issues.

While Question 15 seemed to generate more direct writing about the actual life experiences of the poets rather than the more abstract idea of how other people and their achievements seem to inspire writing and how this is presented, there were still some strong and well-informed responses. Approaches showed how the values, ambitions and sentiments expressed in the work of both poets might have been inspired by as broad a range of characters as other famous writers; family members; apparently unremarkable people in bars or reckless drivers.

Summary of key points

- In Section A part (i) questions candidates must be mindful of the focus of the task and take time to plan accordingly.
- In Section A part (ii) questions take careful note of the AO3 and AO5 triggers and make these the starting point for planning and selecting appropriate material.
- In Section B responses avoid the temptation to assert biographical detail which has little or no bearing upon the task and which obscures rather than enhances literary-critical approaches.
- Make connections between poets on the basis of their writing rather than the details of their lives.
- By all means make use of the terminology associated with English Literature in order to support an academic register of writing, but avoid simple labelling, the identification of word classes or grammatical constructions simply to display knowledge.
- Make sure that your handwriting can be read.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Summer 2019

COMPONENT 2: DRAMA

General Comments

This year it was good to see more focused responses across this paper. Although this is a closed-book paper, candidates generally selected pertinent material from the plays and there was much less of the narrative, descriptive type of response which sometimes characterises weaker responses. It was also rewarding to see a more varied range of relevant contextual material and also critical sources. Examiners were impressed with candidates' ability to quote freely from the texts, in particular from their Shakespeare play, and also their ability to quote verbatim from critical sources.

Short task responses to Shakespeare extracts reflected an improved knowledge base and extended responses to both Shakespeare and the two drama texts in Section B showed improved time management and a carefully planned approach in many instances. It was also very encouraging to see how candidates appropriately balanced their coverage of the relevant assessment objectives in the extended writing tasks.

However, we remain concerned about the quality of written expression at this level. Candidates who write very long, one sentence paragraphs risk losing their focus and intelligibility, and this trend appeared to be more prominent this year. There is also a slight trend away from academic style and register and towards the vernacular, which needs to be corrected.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A: Shakespeare

In Section A, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* remain the most popular texts, with *The Tempest* quickly building its popularity profile every year. *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Henry IV Part 1* are less popular, but it is rewarding to see that both plays are clearly stimulating and rewarding for those candidates who study them.

In response to the Shakespeare extract, candidates were often clear in their knowledge and understanding of the chosen part of the play and were reasonably accurate in discussing, for example, Lear's *state of mind*/the *presentation* of Cleopatra or Falstaff/the *relationship* between Prospero and Ariel. However, there was some uncertainty regarding '*Hamlet's thoughts about himself*', with a preference for describing feelings rather than considering how Hamlet's *thoughts* are presented by Shakespeare. Those who missed the reference to Fortinbras struggled to access the second half of Hamlet's soliloquy, and there were several who misinterpreted the '*eggshell*' concept.

In response to the Shakespeare essay in part (ii), there were several different approaches to the issue of *sanity/madness* in the *King Lear* question, with the more successful responses engaging with concepts of Lear's actual madness, the 'professional madness' of the Fool and the feigned madness of Edgar.

Those who argued for the madness of Edmund, Goneril and Regan sometimes struggled to develop sufficiently coherent arguments, especially if they had not tried to define the characters' behaviour as a kind of madness at the outset. Most saw the case for Cordelia's sanity being the most apparent, with some suggesting that in her sane rejection of the love test she demonstrated a kind of madness in refusing a slice of the kingdom and its associated security.

It is worth remembering that candidates must pay close attention to the wording of questions in Section A part (ii), so that, for example, in attempting the *Hamlet* essay question, 'obsession' with *honour* cannot be overlooked as a 'driving force of the play'. Some discussed the revenge tragedy genre, with many willing to consider the different kinds of honour in the play, for example attitudes towards female chastity. The strongest responses avoided narrating contexts but interwove them skilfully into their central argument. It was pleasing to see that the CPD message in recent years regarding the worth of literary /ideological contexts has borne fruit, and there were many instances of responses which were pleasingly tuned in to concepts rather than just historical events.

The Tempest question produced some impressive work on ideas about freedom and oppression, with a clear focus on key relationships and especially ideas about colonialism. Those who wrote on *Antony and Cleopatra* engaged with the question of *dominant power* and argued convincingly for the dominance of either Egypt or Rome, the popular approach being a study of the central relationship and Cleopatra's sole claim to the power of Egypt through Shakespeare's characterisation and themes. Although *Henry IV Part 1* is still very much a minority choice, the essays produced on the court and tavern as opposing worlds were generally stimulating and well supported, with some interesting scrutiny of the differences in how Shakespeare constructs dialogue, including the impact of blank verse versus prose.

Section B: Drama

In Section B, the most popular text pairing by some considerable distance remains that of *The Duchess of Malfi* / *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but *Doctor Faustus* / *Enron* was also a popular combination for study. It is pleasing to see all texts attempted on the paper.

Examiners were impressed by the capacity of candidates to write focused, planned, cogently argued and well supported essays in this section, with accurate and apt quotations impressively integrated. It is also to be noted how well prepared centres are for this section in particular. The candidates' evident enjoyment of the texts is a genuine reflection of not only their own endeavour but also their teachers' hard work in preparing them and engaging them.

Question 6 seemed to be marginally less popular than Question 7, and many responses engaged well with different kinds of *authority*, with some enterprising connections/contrasts established between *Faustus* and *Skilling* or *Fastow* and the different contexts.

Question 8 was the most popular question in this section, with many interesting discussions on the *insecurity of males*, although there was a temptation to focus on the *powerlessness of females* exclusively in terms of sexuality.

Question 9 produced some thoughtful work on *confined locations* and *destructive impact*, and it was pleasing to see close scrutiny of stagecraft and dramatic technique in response to this question.

Question 10 was significantly more popular than 11, with responses fully engaged in the elements of both plays which qualified for *mock* and *shock*, some arguing that in neither play was the social criticism served up a *healthy dose*. It was very pleasing here to see the candidate's knowledge and understanding of different dramatic traditions and conventions put to good use.

Questions 12 and 13 seemed to be relatively evenly attempted, both offering the candidate the opportunity to discuss attitudes and values within the respective cultures and contexts. There were some particularly thoughtful responses to the idea of *self-betrayal*, and some close attention to the *insights* which might be gleaned.

Finally, questions 14 and 15 seemed to attract quite an even spread of responses, with clear engagement with ideas about *public* and *private morality* and the *system of law favouring the rich*. It is interesting to see how these plays in particular stimulate candidates' sense of injustice and inequality, and examiners saw many responses which showed a high level of engagement with ideas about systems and organisations as presented in the two plays.

Summary of key points

- It is important to remember to read the set extract from the Shakespeare play as closely as possible, without attempting to respond immediately to the question.
- It is also important to engage with **all** elements of the essay questions, as they offer a critical view which must be addressed during the course of the response.
- Too many essay responses are over-long and consequently unstructured, with some barely coherent. Expression skills are often severely compromised when candidates are rushing to pour out all their knowledge, sometimes irrespective of the question. This should be discouraged. Examiners frequently saw 6-8 pages written in Section B, and this is unnecessary. Please remember that it is quality not quantity which is valued.
- Where poor handwriting impedes the legibility of a response, it makes awarding a mark very difficult. Many responses this year might have fared better if they had been word processed. WJEC has clear advice on applying for this facility.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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COMPONENT 3: UNSEEN TEXTS

General Comments

Section A: Prose

While more centres seem to have opted for the period 1880-1910 and Q1, substantial numbers also responded to Q2 (period 1919-1939). Responses to both questions represented the whole range of ability and the challenges of the two extracts were found to be different but equal. Many candidates made very good use of the supporting materials but others unbalanced their responses with an over-reliance upon broad, pre-learned contextual materials.

Section B: Poetry

Candidates should be reminded that this section of the paper offers an opportunity to engage and write freely about poetry without any emphasis upon either context or other readings. The point is made because many candidates show a tendency to try to identify period and then write generally about movements such as Romanticism or Modernism, or to import into their work broad general comments about the nature of poetry. Both of these approaches result in unfocused, low-scoring responses because they leave little time or scope for close analysis.

One of the biggest problems in this part of the paper is unsupported assertion. In "Celandine" candidates treated the identity of the subject as a puzzle which had to be solved before analysis could begin so the female was asserted to be a dead daughter/wife/lover/sister or any one of these who had not died but who had left the poet. Depending upon choice, the discussion then proceeded with a lot of time spent making the ideas and sentiments fit the meaning imposed by the candidate. In situations such as this one, candidates must be able to feel more comfortable with uncertainty and give themselves the opportunity to explore *tentatively* different possibilities without reducing the poem to a single point of focus. This is the basis of creative engagement whereas a reductive approach leads mostly to "attempts to engage" or superficial approaches.

In responses to "The Poplar Field" unsupported assertion became even more extreme with a number of candidates asserting that it was a war poem having battered onto the terms "field", "retreat" and "hasting away" with the blackbird presented as a symbol for the non-combatant officer class. While, admittedly, only a very few candidates went as far as this in bringing their own meanings to the poem, this might provide the starting point for a conversation with future candidates about the necessity for balance and common sense when addressing poetry. In other ways common sense was set aside when considerable numbers of candidates claimed with certainty that the voice of the poem was that of a dead man - often being even more specific in that he had been dead for twelve years. It was claimed that proof of this lay in stanza 4 where the poet was speaking from his grave "With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head". Careful reading and preparation should have revealed that this is the fate the poet predicts for himself "ere long".

Comments on individual questions/sections

Q.1 Period 1880-1910

AO1 and AO2

Strong responses showed an immediate and confident understanding of the circumstances and launched quickly into an analysis of Moore's literary techniques showing how the writer's tone and attitudes towards his subject were implied and how the complex character of Esther was revealed. Less secure responses were confused about Esther's circumstances - with some believing she was *catching* a train in order to leave behind the depressing landscape and abuse which they believed was presented in the later sections of the extract. The contents of this text should not have been beyond the comprehension of those who had undertaken two years of A level study and mistakes such as these point clearly to a lack of close reading and preparation. Candidates need to be advised to spend adequate time reading and re-reading materials rather than embarking immediately on an effort to produce as much of their own writing as they can in the time.

While strong responses were secure and confident about the literary concepts and techniques employed in the passage and the ways in which meaning is made, others fell back immediately upon the technical terms of English Language study, spotting features such as noun phrases or syndetic lists without developing ideas about how these might make meaning. There is no embargo on terms from other disciplines, but candidates must be aware a "naming of parts" approach to analysis will not, of itself, earn credit. This applies equally to the technical terms of literary study which must be regarded as study tools rather than the finished products of an essay. Another feature of relatively weak responses was the transference of terms associated with the critical analysis of verse to prose study. Candidates must be reminded that terms such as volta, caesura or enjambment have very specific applications and are not helpful in the analysis of prose.

When discussing technique, only a minority of candidates felt happy with the role of the narrator and were able to demonstrate familiarity with concepts such as free indirect discourse. Mistakes included describing Moore as a first person, unreliable narrator or Esther as a first person narrator. Even when the narrative stance was correctly identified, points were often asserted without attempts at support or any discussion of significance. These are fundamental issues in the study of prose and, once again, had candidates spent more time and care at the reading and planning stage, much of this damaging error (which prevents candidates from engaging productively) could have been avoided.

The point has been made before that successful literary analysis involves drawing-out rather than *imposing* meaning upon the text. There was quite a lot of unconvincing writing where, for instance, candidates decided that any mention of the colour white (as in the vapour from the departing steam train, the level crossing gates or the whitewashed walls of neighbouring houses) was a symbol of Esther's purity. This was justified by the assertion that white was often associated with purity or virtue in literature. Candidates must be persuaded not to abandon common sense in the pursuit of literary devices.

In order to be at least clearly engaged (AO1) with a text candidates must be able to go beyond an accurate description of characters and events and be able, with clear support (AO2) to say something convincing about a writer's techniques and apparent intentions. The perceived implicit meanings of a piece need to be addressed tentatively and supported with example and discussion. A relatively small amount of writing of this kind will score much, much better than pages of narrative and unsupported assertion.

The process of analysis requires at least *clear* support from the text itself. The best responses managed to isolate key words and phrases which clearly support discussions of technique, implicit meaning, tone or attitude. Less successful responses relied upon copying out larger sections of texts in support of an assertion. Once again, had candidates planned their responses more carefully and used a basic editing technique such as underlining key words or phrases in the text they would have been better placed to support their writing effectively.

AO3 and AO5

It might be helpful to re-state some of the principles behind the inclusion of critical and contextual materials with the literary extracts. In order to fulfil the regulatory requirement to examine in different ways across the specification, we introduced the opportunity for candidates to make use of materials which they would see for the first time rather than have them rely exclusively upon materials which they might have learned in the course of study.

While this approach introduced a different skill, it was also designed as a means of helping candidates to avoid the pitfall of reproducing large amounts of pre-learned material irrespective of relevance. Candidates may, of course, make judicious use of what they have learned in the course of study but should not fall back upon the lengthy reproduction of notes on issues such as women's suffrage; the industrial revolution (often mistakenly claimed to have started in the late 19th century) or the plight of women and servants. In order to be judged at least *clear*, contextual/critical materials must be applied relevantly to the specific passage under consideration. Candidates would be better prepared for this part of the paper if they became more familiar with examples of literary writing from the period rather than trying to digest swathes of social and political history.

Candidates should also be aware that extracts (which must be addressed) might contain materials which could be used under both AO3 and AO5 and part of the skill being tested here is the candidate's ability to discriminate carefully as well as to apply materials relevantly.

AO3

Examiners report seeing a great deal of "detached" AO3 material which effectively derail the critical analysis of Moore's writing. In its most unhelpful form, detached AO3 appears either as a lengthy, descriptive, generic introduction to the period of study or as substantial paragraphs devoted to an issue such as the women's movement which are not used to illuminate any aspect of the text. It may be that candidates find it much easier to reproduce notes on the history of society rather than to address literary technique, but they must be warned that however lengthy or well-written such work may be, it will not score highly unless it is linked carefully to a discussion or analysis of the text. For many years now, Principal Examiners on all papers have been recommending a task-text-context approach.

AO5

While there were fewer examples of pre-learned critical comment being used unproductively, a number of candidates continued to import general commentary on literary movements or conventions which were then either distorted to fit Moore's work or their relevance was asserted without discussion. Time spent carefully weighing the significance and application of the given critical extract would be more productive than efforts to remember and reproduce generic critical materials.

Q.2 Period 1918-1939

AO1 and AO2

In addressing Galsworthy's narrative technique plus the status and motivation of his narrator, candidates faced a very similar challenge to those who responded to Q1 and many of the comments above apply equally to the treatment of this text. However, more specifically, only a very small minority of candidates seemed to take note of the detail in the preamble to this piece which identifies the narrator as a painter. As future cohorts prepare for this paper, they should be advised to look for potentially useful details in introductions: past papers will show characters in the extracts who have been introduced by age or status and such details are designed to help candidates gain a secure grasp of material they have not previously studied. In this case, "an artist" might have helped candidates respond to Galsworthy's interesting match between the narrator's vocation and the ways in which he describes Vaness which, as one candidate remarked, "look as if he is studying a subject for a portrait." Importantly though, candidates must be prepared to make something of the details they have read and not simply reproduce them as a descriptive introduction.

Three characters figure prominently in this extract: Vaness, Miss Monroy and the artist narrator himself. Similar to candidates responding to Q1 who could not sort out the narrative technique, there was a tendency here to talk about Galsworthy as if he were the direct observer of events which rather undermines the novelist's craft. Others failed to take account of the setting of the extract - some assuming that because it was in English the setting must be England.

Many candidates handled the abrupt change in tone and focus in the last two paragraphs quite well, but very few recognised the structural qualities of the writing where suddenly all the close attention to the appearance and behaviour of Vaness and Miss Monroy in the first five paragraphs becomes a preamble to the narrator's personal crisis and thereby transforms the earlier part of the extract into so much more than descriptive writing as it is seen to underpin a more abstract, moral and philosophical enquiry.

It was unfortunate that mention of the war in the last two paragraphs triggered pre-learned responses detailing issues such as casualty figures and combat conditions which diverted attention from the kind of literary criticism exemplified above.

AO3 and AO5

Please see notes on Q1 above for general comments on these two assessment objectives.

AO3

Mention of the war in Meehan's supporting extract should not have been interpreted as an invitation to write freely about World War 1. This specific extract was chosen to help candidates to pick up the concerns of the last two paragraphs of Galsworthy's writing and the cynical almost despairing attitude towards mankind which the narrator expresses. An awareness of the aftermath of the war (which should certainly have been part of any course of study focused upon 1919-1939) is enough to contextualise the sense of moral malaise expressed by the narrator and colleagues might like to use this example with future classes as a guide to what to avoid (i.e. detailed accounts of WW1) and how to keep attention focused upon the literary qualities of the extract.

The other part of Meehan's commentary is designed to help candidates make sense of the presentation of Miss Monroy and the attitudes/values which are implied.

It is certainly valid and relevant to make reference to the "roaring twenties" and the cult of youthful extravagance expressed in the culture of music, dance and costume - all of this has a direct bearing upon the passage, but lengthy, detached and general assertions about life in the 1920s struggled to demonstrate clear use and application of the supporting extract. Once again, a simple calculation should help candidates to judge how much time and space need to be dedicated to earning 10 marks out of 50 for this aspect of their writing.

AO5

The extract from Boynton's book on Galsworthy should have provided candidates with plenty of material which could have been applied directly to the treatment of character ("the interpretation of character through action") while offering opportunities to question "the real business of the story-teller" and speculation upon the potential "satiric force" of this particular extract. Bearing in mind that AO5 is worth only one fifth of the marks available, there is more than enough material here to support candidates' treatment of this AO. Indeed, had responses focused more upon a detailed consideration of Boynton's observations and less upon general assertions about modernism and stream of consciousness they would have been more likely to appear sound and secure.

Q.3 'Celandine' by Edward Thomas

There were some splendid responses to this poem which offered accurate and carefully supported analyses of the subtle shades of feeling expressed and the implicit meanings of images such as "shadow" and "phantom" when set beside "a flame / A living thing,". Careful observations of the poet's techniques scored much more highly than lists of terms associated with the analysis of poetry or, as in Section A, the distracting use of English Language approaches such as identifying word classes or claiming the importance of dependent clauses of one type or another without any attempt to explain why or show how such choices were effective in making meaning. Despite advice offered in the past, examiners noticed a proliferation of terminology such as "semantic fields", "lexis", "concrete noun" and "compound-complex sentence" and so on which, in themselves, offer no support to analysis and, unless used expertly, tend to distract from literary approaches. Equally, candidates who relied upon the assertion of literary terms such as "sibilance", "caesura", "Volta" and "enjambment" without any qualifying discussion tended to produce superficial work.

Some candidates managed to engage thoughtfully with the metaphorical aspects of the poem - "a short swift eternity" for instance but those who went only as far as to label this "oxymoron" did not manage to show a sound, secure appreciation of poetic techniques. Lastly, there were some sensitive and interesting analyses of the poet's exploration of memory and even though many did not quite grasp the meaning of "a never perfectly recalled air" they still managed to relate closely to the presentation of the ephemeral quality of memories.

Q.4 'The Poplar Field' by William Cowper

In responses to "The Poplar Field" unsupported assertion became even more extreme with a number of candidates asserting that it was a war poem having battered onto the terms "field", "retreat" and "hasting away" with the blackbird presented as a symbol for the non-combatant officer class. While, admittedly, only a very few candidates went as far as this in bringing their own meanings to the poem, this might provide the starting point for a conversation with future candidates about the necessity for balance and common sense when addressing poetry.

In other ways, common sense was set aside when considerable numbers of candidates claimed with certainty that the voice of the poem was that of a dead man - often being even more specific in that he had been dead for twelve years. It was claimed that proof of this lay in stanza 4 where the poet was speaking from his grave "With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head". Careful reading and preparation should have revealed that this is the fate the poet predicts for himself "ere long".

Summary of key points

- In both sections reading and reflection is essential and in most cases candidates would benefit from longer preparation and shorter, better planned responses.
- Remember that the business of critical analysis is to draw-out meaning rather than to impose or assert it.
- Make careful and accurate use of technical terminology to support an academic register but avoid a "naming of parts" approach and remember that the classification of words is of limited value.
- Test all attempts at the interpretation of implicit meaning against common sense and the predominant tone of the piece under analysis.
- Before starting to write your analysis, make sure that you have arrived at a satisfactory and clear overview of the whole extract or poem.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE A LEVEL

Summer 2019

COMPONENT 4: PROSE STUDY (NEA)

General Comments

There was a great deal to admire in much of the work seen by moderators, and most candidates had been well prepared for this challenging unit. Unfortunately, this was not the case in all centres. There were a small proportion of centres where the same problems raised in the last two reports once again adversely affected candidates' chances of success. There were examples of talented candidates who were disadvantaged by their approach to studying the texts and by the question they were answering.

The focus of the Principal Moderator's report, and individual moderators' feedback to centres, is always to offer guidance on the best ways to support candidates, to give advice based on good practice seen in hundreds of different responses read during the moderation process. Rather than repeat issues which have already been covered at length, the aim of this report will be to offer advice through outlining some examples of successful and less effective approaches witnessed this year. **However, it is strongly recommended that centres revisit the detailed advice given in the Principal Moderator's reports for 2017 and 2018 as a helpful adjunct to the guidance offered here.** Included in last year's report, for instance, were the key indicators of a successful centre, specific problems relating to each assessment objective and advice on effective assessment procedures.

As in previous years, the main issues affecting candidates' achievement in 2019 were:

- a lack of **detailed knowledge and secure understanding of the texts**, affecting the quality of support and convincing development of claims
- limited knowledge and understanding of the **conventions and features of prose writing**, specifically narrative devices used by novelists and how these differ from poetic and dramatic techniques
- **text combinations** which limited candidates' opportunities to meet higher band criteria
- **task-setting** which led to a reductive view of the texts, placing an emphasis on context or issues, such as gender politics or class divisions, rather than on the texts
- the **wording of titles** which encouraged a descriptive rather than a discursive, analytical approach or which led candidates away from a literary perspective on the writers' presentation of the topic
- ineffective **planning and organisation** of material into a clear line of argument
- **over-reliance on web-based study sites** leading to commentary style writing rather than analysis and limited engagement with more worthwhile critical material.

Unfortunately, there were still some centres whose assessment was generous and therefore insecure, making adjustment to marks necessary.

The main problems in assessment arose when:

- **annotation** was sparse or limited to merely AO markers without brief accompanying comments or descriptors to indicate clearly when and why credit was being awarded
- **marginal comments** or reference to assessment criteria did not accurately reflect the candidates' achievements
- primary markers had not adhered closely enough to the **standards established in the exemplar materials** in order to make the crucial distinctions between the bands:
 - **Band 2:** *attempt; some understanding*
 - **Band 3:** *clear; sensible; appropriate*
 - **Band 4:** *sound; secure; accurate; purposeful*
 - **Band 5:** *confident; perceptive; mature; autonomous*
- there was limited evidence of **internal moderation** or dual marking of responses or of dialogue between markers which usually leads to more secure assessment.
- assessment was not **effectively standardised within the centre** leading to inconsistency across the sample and/or cohort.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Comments on different approaches

As suggested above, it might be helpful this year to give some examples of different approaches from centres which highlight both good practice, which could be emulated, and some problems which can hopefully be avoided.

1. Teaching one text:

In one very successful centre, the decision was made to **teach one text and to offer candidates a choice in their second text**. This was by no means the only approach which served candidates well and is not intended as a blueprint for all centres. However, there were useful indicators of good practice worth considering for all centres when reviewing their own approach to this unit:

- The candidates had been taught the post-2000 texts in detail, in this case McCarthy's *The Road*, so that they had a **solid understanding of the novel form** which they could then apply when studying the other text. The majority then chose this as their post-2000 text although more confident readers were given the opportunity to select a different text, such as *The Circle* by Dave Eggers or Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure*.
- A clear emphasis had been placed **on rereading the novels and studying them in the same way as their exam texts**, rather than reading them only once or relying on extracts. This allowed even the less confident candidates to select more relevant support and to develop ideas convincingly. In the best candidates there was evidence of the Band 5 creative engagement which can only arise out of thorough knowledge and understanding.
- Candidates were able to **demonstrate some independence** by choosing their pre-2000 text from a small range of appropriate novels. Most chose either *Frankenstein* or *Brave New World*, but *A Handful of Dust*, *Beloved*, *Slaughterhouse V* and *The Remains of the Day* were also studied.

It was especially helpful to candidates that they were **not confined solely to texts in the ‘dystopian’ genre**. They often discussed its importance in relation to *The Road* but did not fall into the trap of viewing either text solely as an example of the genre; their responses did not become a checklist of generic features as can happen when the emphasis is placed on the genre per se rather than the specific texts.

- Having studied *The Road* **as a whole text**, rather than solely from one perspective, the candidates could choose a focus which genuinely interested them, offering more opportunity to demonstrate independence. A wide range of topics was considered: parent and child relationships; lost innocence; brutality/violence; betrayal; despair/hope; religious faith; guilt/redemption; the flawed hero; etc.
- **The tasks were carefully worded by the teacher**, in negotiation with the candidate, in order to ensure that all the AOs were targeted. The emphasis was firmly on a literary perspective, rather than one which would mean that context or an ‘issue’ drove the response. Although the titles were suitably varied, there was a consistent approach to the wording:
 - All tasks included the term **‘present’ or ‘presentation’** to remind the candidate to focus on the writer behind the ideas and how his or her conscious choices shaped reader response
 - All tasks included a statement as a shaping element to narrow the focus and help the candidate structure a tight literary argument. The most successful of these were **specific literary views of the texts**, usually crafted by the teacher, rather than general statements or aphorisms, and included a contentious element with which the candidate could engage in order to make a case. For instance, two candidates responding to *Beloved* and *The Road* had very distinct statements to help them develop individual arguments:

‘Although both writers force us to witness the full horror of man’s inhumanity to man, they do allow us a faint glimmer of light in all the darkness.’ With this view in mind, compare and contrast the ways in which the writers present hope in the texts.

‘In both texts the conventional portrait of the loving, nurturing parent is not just challenged but turned on its head.’ With this view in mind, compare and contrast the ways in which the writers present parent-child relationships in the texts.

- The candidates seemed fully aware that they were writing **literature essays** and that the emphasis should be on how the writers had shaped meaning, on analysing and evaluating the effects of the writers’ choices of language **and** other prose devices. There was discussion of range of prose devices suggesting a secure sense of genre, including narrative viewpoint, imagery patterns, symbolism and motifs, structural decisions in the progression of ideas and character arcs, the importance of setting as well as openings and endings, use of dialogue and even chapter headings. In the most effective responses, these were all securely linked to the task and fully developed as the candidates knew the texts well enough to provide apt support for each claim.

- They had obviously been reminded to **balance AOs 2 and 3** carefully (TASK – TEXT- CONTEXT), so that the best responses demonstrated a confident understanding of the relationship between the texts and the various factors which might have influenced its writing and reception.
- **Connections between the texts were used as scaffolding for the argument** and clearly outlined in topic sentences, then developed with detailed consideration of both texts. At the top of the range, candidates made effective use of paragraphs as building blocks for their argument and were able to show how studying one text had informed, or *illuminated*, their understanding of the other.
- The candidates had been steered towards **high quality critical opinion of the texts** where possible and away from over reliance on the kind of online study guide material which can be helpful in the early stages but is no substitute for thorough textual knowledge. This was made easier as all the pre-2000 texts chosen had attracted mainstream critical attention which could then also be applied to more recent works. The most confident candidates were able to engage with these views, using them to discuss alternative ways of interpreting the texts.
- This was a relatively large centre with a wide range of ability and several different teaching groups but **internal moderation was robust**. All the scripts in the sample had been marked and annotated by at least two teachers and there was evidence of dialogue between them explaining how marks had been fine-tuned within the band. One primary marker was more generous than the other two but had been brought in line through negotiation so that the rank order was secure and the final marks across the range accurately reflected the centre's standards.
- Following **advice in the previous report** about generosity of marking at the upper end of the range, the centre had made specific reference in summative comments to the standardising exemplar materials as benchmarks for assessment.

Obviously, not all the candidates met higher band criteria and the range of ability was accurately reflected in the marking. At the lower end, the candidates tended to adopt a more descriptive, commentary approach with less secure focus on the writers' technique. However, none had seemed disadvantaged by the centre's emphasis on literary appreciation of the texts and at the more confident candidates had been given every chance to meet Bands 4 and 5 criteria.

2. **Allowing a fully independent text choice:**

In other centres, allowing candidates a free choice of text in both categories worked well when this was underpinned by a **structured programme to support study of prose fiction**. Some candidates clearly relished the opportunity to study independently and had been well grounded in the necessary skills and knowledge of the novel writing process. Naturally, this was most successful when the candidates were confident readers.

This approach proved less successful and made it more difficult for candidates to achieve marks in Bands 4 and 5 when the candidates were working without sufficient support and teacher in-put. The approach was commendable in theory but in practice many candidates were given more independence than they could comfortably handle.

This was the case in one centre where the candidates had been allowed to choose their own text combinations, the topics they wanted to pursue and the wording of their titles. Most struggled with this level of independence, having only studied one prose text at AS in Year 12.

Some **unhelpful text combinations** posed problems when deciding on a suitable focus and making connections:

- Quite often candidates had made their selection with **AO3 and AO4 more firmly in mind than AO2**, choosing their texts to fit a common 'issue'. For instance, *The Color Purple* was paired with *The Help* but the focus on racial intolerance led to a response driven by context or the 'issue' rather than literary appreciation of the texts. Although set in quite distinct eras, the contextual backgrounds tended to be conflated and generalised and the texts were largely used as illustrations of the evils of racism. The candidates were often writing about the 'issue' rather than the texts; one candidate actually wrote: '*Celie is a representative of women in the period.*'
- Female repression was a popular focus but pairing *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Pride and Prejudice* with *The Power* or *A Thousand Splendid Suns* made it difficult for the candidates to see beyond their concern with gender politics in order to appreciate the individual texts as literary works. Such a **focus on a single issue led to some distortion** of the writers' meaning; one candidate confidently stated in her introduction: '*Female repression is undoubtedly at the very heart of all Jane Austen's novels*' while another made exactly the same claim for *Brighton Rock*.
- Atwood's novel was also linked with other dystopian texts, such as *Never Let Me Go* and *1984*, but candidates often limited their focus to little more than a **description of the repressive regimes**. Focusing on the genre rather than the novels in their own right often led to a checklist of dystopian tropes, a reductive approach also seen in candidates writing about *Wuthering Heights* and *The Little Stranger* where the focus was solely on typically 'gothic' features.
- Some text pairings made it difficult to make more than **superficial connections**, especially for less confident candidates linking *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Shutter Island* in a consideration of madness or boarding school life in *Villette* and *Never Let Me Go*.
- Some candidates tried to **pair a novel with a non-fiction text** such as *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* or *Stuart: A Life Backwards* which proved very problematic, especially when the candidates referred to both texts as novels and treated them in the same way.

When also given the responsibility to **craft their own tasks**, candidates also floundered:

- Some tried to cover too much in **wide, unmanageable topics** such as 'gender', 'power', or 'women' without any narrowing of focus. One even tackled 'the meaning of life'.
- The titles often encouraged a **contextual bias** as if using the texts to prove a sociological or philosophical point, such as 'the dangers of dictatorship', 'the challenges of adolescence' or 'women will always be the repressed minority: discuss'.

- Most precarious of all, however, was the very popular **topic of 'identity'** which is fraught with problems when linked to literary fiction. Such an abstract topic has so many possible meanings, especially to the young people of today, who are perhaps understandably very drawn to this when choosing a focus. Unfortunately, few had decided which definition of 'identity' they were exploring before writing: some seemed to be exploring agency or self-autonomy while others took it to mean freedom or independence and some defined 'identity' as self-knowledge or even individuality. Firmly deciding on any one of these more precise terms would have helped the candidates struggling with this amorphous term, underlining the reason why **previous reports have strongly recommended that it is best avoided.**
- Titles written by candidates sometimes sounded very impressive but made little sense and rarely helped them structure an argument. As a result the candidates often wrote descriptively with little opportunity to engage creatively or simply ignored their title and focused very loosely on the topic. The candidate tackling this awkwardly worded title encountered some difficulty in sustaining a literary approach:

'The transition between time periods and the conflict between social convention and the passion and desire of young people, as seen in the novels *The Go-Between* and *A Sense of an Ending*.'

- This struggle with task-setting was hardly surprising; it is a very tall order to expect candidates to craft titles with the same challenge and clear focus on the AOs as exam questions. This is why feedback to centres has consistently emphasised that **the wording of titles should not be left to candidates and must be the responsibility of the teacher.**

Even when the text selection and wording of titles were less problematic, the candidates seemed unsure **how to approach the study and critical appreciation of prose texts** and demonstrated limited appreciation of the techniques and conventions of novel writing. Working independently, without a secure grounding in prose study, they often fell into common pitfalls:

- **Reading the text only once and then relying more on study aid material** to help them understand the texts and gather their material. As these guides are often little more than commentaries of meaning, with relatively sparse textual support, they did not help the candidates avoid writing descriptively rather than analytically.
- Many candidates actually **quoted from such study aids** as if they were critical views of the texts which present an alternative reading rather than explaining key ideas as simply as possible. At times candidates seemed uncertain how to distinguish between their words and those taken directly from such sources, taking them dangerously close to plagiarism.
- **Quoting support without clear context** in the novel and 'stabbing' at the text with limited acknowledgement of where the quoted phrase had appeared
- Giving limited attention to prose techniques but **approaching analysis of language in a similar way to poetry**, selecting one quotation and subjecting each word to micro-analysis as if the novel's meaning could be pinned on one sentence rather than developing the point with more evidence. **Good points were often weakened and made unconvincing by a lack of support.**

Candidates often showed their lack of confidence in tackling prose works by focusing on phonological devices, especially alliteration and sibilance, making overblown claims for their effects as if discussing poetry or drama.

- Referring to the characters as if they were **real people** with limited focus on the ways their creators had crafted them and why. Some candidates barely mentioned the writers behind the characters.
- Making frequent, even exclusive, use of **linguistic terms**: determiner; declarative; adverbial clause and basic word classes such as adjective, noun and verb. While these did not necessarily detract from critical appreciation they rarely contributed very much of value either, and candidates would have been on safer ground focusing instead on literary terminology.

When it came to **assessing the work of candidates given so much independence**, teachers to some extent rewarded their *efforts* rather than their *attainment*. While this was perhaps understandable, it is not appropriate: the work can only be assessed using the criteria and weighed against the established standards. When competing with candidates with a more confident understanding of the genre and more developed study skills, the work was often generously marked.

While independent study is valued in this component, and centres are free to choose this approach, it is worth restating that candidates must be allowed an appropriate level of autonomy. **It is not the intention of the specification that they should be expected to work without teacher guidance.** As emphasised in previous reports, this approach can be extremely rewarding for candidates but must be undertaken as part of a structured study plan whereby teaching covers the vital knowledge and skills candidates need for critical appreciation of prose works.

3. Teaching both texts:

Finally, in a significant number of centres, all candidates responded to the same two texts. This is a perfectly acceptable approach and can help candidates gain a more secure understanding of the genre and how to write about it, although it is vital that there are opportunities to demonstrate independence.

In one particular centre where *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was successfully combined with Tóibín's *Brooklyn* all fourteen candidates tackled **different topics** including: the importance of physical journeys; how the protagonists had been shaped by external forces, the silent protagonist, secrets and lies; watching and being watched; isolation; doomed love; lost innocence, etc. Their **individual titles had been carefully worded** in discussion with their teacher to help them structure their material and address the AOs. The use of diverse tasks allowed the candidates to demonstrate independence, not solely in their choice of title but also in the considered selection of textual evidence; their confident knowledge and understanding of both texts allowed them to make and support convincing individual arguments.

In some centres, however, studying the same two texts was less successful as the candidates were effectively **all writing about the same topic**, an approach which is definitely not advised. The texts had often been selected in order to focus on a **single theme or issue**, such as the very popular female repression or class division, and teaching seemed to have centred almost completely on this one aspect. Previous reports have frequently warned against this reductive approach which does not help candidates develop a strong understanding of how novels work.

Sadly, it seemed that many candidates had gained the idea that novelists write in order to espouse – or simply illustrate – one idea, as if fictional prose is mainly a polemical rather than creative process.

Moreover, imposing the same topic left little scope for candidates to pursue something which genuinely interested them and might well have **stifled enthusiasm** for the texts. Helping candidates to plan and structure their own independent response to a task can also build confidence for the exam units where they meet unfamiliar questions without the support of a framework.

In one centre *The Great Gatsby* was paired with *Atonement*, a popular combination, and it is clear to see why teachers would opt for texts with such evident literary weight. However, both these complex and multi-faceted works are hard to pin down to one idea, and difficult to study quickly or partially. As a way to make the texts more manageable, perhaps, the most popular task centred on social divisions, primarily class hierarchies, a slippery concept for 18 -year-olds trying to define subtle nuances in both texts. Many focused exclusively on Robbie and Gatsby as lower class outsiders or on the Buchanans and the Tallises and Paul Marshal as ‘upper class’ autocrats, focusing on a few key incidents, sometimes only dealing with Part One of *Atonement*; some made scarce reference to Parts Two and Three or even mentioned Briony as the central character. In both cases, the emphasis was often on context with the characters viewed almost as stereotypes or representative figures illustrating social attitudes, an approach positively invited by one candidate’s title:

What do the texts tell us about attitudes to social class in their respective societies in the years between WWI and WW2?

In another centre where *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were the common texts, **the tasks initially appeared varied**, with different statements related to the topic intended as a shaping element and starting point for AO5. However, these were **not literary views of the texts**, but had often been sourced from sites such as Brainyquotes, and aphorisms or famous quotations from Nietzsche, Betty Friedan, Michelle Obama, Jung or Marilyn Monroe tended to take the candidates away from critical appreciation of the text and towards a focus on the ‘issue’.

What was more concerning, however, was that the candidates were all in essence **writing about the same topic**, even using the same extracts for close focus, the same quotations and the same contextual and critical material. This common ground in all responses made it difficult for the candidates to demonstrate independence or for the teachers to assess their work accurately. In centres where this approach, teaching to one topic, had been taken, it was quite common for the rank order of candidates to be insecure.

As emphasised from the outset, there is **no hierarchy of approach** in this component and moderators saw both very good responses and less impressive work in centres where the candidates had worked independently, where one text had been taught and where both texts were studied by all the candidates. The same text combinations worked very well for some centres but produced disappointing results in other.

Whichever approach taken or texts selected, the two factors which made the most difference in candidates' chances of success were:

- the level of detailed knowledge and understanding of the texts
- sustaining a solidly literary perspective by focusing primarily on the texts and the writers' presentation of the topic rather than on the topic or 'issue' in its own right.

Summary of key points

- Text selection should allow candidates to choose from a range of different topics, ideally one which reflects their individual interest. Teaching to one theme or 'issue' is a reductive approach and should be avoided.
- Candidates selecting their own texts and tasks will need to be supported by a programme of study skills targeted on prose fiction/the conventions of the novel, planning and redrafting, etc. They cannot be expected to meet Band 4 and 5 criteria without structured guidance.
- In centres where both texts are taught in common, candidates must be given an appropriate choice of topic and task.
- Candidates should be encouraged to reread and study the texts in detail to develop secure knowledge and understanding.
- The emphasis from the outset should be on literary appreciation rather than viewing the texts as vehicles to discuss context or 'issues'.
- Task setting and the wording of titles should not be the sole responsibility of the candidates and teachers can consult WJEC when reviewing approaches to this vital component.
- Candidates must be made aware of the pitfalls of relying too heavily on web-based study support materials
- Primary markers of the candidates' work should revisit the latest standardising materials from WJEC before assessing their own candidates' work. Wherever possible, at least some of the candidates' responses should be marked by another teacher and judgments on the work discussed by both markers.
- Centres should be willing to review decisions and practices in light of specific and general feedback on performance.

It is acknowledged that the NEA component does put a lot of pressure on teachers who rarely have the time or opportunity to see other centres' approaches. Once again, this report is longer than intended and while this is not ideal, it arises out of a genuine desire to pass on to those tasked with delivering this unit some of the good and bad practice gleaned from more than eighty centres' work. Hopefully the report will have included some ideas which will help both candidates and their teachers in preparing effectively future submissions. All moderators wished to extend their congratulations to centres where truly excellent work had been seen, reinforcing the value of this component.



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