



2004

Literature: GA 3: Written Examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

In 2004, each essay was marked out of 20. Examiners welcomed this change and believe it enabled them to discriminate more finely. It also allowed the outstanding students to be appropriately rewarded.

It was encouraging to see that the majority of students appeared to understand the requirements of the examination task. Most students were able to focus on and develop an interpretation from the passages, while at the same time moving out to the wider text to demonstrate their understanding of its concerns.

However, many students still found it challenging to work closely with the language of the text and to demonstrate a sense of the interrelationship of aspects of the text and its interpretation. Some students fell back on an 'add on' approach, often appending a paragraph to their essay which said that the writer had used images, metaphors, onomatopoeia etc. One student wrote '*The sound of axe strokes gives good imagery and adds emotion*'. Students should be encouraged to see such techniques as integral to the passages under discussion, not additional features to be duly listed. Sometimes students were so busy talking about rhyming schemes, line lengths and alliteration that they seemed entirely to miss the poetry.

Students still like to talk about themes; however, they should be encouraged to look more closely at the way the text has been structured so as to develop its concerns effectively. Sometimes students made their overriding interest in themes all too explicit, for example, '*The theme I am going to discuss is paralysis*' (*The Dubliners*). Another wrote, '*Images and themes are what Shakespeare uses to add depth and content to his work*', and again, '*Yeats conveys many ideas and plenty of various themes concerning life*'.

Some students continue to have trouble relating the passages in the examination to what they have prepared on the text; some relied on passages from the previous examination or from practice papers. While it is good that students have been practising working from passages, they should remember that there is no substitute for dealing with the passages on **this** year's paper. The best students are able to move easily within and between the passages, for example one student discussed Farmer's concern with female writing, reflecting on what the girl in *Ismeni* was able to gain from her writing and the extent to which the man in *Home Time* appeared to feel threatened by what the woman had written.

Many examiners expressed disappointment at the poor level of expression shown by a significant number of students. The odd spelling error is not a problem, but many responses showed no evidence either of care (for example, the same word spelt differently several times) or of checking and re-reading. The Grade Descriptors at the upper levels require students to write coherently and to demonstrate subtlety and complexity.

Basic historical errors persist, which tend to distract from the impact of a student's response; for example, Chekhov writing **after** the Revolution, Blake's criticism of the **Catholic** Church, *Pride and Prejudice* being a **Victorian** novel (and at times a film), Elizabeth Bennet being a member of the lower class, Chaucer writing in Elizabethan England. Some students also became too involved in the life of the writer, rather than what they had written, which is the focus of the task. This particularly applied to the responses on Yeats.

Students should also be cautioned against writing lengthy and overly detailed plans. Some plans were over a page with full sentences. Often these students found they ran out of time to complete their responses.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

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

By far the most popular text was *Pride and Prejudice*. As some different novels are being offered in 2005, it is hoped there will be a greater variety of novel responses. Most of the *Pride and Prejudice* essays were not very strong; many students saw the passages as offering a chance to discuss the theme of marriage, and some simply ended up listing the various marriages in the novel with scant reference to the passages. The following response, however, shows how the passages did allow for a wider discussion based on a perceptive analysis.



The discussion between Mr Bennet and Elizabeth, in the third passage, encapsulates one of the central concerns of 'Pride and Prejudice'. When Mr Bennet cautions Elizabeth on the danger of entering an 'unequal marriage', we are invited to reflect on Austen's exploration into what constitutes a desirable marriage. Furthermore, Elizabeth's misapprehension over Darcy's 'haughty' nature in passage 1 exposes the various forms of pride and their consequence throughout the novel.

The student later wrote, with reference to the first passage:

Elizabeth's pride and stubbornness prove to be obstacles in the developing relationship with Darcy. When Elizabeth playfully asserts 'I have always seen a great similarity in our minds', she remains oblivious to the irony of her remark. Indeed, her naïve prejudice against Darcy's flaw is expressed by Austen through her thoughts that, 'it would be a greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk'. The fraught fascination she possesses generates a tantalising sexual energy that engages her with Darcy through verbal sparring. The italicised 'your' 'I' 'you' seem to emphasise the gulf between the protagonists but at the same time the reader can sense the simmering tension which lurks beneath their proud facades. We see Elizabeth and Darcy amusingly relishing their intellectual equality through verbal struggles.

Heart of Darkness, The Leopard and A Fringe of Leaves would seem to be challenging texts, yet the students who wrote on these often did very well. The following excerpt is a discussion of the first of the White passages.

Austin too appears a repressed soul, revealed in the pungent words of his journal, 'Oh the blackness....state of doubt, anguish, even terror.... Original abyss'. Indeed, underscored by White's emotive language, which heightens the intensity of the scene, (swallowed the bitterness in his mouth and clenched his teeth), Austin's journal entry, which borders on melodrama, represents an explosion of his inner bottled emotions. White describes the 'creaking of planks, a dashing of waves, a distant, confused thunder', images of a natural turbulence which echo the tumult in Austin's rational mind.

Similarly, White's novel conveys a biting condemnation of the intellectual world, symbolised by Austin's beloved Virgil (the focus of the later, comical incident in which Austin undertakes a ridiculous quest to rescue the blessed book amidst the chaos of a sinking ship). Indeed, while Austin considers death to be a 'literary conceit', which is highly ironic considering the violent nature of his impending demise, Ellen is advised by Mrs Roxburgh Senior to keep a journal 'to help you express yourself'. It is an irony that both Ellen and Austin lose their journals at sea, symbolising their forced transportation (for Austin at least) into a situation in which 'reason' must succumb to the more sensual 'instinct'.

This student was able both to explore the passage and to move out from it to a more general discussion. The touches of humour and irony in the response reflect something of the original.

The most popular play text was *The Cherry Orchard*. Responses here were mixed, although it was pleasing to see that many students did have an awareness of the text as a play. The following excerpt is from an excellent answer on *No Sugar*.

It is this mastery of the many different varieties of English, and the knowledge of its idiosyncracies and of the slang needed to create such a cast that is shown in all three passages. In Passage 1 the Sergeant, Milly and Gran are all defined by their own particular brand of English. The Sergeant's rough jocular 'between you and me and the gatepost' smacks of larrikin Aussie English. In contrast to this, the Nyoongah Millimurras' English is peppered with vernacular speech and the colloquialisms of a second language English speaker. In keeping with the idea that language defines the cast, Passage 2 demonstrates Billy's character through language. His very simple Pidgin English 'She got go back Oombulgarri' is also a symbolic display of his powerlessness against the Wetjala Authority, in particular the hierarchy of 'protection' that had the complete domination of the power that language wields.

The majority of students writing on the short stories chose to do so on Farmer. Students had difficulty seeing the extracts as part of a body of work, and answers tended to look at each extract in isolation and to offer a summary of each of the stories from which the extracts came. However, the following opening to a response showed a student comfortably in control of the task.

Beverley Farmer's stories offer an exploration of contemporary existence, in particular the disparity between ideas and reality and the transition from naivete to understanding mirrored in the descriptive imagery of her writing.

The student concluded the essay as follows:

Caught between the innocence of childhood and the understanding of an adult, Rosemary's transition into the maturity of an adult is catalysed by her encounter with 'Madame' previously distanced and unknown. Like the albatross, uncomfortable on land, Rosemary's knowledge unfurls, like the 'blue wings' watching the sky as an albatross would, finally comprehending as she thought of Madame's 'trials' and her own. So too, the woman who perceives life not to be fair. The man's exhibitionistic grabbing of the mug



reveals his physical power, and in his warning of never wanting to 'figure' in her writing, perhaps brings her an awareness of the power of language and of writing, the dominance that control of the written discourse gives to the writer. Thus these characters, like Ismini, are moving to a new understanding. An essential part of human life, the recognition of harsh reality and the gradual transformation of an individual with the gaining of 'intolerable knowledge', 'uncurling like a beanshoot', underpins the given passages.

As was the case last year, there were many responses on Drewe. It appears that in some cases the students would have preferred some other passages or the chance to talk about Eric Cooke, and many did so anyway. The third passage, with its sizzling and spitting and the waving spatula, did give rise to some lively and responsive writing.

The poetry responses evinced many of the same problems as those on the short stories; answers only sometimes conveyed a sense of the poetry as poetry. Blake was a popular choice, but, on the whole, was not well handled. Few students alluded, even briefly, to any of Blake's other poems. Several argued that 'The Tyger' was about the Industrial Revolution. It is hard to see how the anvil fits here. If this is a poem about the Industrial Revolution, how do its concerns fit with those in others of Blake's works? The Shakespeare sonnets were generally not well answered as many students appeared to lack an appreciation of the sophistication of the language and the play on words, especially the 'lie' in Sonnet 138. However, the following example was a welcome exception:

Whether Shakespeare's sonnets lament the passing of time, attempt to reassure his beloved of his beauty or contemplate the nature of love, it is the dramatic voice in the sonnets that fleshes them out as passages 1, 2 and 3 clearly show. This voice plaits together thoughts and emotion and the audience is at once made aware of the most intimate of thoughts and the deepest of feelings.

When discussing Sonnet 12, the student continued:

In the third quatrain, this gentle urgency becomes more pressing, with the impending sense of time encroaching. 'Wastes of time' suddenly elicits the image of a dry wasteland where only the 'hideous night' and the 'barren leaves' reign. This absolute lack of fecundity is echoed in the word 'die' in the 12th line. Finally the sonnet offers no solution for immortality except the rather crude suggestion to 'breed'.

There were some sensitive Harwood responses, of which the following is an example:

The given passages display a number of Gwen Harwood's major concerns; the role of women and the meaning of their lives as well as the transition from naivete to understanding by the individual.

.... Filled with negative, unpromising imagery, that of dead mice, stale bread and, most significantly, crusted milk, a reversal of the nourishment implicit in motherhood, the reality of life for such mothers is revealed, far removed from the socially accepted notions of harmony and fulfilment.

.... The intimacy of 'Mother who gave me life,' addressed directly to a beloved mother, whose death brought repeated anguish to a daughter, is singular in the selected poems. Unusual in a poet who prefers to adopt flamboyant theatrics, such as the performer 'Crab' of the 'Night and Dreams', this poem's naked emotion and plea to 'forgive me' renders this one of Harwood's few truly personal, even confessional poems. An elegy directed to a loving mother whose presence is a 'lamp' even amongst the 'light of the living', the writer's love for her is palpable, thanking her mother for the understanding she finally gained.

The image of a cloth, which runs through much of Harwood's poetry, is perhaps the most expressive motif of all. The 'fine interwoven linen' is an apt metaphor for the interconnectedness of individuals, but particularly that of women, each small strand together composing the 'fabric of marvels' that underlies existence itself.

The examples of student work included in this report indicate that many teachers and students are responding very well to the requirements of this study. Many papers conveyed the students' enjoyment of, and engagement in, Literature and this makes the task of assessment often very rewarding.

Overall, it is recommended that teachers and their students work through the Descriptions of Expected Qualities for the Written Examination - Essays 1 and 2 (available on the VCAA website with the Exam Criteria).