

Literature GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Literature continues to attract many very capable students and this year most students completed quite full responses to their chosen texts. A wide range of the listed texts was used including recent additions to the text list such as Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. This year's report focuses on the necessity for student responses to be firmly based on a close reading of at least one of the set passages from the text being discussed.

The examination of theoretical perspectives and a variety of critical standpoints has a valid place in this course and students are to be encouraged to explore such views, but this must not take the place of first-hand exploration and thoughtful evaluation of the text/s. The criteria and the grade descriptors are quite explicit on this point. Criterion 2, for example, with its italicised section '*but it is crucial that they (students) provide a close reading of at least one of the passages, rather than an attempt to present a prepared answer*' clearly instructs on what needs to be done.

To become skilled at this task necessitates the habituation of students, during the year, to working closely with texts, to reading and reflecting on the language and structures of particular passages and their links to the meaning and concerns of the whole work. The concomitant to this is the development of an apt and expressive language in response to the text/s, a development which will involve language learning, experimentation with, and exploration of, writing styles.

This is a very challenging but exciting and rewarding experience as many teachers and students will know. It is in its largest aspect about the learning of a habit of attentive, thoughtful and reflective reading which has ramifications beyond this course and prepares students for life-long learning.

The study design and the assessment criteria speak of 'text' deliberately as the generic term for the five forms of literature which the course covers. It is something of a disappointment that there are still students who, whilst obviously familiar with close attentiveness to text where poetry and perhaps drama are concerned, ignore the need to base their answer in a close examination of the set passages of prose texts.

Take the case of the student who was able to say of Carey's short stories in general that they 'deal with ideas of loneliness and isolation made clear through the broken characters who inhabit bleak and disenchanted landscapes'. The answer refers to two of the set passages and in particular to 'A Windmill in the West', commenting that 'the central character is trapped which is made obvious through the dystopian surroundings. It is a hot, dusty and featureless landscape demonstrative of his place in the world and the loneliness which controls him'.

These are not uninteresting, unequivocal or unintelligent comments but the rest of this student's brief answer merely retells the events of the story and the set passage – failing to locate or justify its earlier comments or indeed to make further points out of close work with the passage. A slavish line-by-line working through of every aspect of a passage is not expected but a reading and interpretation which grows out of detailed work with set passage/s is central to success.

Some points that might have been made by a student who has spoken about loneliness and isolation include the many ironies to be discovered in the 'waves' and 'waving' which take place in the first two paragraphs. Does the grammatical change from the active verb 'wave' to the participial form 'waving' dramatically tell something about a growing remoteness or isolation? What is being said about the communication or lack of communication taking place? Could this be linked in a wider context to the issues about isolation conveyed by the use of generic titles and names which mark the story? 'A windmill ... the west ... the pilot ... the soldier ... a captain' – the only suggestion of the intimate or particular (and then not without irony) being the soft white socks from Fish and Degenhardt.

And what of the way the end of the passage suggests the soldier's state of mind? The prose is deliberately unadorned and there is a sense of disjointedness in its shifts of focus. 'The ground is hard ... He will need a big hole. His uniform has become blackened and dirty. He digs continually.' There is no explanation for the appearance of the digging implements. They are suddenly there. Is a dazed numbness, something surreal or nightmarish being suggested? 'He has a mattock, pick and shovel.'

What might be said about the whole strange perspective suggested here about the scorpions; scorpions he has obsessively spent his time collecting and killing? Here they are poignantly enough addressed as familiar intimates, friends: 'There is no time. He tells them, there is no time now.' What fear, what desperation is suggested? Is this a new level of almost unimaginable isolation? Might not the student have found here an apt way of characterising what was meant by her/his earlier comments about 'broken characters'? And so on.

Results are often excellent when students work attentively at prose, as in this excerpt from an answer on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The funeral of Peter Wilkes is portrayed through the simple yet meaningful language of Huckleberry. It appears that every attempt to produce dignity is undercut by some incident. Huck's noting of the 'sick melodium' and the dry understatement of 'Peter was the only one that had a good thing' hilariously undercuts the whole community show of solemnity. The description of the dog yapping in the cellar as 'a powerful racket' - a formless burst of spontaneous noise - is juxtaposed with the surface religiosity of the ceremony. Huck's innocent commentary portrays the undertaker as insincere in his efforts. The silent hand movements of the undertaker are as self-dramatising and 'idiotic' as those of the Duke and King. There is something obsequious and insincerely servile about this character as he attempts to 'appear' invisible. The repetitive pattern of the words 'glide', 'glided' and 'gliding' suggests he is an ever-present shadow, putting on a theatrical performance - 'the last touches'. Finally, the undertaker's pervasive motives are confirmed as he places himself at the centre of the people's attention. He 'stretched his neck out towards the preacher, over the people's heads' and whispers 'He had a rat'. Twain points out the readiness of the people to be swayed by style and the way their presence at the funeral is not about grieving the death of Peter Wilkes but a fickle seeking for sensation in their empty lives.

Finally, in an excerpt taken from the beginning of another student's long and thoughtful answer on *Antony and Cleopatra* there is a demonstration of an inward and intelligent reading and response. That reading (constantly in touch with the detail and import of the set passages) is used to guide an almost seamless movement from set passage to passage. Answers of this quality are rare but it is hoped that teachers and students will find it inspirational.

At the end of the play the audience is left with mixed feelings - there is a tremendous sense of loss at the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, mingled with feelings of awe and wonderment as Cleopatra, in regal (even 'Roman') style becomes 'fire and air' and hastens towards her Antony. There is little doubt, dramatically and metaphorically, that if there is an afterlife, this couple will make the 'ghosts gaze'. And yet, as Caesar draws the play to a close with sombre formality (and a characteristic touch of self-interestedness), the audience cannot help but feel that, in some ways, the cold world of politics has achieved a victory.

Each of the three passages contribute to those feelings - the contrast between the poetic and inspired descriptions of Antony and Cleopatra, and the self-revealing words of the unattractive Caesar serving to underline the central oppositions of the play.

In the first passage we witness Caesar project himself through his 'apology' at the start as a fair and reasonable man, one not easily given to such irrational emotions as hatred. Much of his speech is structured to create this impression: he delivers the 'news' from Alexandria as if objective and his use of the qualifiers 'If...but' serve to reinforce this image. Yet very quickly we feel the contempt in his voice. Rather than complaining directly (as well he might) about Antony's neglect of duty, he makes a critical assessment of his character and behaviour. Having already seen Antony and Cleopatra together, the audience is more interested here in forming an opinion of Caesar, and the impression we get is not a positive one. He is haughty and sneeringly dismissive of Lepidus, who seeks to defend Antony - 'You are too indulgent'. There is a remoteness, an aloofness about him figured from the first in his use of the third person, and followed by his disdainful allusion to 'slaves' and 'knives that smell of sweat'. He appears morally self-righteous as he speaks of Antony and Cleopatra's lovemaking as 'tumbling' - seeing the act of love as a purely physical, passionless thing. He is finally, hatefully spiteful as he wishes Antony the rewards of his 'voluptuousness', the 'surfeit...of his bones' - disease.

The image that he paints of Cleopatra, the image of a wanton whore, is one shared by Philo and others. Even Antony, in a fit of rage, turns 'Roman' and declares her a 'triple-turned whore'. But it is Enobarbus who, whilst recognising the wantonness of Cleopatra, gives the audience the fullest picture of her character.