

2017 VCE Literature examination report

General comments

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

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

The 2017 Literature examination was the first for the new study design and the examination was in a new format. In Section A students were asked to respond to an unseen essay topic and draw on a literary perspective of their choosing in presenting their reading of the text. Section B focused on close analysis of the language of the texts, in relation to three selected passages presented on the examination, of which students were required to use two or more as the basis for a discussion of the text as a whole.

Students may be well advised to indicate clearly which section they are attempting in their essays. Although most students did so, in some cases where students did not it was difficult to determine on first reading which essay belonged to which section.

Students were required to write on two texts, drawn from two different categories of text (novels, plays, short stories, poetry and other literature). This year some students wrote on two novels or two plays and only one response could be assessed. There were few incomplete examinations.

It was clear that many students had developed skills and approaches to Literature that will serve them well into their futures, either academically or as discerning readers.

Section A – Literary perspectives

Students generally appeared confident and well-prepared for this section, and this was reflected in the overall scores. Most students responded to the topic and offered a perspective from which they were reading the text. Some students, however, ignored the topic and presented a prepared response, while others answered the question but did not address a literary perspective. Some spent too much time explicating the literary perspective or critique and not enough time on engaging with it or presenting their own view. Students need to be able to respond to the topic, the perspective and the text at the same time, with their own reading of the text remaining the focus of their response. The underpinning idea is that by debating views with other readers we arrive at a better clarification and expression of our own responses.

It should be understood that the literary perspective does not have to be an identifiable school of thought; it could be, for instance, a review or the introduction to the edition of the text students used for study. Moreover, students do not need to name the authors or titles of the critiques they are using. Some students were very specific about the literary articles they had chosen (for example, naming Chinua Achebe or Edward Said on *Heart of Darkness*), but others adopted a more general stance, naming 'a Freudian perspective', 'queer reading' or a 'post-colonial lens', or

merely using the discourse of feminism, class inequality (not necessarily Marxism) or psychosocial development as examples. No single approach was prescribed or expected. It is important to understand that there can be multiple ways of reading a text and many nuances within a particular school of thought. The words 'to what extent', 'discuss', 'reflect on' and 'consider' in the questions signal the opportunity to challenge the ideas put forward in the topics, acknowledging the point made but offering another equally valid and substantiated perspective.

The essays included later in this report will illustrate different approaches. The following is an example of an introduction to an essay that is clearly drawing on the discourse of class and, to a lesser extent, feminism, without naming a particular writer or even announcing the perspective. Yet it is evident that the student is both addressing the topic ('failure to recognise the potential') and addressing ideas of entrenched class and gender discrimination.

Through a comically-disguised critique of the social structures of Edwardian England, Bernard Shaw's views on the failure of society to identify the potential within women and members of lower social classes is a testament to his disgust with the systematic oppression of women and the fundamental dysfunction of trickle-down economics. Higgins, a member of the wealthy upper class, embodies these ideals as he equates education to schooling and holds himself with a supercilious purpose of pompous intellectualism—whilst demonstrating an entrenched inability to recognise potential in women or members of the lower class. Shaw's egalitarian views and his fabian recommendations for a meritocracy are interspersed through the comedy, and the false pretence of a stockstandard love story allows the playwright to deseminate these opinions to a huge audience.

Students were asked to use only one literary perspective, even though their coursework will have addressed two or more. Most students understood that this limitation implied that the examination task was not a replication of the coursework task and was more circumscribed. Several students did, however, introduce a second perspective. However, unless it was an integrated perspective, as in the above extract on *Pygmalion* (in which women are seen as an embodiment of a lower class), the addition of a second perspective did not always help the student as it often detracted from a more detailed account of the initial perspective or from the discussion of the text or topic.

Responses in the upper range showed a detailed and sophisticated understanding of a chosen literary perspective, named or not, and were able to debate it in relation to the text, using appropriate discourse, to offer a considered and relevant response to the topic. Responses in the middle range generally showed an understanding of the task but often presented prepared responses that did not fully address the topic or did not show subtlety, complexity or detailed analysis of either the text or the perspective. For example, some responses on *A Doll's House* did not address the question of how **individuals** may conform to the expectations of others and wrote only about the ways **women** were shaped by social expectations, whereas the topic itself invited a broader consideration, including the ways in which men's roles were shaped by the expectations of 19th-century Norwegian society.

Low-scoring responses did not always put forth any literary perspective and sometimes also lost focus on the discussion of the text. Some of these responses also showed limited knowledge and understanding of the text itself, with some misreading.

There were responses to most texts in this section, although some texts were significantly more popular than others and some texts elicited few responses. The range of texts most commonly chosen for this section, however, was limited. Popular texts included *Heart of Darkness*, *A Doll's House*, *Twelfth Night*, *Pygmalion* and *North and South*.

Section B – Close analysis

This section required students to give detailed and close attention to the writer's language and present a discussion of how that language created meaning, using two or more passages on which to base their response. The change from 2016 was that students were required to discuss two or more passages in developing their interpretation. Students could have discussed the passages separately but also needed to discuss the text as a whole. Students whose responses scored most highly were able to offer both close analysis and a sense of the entire text. They showed how the features of the extracts and the moments encapsulated in the chosen passages contributed to their understanding of the text. This is especially important in relation to the poetry and short stories, where the instruction was subtly different as it required the student to discuss not only two or more of the three passages as discrete texts with their own integrity but also to present, on that basis, a reading of the text in its entirety. Students could have referred to stories or poems not included on the examination, where relevant, but they should have based the majority of their essay on the given passages to present their reading of the text.

In this section, there were some very good responses on *Heart of Darkness*; *My Brilliant Career*; *North and South*; *The Leopard*; *Agamemnon*; *A Doll's House*; *Coriolanus*; *Twelfth Night*; *Pygmalion*; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; *Dark Roots*; *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories*; *Candide, or Optimism*; and on Browning, Heaney and Szymborska.

A formal introduction was not required for the essay, nor was there an expectation of a certain number of paragraphs or paragraph length. Among possibilities, students could have begun with a very immediate engagement with one or more of the passages, perhaps setting up a contrast between two passages or identifying the ways in which the three passages represent complementary aspects of the text. Often, the kinds of introductory paragraphs that may have characterised a Section A essay (although not explicitly required for Section A) may have affected the student's close working with the language of the text. It is in this close working, where the student starts to engage with the language of the passages, that the essay starts to address the task.

Responses in the upper range were characterised by highly detailed and sophisticated attention to the language, an ability to tease out the meanings – often in quite complex and delicate ways – and an ability to make careful connections to elucidate an overall view of the text. This required a thorough knowledge of the text and its context and an ability to respond to the passages selected, understanding how they sit in the author's work or the text as a whole. The highest-scoring poetry responses in this section paid close attention to subtle nuances and were able to discuss how writers created meaning by the patterning of language – not only imagery and tone, but rhythm, rhyme and structure, in other words, the elements that distinguish poetry from prose. The highest-scoring short story responses attended to similar concerns in the stories but also explicated differences among them, recognising that the stories make up a collection (not an anthology, in these three cases) but retain their unique integrity as individual works.

Often, students who scored in the middle and lower ranges wrote an essay that was almost identical in structure to their Section A essay. Sometimes these students responded to the Section A text topic, even writing it out at the head of their essay, invoking a literary perspective but failing to engage closely with the language of the passages in the way that was needed in this section. Such an approach did not recognise the demand of the Section B task, which was to focus on close reading of the passages in order to articulate a sense of the whole. The essential underpinning of the Section B task is that our reading of any text is shaped by our response to the detail of the ways the language works at key moments in the text as we experience it. While students are not discouraged from finding support for their Section A essay and argument in the passages provided or, conversely, discovering an illuminating idea in the topics of Section A to

organise their thoughts for discussion of the selected passages, it should be remembered that the two tasks are different and the two essays should be approached in different ways.

Some students used many quotations, sometimes potentially well chosen as pointers to evidence, appearing to be making extensive use of textual detail, but they made little comment on **how** those instances of language supported an argument about the text. While it is essential for students to select textual evidence, the examples need to be analysed and commented on as the basis of their interpretation. Students should not expect their selected quotations to stand alone.

Low-scoring essays sometimes merely summarised the passages or the text, with little attention given to the language, and sometimes revealed major misunderstandings of the text, its context, the characters or the narrative development. For instance, some students referred vaguely to 'the time period' or claimed that Shakespeare was writing in the 12th century, and others referred to the Bishop's 'wife'.

Some students used inappropriately colloquial language, such as 'significant other', 'love interest', 'a peaceful vibe', 'headspace', 'face his own demons' or 'hanging out at the garden party' and 'the reveal'. Students are advised to critique their writing and consequently select a vocabulary appropriate to the circumstances of the text. When choosing words to describe how the text is constructed, students should avoid terms such as 'showcasing', 'exhuming', 'excavating', 'saturated' and 'drenched', and euphemistic terms such as 'passing', when 'murdered' or 'dying' are more representative of and responsive to the events and the language of the text. From their reading of the work of critics, students will learn language that more appropriately reflects a writer's creative processes. In their own exploration of writing, as in Unit 3, Area of Study 2, they may explore writers' language and learn that it does not need to be florid or overly technical.

Again, there were responses to most texts, but popular texts for this section included *Opened Ground*, Robert Browning poems, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Dark Roots*, Chris Wallace-Crabbe poems, Rosemary Dobson poems, *Heart of Darkness*, *A Doll's House* and Szyborska poems. There were few responses on *That Deadman Dance*, *The Sound of Things Falling*, *The Cat's Table*, *Buried Child*, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* and *The Dreaming & Other Essays*.

The descriptors 'Expected Qualities for the Mark Range' for each section have some similarities but they also clearly reflect the different criteria by which the two sections are assessed.

Specific information

Essay 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	4	4	5	6	8	11	12	13	10	8	6	5	2	1	12.7

Essay 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	5	5	6	8	12	12	12	9	8	6	4	2	1	12.5

Novels

The overwhelmingly popular choice for this category was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Most students wrote on this text for Section A but a significant number of students chose instead to write on it for Section B and gave close attention to the selected passages. There were many

answers on *North and South*, *The Leopard* and *My Brilliant Career* but few on the remaining novels.

Plays

The most popular choices were Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. It was clear that the drama category was very popular, suggesting that students engaged strongly with these plays during their studies. They often showed a clear awareness of the performance aspect of the plays, commenting on the staging, the positioning of characters and the stage directions. There were far fewer responses on *Rhinoceros* and *Buried Child*.

Short stories

Although there were not many responses on Gogol's stories, there were many very good responses on *Dark Roots* and *Close Range*. These essays often displayed a lively engagement with the stories and an awareness of the concerns of the collections as a whole. Students appreciated the sometimes gritty realism of the Proulx stories and the often awkward and pained relationships in Kennedy's work, and were able to locate their observations firmly in the imagery and language of the writing itself.

Accomplished essays were able to offer a generalised view of the collections, making astute generalisations that addressed authorial concerns and style. For instance, while the writing in the following extract is not highly expressive, the student understands one of Kennedy's inspirations, the decisive moment in which things change, and has not here resorted to thematic connections.

Additionally, another key motif of Kennedy's writing is a revelation and/or turning point, in which the characters change their situational outcome or overarching life direction. This is particularly evident in 'Seizure' in which Helen felt 'a word which stayed tugging faintly and insistently on the end of that line', later revealed as 'cherish' the one qualitative aspect missing from her relationship. While somewhat ambiguous in ending, Kennedy's description of 'feeling the cool relief of locating it settle over her' emphasises the important epiphany Helen has experienced

Other literature

There were fewer responses to the texts in this category in comparison to other categories, with *Candide*, or *Optimism* being the most popular and eliciting some excellent responses. Other strong responses were able to acknowledge the authorial role in Fitzpatrick's memoir and Stanner's essays.

Poetry

The most popular texts were Heaney, Browning and Wallace-Crabbe. The essays written on these texts were chiefly in response to Section B, which invited close discussion of the selected passages. There were some very good responses on Szymborska that were alert to the quirky nature of her insights and her exploration of language and metalanguage, and a number of responses on Dobson. Few students wrote on the anthology *Language for a New Century*, but there were some insightful essays that engaged with individual poems and the global perspective that the collection offers. A collection of works by diverse authors can pose something of a challenge for some students. The following extract from a student essay, adopting a post-colonial perspective, offers an example of how views and values may be addressed in relation to such a text.

However, Ping-Kwan nonetheless further highlights the trans-generational impact of British imperial rule of Hong Kong, through questioning 'how history was made'. This concept of history

being 'made' alludes to the aphorism: 'history is written by the victors', and hence intimates that history is entirely constructed by the oppressors, while minorities are marginalised. This is further accentuated with the anaphoric phrase 'lots of' in 'Lots of people tinted the pictures, lots of people/named the streets after themselves'. Ping-Kwan's employment of parallelism in this is intended to emphasise the continuous of such a process, thereby solidifying the immense difficulty of forming a truly Hong Kongese.

Heaney's poetry was the most popular choice in this category. Responses to these poems often concentrated on *Requiem for the Croppies* and *The Strand at Lough Beg*, overlooking *A Transgression*, but they sometimes confused the historical settings of the poems. For instance, the Battle of Vinegar Hill took place in County Wexford in 1798, not in Northern Ireland in 1916, and was not part of the period that is euphemistically known as 'The Troubles'. Students who addressed all three poems sometimes assumed that there was a single unifying idea and read *A Transgression* as an allegory of the Anglo-Irish conflict during 'The Troubles'. Nevertheless, there were some very fine responses that engaged closely with the language, as evident in the student example below.

Students who wrote on Browning were often very sensitive to the imagery and tone, and displayed a sense of the nuances of meaning. However, at times students showed little awareness that they were writing about poetry, not prose. These students did not comment on the rhythm, the effect of line endings and stress, the highly patterned line structures in *Love Among the Ruins* or the humour of *Youth and Art*, often reading the latter only as a sombre tale of love lost. They also often struggled to capture the way in which the hesitations and digressions in the verse in *Passage 1* created the voice of the Bishop and his state of mind. These students also showed limited awareness of Browning's portrayal of the Bishop's mortal sins, something that Browning highlights in presenting the Bishop's vainglorious attitude in his monologue. Even in the hour of his death, he is less concerned about his immortal soul than he is about the grandeur of his earthly tomb.

The following excerpts illustrate analyses that take account of the rhythm as an essential feature of two of the poems.

The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church

Browning demonstrates tensions between the Bishop's deteriorating consciousness through the use of the volta in him jumping from the 'church' to 'And so ... about this tomb of mine' that reflects his inability to focus and speak clearly...

Love Among the Ruins

"Love Among the Ruins is set in a bucolic, pastoral setting, where the "quiet-coloured imagery of the "evening smiles" creates a dreamy, dazed atmosphere, The sibilance in "solitary ... sheep ... stray or stop ... half-asleep" create a repetitive "s" sounds that echo the "soft winds", accentuating the peaceful cadences of the poem. The setting becomes a place that flourishes and indulges in the beauty of love, as like the "miles and miles" of pasture prove endless, so does love. The alliteration in "tinkle homeward through the twilight" creates a beautiful, peaceful imagery, almost like a romanticized dream, where the verses "sway" in AABB rhyme like the rolling hills of the landscape, carrying with it the smooth, comforting feeling of love in the gentle, calming rhyme. Leaving the listener feel at ease by the ongoing nature of love in the endless "twilight" and horizon, Browning celebrates the joy and triumphant in the eternality of love.

Students who chose Dobson's poetry often wrote knowledgeably and with understanding. *The Mirror* was often discussed with some insight. Discussions of *Eutychus* often lacked complexity; while most acknowledged its Biblical context, many students did not appear to recognise the shift of speaker in the last two stanzas. Comments on *The Almond-tree in the King James Version* often

seemed merely to offer a very simple reading about impending death instead of responding to the imagery and its effects or to the biblical context from which it derives.

Many students engaged closely with all three Szymborska poems, capturing her wry, oblique perspective on philosophical questions. The highest-scoring discussions were on *Atlantis* and *Travel Elegy*, in which students were alert to the end-stopping, the internal contradictions, the inherent doubts, the fading of memories and the uncertain nature of memory itself, although some students ignored *Psalm*, a whimsical parody of the arbitrary confines humans place on the physical world.

The essays on the Wallace-Crabbe poetry often revealed thoughtful understanding of the three poems selected, and many students were able to venture beyond these to offer a sense of his poetry as a whole, based on the poems set for study.

Sample essays

The following complete essays are offered as examples of high- to very high-quality responses and should be taken as illustrative of a variety of ways of approaching the tasks. They are not presented as model essays or examples of the highest-achieving essays.

The Section B essays demonstrate well-developed abilities to work closely with the language and to explore the ways in which key moments or passages contribute to the overall meaning of the text. Because Section A was new in 2017, more examples for that section have been included than for Section B.

Section A samples

Sample 1

Nominated text: *Twelfth Night* – William Shakespeare

Shakespeares' 'Twelfth Night' inhabits the liminal space between a licenced misrule of Saturnalia and austere social structures that govern its society. Once rigid institutions of gender and love are destabilised within the play through archetypal representations being triumphed by deviating forces of change. The epitome of a Petrarchan lover, Orsino's poetry which fails to elicit female desire, as well as Viola's subsequent romantic success suggest that previously established institutions of love fall outside conventions of heteronormativity, into a realm of ambiguity. Structures of gender that determine the dynamic of hierarchy are rendered hollow at Viola's performance of masculinity. Ultimately, the ambiguity of socially constructed gender roles are alluded to by the play's reliance on comedy as means of enduring the absurdities of reality, branding social constructs as an empty force and carrying the dramatic trajectory of the plot to play's poignant end.

Viola's triumph in wooing Olivia over Orsino's conventional text suggest that socially constructed languages of love as perpetuated by gender roles are futile. The play's investment in love is immediately apparent within the first two introductory scenes, Orsino's languorous speech on love in which foreshadows his later union with Viola, who is washed upon the shores of Illyria seeking the protection of a male disguise. Love gratifies the existence of the characters as well as propells the momentum of the plot, espousing the belief that "journeys end at lovers meeting". Orsino's words on the emotion in his monologue clearly align himself with Petrarchan lovers of the past, evoking conventional images of "sweet sounds" and "bank of violets" to delineate love's "high fantastical form". The currency of his poetry in the play's romantic economy however fails to earn its worth when it is unable to win the heart of his "beloved", the Countess Olivia; further denounced at Olivia's dismissal of his "heresy" as well as her subsequent self-deconstruction into "divers schedule" in mock fashion of his worship of her "fine frame". Orsino's role as the masculine wooer crumbles at the staleness of his words and the strict reliance on their faded ability. In stark contrast, Viola's success in winning Olivia's hard-

won affections by “stepping out of [Orsino’s] text” to a space of spontaneity and earnesty suggest that love escapes pre-scripted gender roles and in fact breathes with vivacity outside of heteronormativity’s dominance; that Orsino’s failure lies not with his love but the language used to express it, and the gender roles that underline it. Orsino’s failure in achieving Olivia’s heart in contrast to Viola’s success alludes to the irrelevancy of socially constructed gender roles within the economy of love.

Viola’s performance of masculinity demonstrate the ambiguities that saturate institutions of gender. Crucially employed by Shakespeare is the tumultuous conceit of the “hungry” sea, as a metaphor for “inconstancy”, ambiguity, and fluidity in ‘Twelfth Night’, birthing Viola and her “monstrous” disguise. Initially an act of self-preservation, Viola’s donning of male attire and behaviour which triumphs over Orsino in courtship suggest that gender is a performative act untethered to definitions of the self. Furthermore, Orsino’s instinctive affections that favour Cesario above his other servants within a matter of days, as well as his appropriation of the sea in his language in describing the “spirit of love” suggest that he too wishes to escape the confinements of his male archetype to inhabit this fluid space, recognised even by Feste that men like him should be “put to sea”. Unlike Antonio, whose past as a notorious pirate allows him to traverse both land and ocean and, metaphorically, in between social structure to maintain a fierce masculinity whilst able to indulge in his tender love for Sebastian, Orsino’s adherence to his Petrarchan archetype as necessary to fulfil the marriages of the play ultimately deny him that privilege.

Orsino’s accusation towards Antonio being a “salt-water thief” therefore harbours deeper connotations of a bitterness at being suffocated by strict gender roles. Viola’s return to her “maiden weeds” is particularly significant; just as she completes the performance of her disguise, the first utterance of her name in the play’s entire by Sebastian in “thrice welcome, drowned Viola” evokes Viola resurfacing from the fluidity of her gender into the barren social constructs of the play, fulfilling her narrative role in the provisional weddings constructed by Shakespeare which, in isolating Antonio in his refusal to submit to the gender constructs, ring sinister. Viola’s performance of masculinity suggest the ambiguities of gender.

Ultimately, rigid constructs are deemed absurd as revealed by the play’s reliance on folly as means of endurance. Directly from the onset of the ‘Twelfth Night’, folly and the succumbing to the absurdities of the play catalyse the dramatic trajectory of the play, as witnessed through Viola’s brazen donning of masculinity as the only means of her survival. The ease of her disguise begin the deconstruction of gender as an intrinsic part of the self, and is employed by Shakespeare as a tool of comedy as well as a distraction from the darker forces at play. Juxtaposing this is the stagnancy perpetuated by Orsino, who’s “love thoughts lie rich canopied in bowers”, and Olivia, willing to isolate herself for “seven years heat” to mourn for her brother, systematically structuring their lives away from the undesirable momentum of reality.

Viola’s entry into their lives shatters this stagnancy, and introduces them to the folly of the world through the ridiculousness of her male pretence. Constructs of gender and their narrative significance begin to breakdown when the appropriation of which catalyse the movement of the plot, ultimately exposing its hollowness and absurdity.

Shakespeare’s ‘Twelfth Night’ intrudes on a wider social analysis through its appropriation of gender triumphing supposed inherent significance of the self. Through Viola’s success both in her disguise and her language of love, gender constructs is illustrated to be hollow and irrelevant to love itself.

Sample 2**Nominated text:** *Heart of Darkness* – Joseph Conrad

Through the destabilisation of Marlow as moral and representational authority, Joseph Conrad reveals the “sordid” reality of colonial invasion and delivers a scathing indictment of colonialism in “Heart of Darkness”. Highlighting the ways in which the binaries of “lightness” and “darkness, European progress and African primitivism, and finally the active and knowing sphere of masculinity and passive and naive sphere of femininity, are constructed and utilised in Marlow’s narrative, serves to reveal the contingency and fallibility of the notions of “civilised values” that underpin the imperialist cause. The two colonising ideologies of empire and gender thus operate collusively within the novella, allowing Marlow to distance himself from his own complicity in the annexation and exploitation of Africa.

Positioning the reader aboard the “Nellie” in the Thames, the narrative mediated by two European and masculine voices (the frame narrator and Marlow) and among an audience of individuals reduced purely to their titles and positives of power within a social and economic structure – “The Lawyer” and “Accountant” for instance - Conrad immediately establishes a purely colonial and patriarchal system of representation.

The further literary conceits as Marlow’s manly journey-as-a-quest narrative structure end extensive discussion of symbolic oppositions – such as “lightness” and “darkness” – draw attention to themselves as artificial constrictions, further evincing imperialist beliefs to be inherently mutable. Conrad’s intent to destabilise these beliefs – as likely held by the readership of Blackwood’s magazine – is foregrounded by this debasement of the images of European progress in the opening passages. The ship is damningly reduced to an apathetically “cruising yawl”, the passengers on board and lethargic and “fit for nothing but placid staring” – alluding to the myopic nature of colonial subjects, who look but do not see – and the “monstrous town” connoting London, considered the ideological epicentre of the “civilised world” is scathingly rendered a “breeding gloom in sunshine”. It is through Marlow’s fruitless attempts to salvage these binaries that Conrad illuminates his utter fallibility. This is exemplified through Marlow’s inclusive description of the moral degradation and moribund stake of the “Company’s offices” in Brussels, the austere and death-like imagery of “whited sepulchre” and a “dead silence” – strongly connotative of the funereal – reveals the moral decay of the imperialist “idea”, where the system of conquest exploitation and “aggravated murder” is beginning to reveal itself in this setting. Marlow’s clear contempt for this deceit and moral corruption – detailing eerily the sense of being initiated into some “dark” “conspiracy” – is presented, however, in stark contrast to the lofty idealism of his “excellent Aunt”. Condescendingly constructed as a “dear enthusiastic soul”, her feminine perception of the brutality of European conquest is translated to “weaning those ignorant millions of their horrid ways”, the blatant naiveté of which Marlow acknowledges in his assertion that the Company was “run solely for profit”. Marlow thus represents a contradiction; while recognising the repugnancy of the system of “lies” and “pretences” that acts as a cloak to obscure the violence of colonisation, he actively condones his “aunt” – and by extension all women – off to the “too beautiful altogether” “world of her oven”. It is through this act that Marlow puts his “aunt” to the symbolic function of representing this “dark” world of naiveté and “pretence”, acting to distance himself from his own complicity, thereby reducing her agency. It is thus through the destabilisation of Marlow’s representational and moral authority, that Conrad delivers his severe critique of colonialism.

The utter frailty and depravity of Kurtz – offered as Marlow’s last “redeeming vision of imperialism – further serves as a thorough indictment of the colonialist project constructed as a spectral and wraithlike being, his “disinterred body” intentionally fragmented and reduced to a “thin vapour exhaled from the earth”, his head likened to an “ivory ball” suggestive that he has been subsumed by his greed and desire for economic gain, Kurtz reflects the utter degradation of European ethics so heavily dependant on social and cultural context. As despite Marlow’s assertion; “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz”, he too is shown to have succumbed to the “primitive” urges and emotions, to perpetuate “abominable terrors and abominable satisfactions” in the lust for power and self-interest. By positioning Kurtz’s moral corruption or

descension alongside the amorality of the Manager and other Company Men – who are depicted as entirely cynical and desirous of economic improvement, as evidenced by the assertion “get him hanged!...Anything can be done in this country” – in Marlow’s “choice of nightmares”, Conrad consciously evokes another binary core to the process of colonisation; the endeavour to “civilise” and to “exploit”. Again, Marlow tries tortuously to salvage this belief in the imperative to “civilise” through the disenfranchisement of female subjects. The stifling sterility and death-like imagery that depicts “Kurtz’s Intended’s” home – the possessive apostrophe rendering her forever the possession of Kurtz – such as “cemetery” and “sombre and polished sarcophagus” echoes that of the “Company’s offices”, suggestive that the “taint of mortality” within “lies” exists here also. Her appearance – “pale visage”, “pure brow” and “ashy halo”, compounded with “floating” as her means of movement – are all suggestive of purity corrupted, that her incredible “capacity for fidelity” has paradoxically become sickly and corrupted by a devotion to “false” ideas. Thus, through Marlow’s “lie” to The Intended, covering Kurtz’s atrocities and serving to fuel the cycle of “lie[s]” that facilitates colonialism, he again exiles her to the separated feminine sphere of naiveté, in an act to unwittingly enable imperialism. Conrad thus again, through highlighting Marlow’s fallibility, shows the decay and moral bankruptcy of colonialism.

The ideologies of both empire and gender are revealed to me mutually supportive most illuminatively though Marlow’s construction of the “savage” woman, who appears at Kurtz’s departure from his ‘Inner Station’. Here, Conrad reveals how these insidious systems of values and “beliefs” serve to silence and other both women and African subjects in Marlow’s narrative. A “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman”, this character is constructed as a symbol of fecundity and sexuality, however through the conjoining of her threatening presence with the “immense wilderness”, she appearing as “an image of its passionate and tenebrous soul”, Marlow’s language works to distance and contain the threat of both. Furthermore, indicative of Marlow’s unwitting endorsement of Western, capitalistic normative values, his appraisal of her is economically nuanced; “she must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her”. It is this through the silencing of the “savage” woman, symbolising her with the jungle and objectifying her as an item upon which value (“ivory”) is placed, that Marlow enacts the collusive ideologies of empire and gender to endorse the imperialist project.

Conrad thus masterfully delivers a scathing and complex indictment of colonialism in his novella ‘Heart of Darkness’ through his deconstruction of Marlow’s colonial and patriarchal authority as narrator. The systems of beliefs and values that underpin imperialist ideology – which in the context of Africa are reduced to the immoral and ruthless pursuit of dominance and economic gain – are thus proven as contingent and transient in contrast to a timeless and “inexorable” capacity for “darkness”.

Sample 3

Nominated text: *Candide, or Optimism* – Voltaire

With the Latin translation of his name itself suggestive of a white, blank canvas on which one may print, the titular protagonist Voltaire’s *Candide or Optimism* is rendered a vessel for the author’s social commentary as to the ways of life in Enlightenment Europe. Alongside the novella’s satire, Candide’s discourse may thus be considered through the prism of Post-Modern theory, the tale a precursor of sorts to the literary form that would only evolve some two centuries later, in subverting the established order to rather advocate personal introspection and reversion to morality as noble livelihood.

Indeed, that Candide embarks on what critic Julian Barnes terms a “kind of pilgrimage” away from his initial egoism bebases the very superstructure of the 18th century world as a culture of personal advancement. From the outset, Voltaire parodies the feverent “Optimism” espoused by Pangloss in Candide’s supremely naive attempts to justify his banishment from Thunder-ten-Tronck and subsequent place in the Bulgar army as “for the best” under the principles of “cause and effect”. Just as Cunégonde comically labels her rape soon thereafter as beneficial, making

a “woman of virtue” such as herself somehow “stronger for it”, Candide passes off the growing masses of corpses on the battlefield as merely “a few thousand more” for which cannons and bayonets provided “sufficient reason”, revealing an overt disconnection from reality.

That this war is analogous to The Seven Years War raging at the time of writing in the French author’s society, however, extends this satire to the real world also as a castigation of Leibniz’s “optimism”. As the protagonist fails for the vast majority of the novella to grow in his understanding of the world subverts the archetype of the ‘Hero’s Journey’ established by Homer’s *Iliad*, and likewise the bildungsroman prevalent at the time in *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Don Quixote* to hold the mirror up to readers themselves, forcing them to examine the extent to which they have internalized the “horrors” of their world. As the vessel that is Candide gradually transitions away from the notion of this being the “best of all possible worlds”, Voltaire thus refuses the very foundations of Enlightenment society as a way of living life.

Perhaps the foremost social pillar to which the author directs his satire, and in some cases vitriol, is what Adam Gopnik calls “the alliance of religious fanaticism with the instruments of the state”. Again contemporaneous to Voltaire, his incongruous gaiety and non-chalant tone as Candide becomes a victim of the Lisbon auto-da-fé undermines the very rhetoric of the Inquisition in their inept conclusion that “the spectacle of ceremoniously roasting” a few individuals in the “infallible secret” to averting further disaster, in much the same way as Cacambo’s description of the “masterpiece of justice and reason” wherein “Los Padres own everything; and the people own the rest” refutes the analogous system in the Americas. Rather than adhering to institutionalized Faith, therefore, Candide’s gradual tendency away from his tutor’s insistence on some ‘divine order’ is consistent with Voltaire’s own Deist perceptions, and his humble final resting place advocates a more pragmatic way of life, forgoing doctrines utilised foremost as means of breeding conformity to rather revert to his inherent morality instead.

Akin to his assault in Leibniz’s philosophy, Voltaire’s picaresque likewise rejects the Rousseauist notion of the “Noble Savage” wherein “man in nature” is free of sin. Beyond heinous acts committed out of adherence to social mores, Candide witnesses countless “shocking calamities” on account of humanity’s decadent dissolution of their principles. Martin’s Manichean misanthropy and the Old Woman’s tale of suffering her whole life as a result of the patriarchal culture only supplement that he himself is repeatedly robbed, assaulted or otherwise taken advantage of by those around him out of pure greed, as when the Dutch merchant stole his Eldoradean sheep and the French con-artists his diamonds. Yet Voltaire likewise makes apparent in his witicisms that this same egoistic self-service pervades Candide himself, for he rationalizes his murder of the Grand Inquisitor and a Jew under the “sufficient reason” of his love for Cunégonde: that is to say, Voltaire forces us to consider the notion that we justify our own misdemeanours so long as they benefit ourselves.

Indeed, the most searing episode in Candide furthers this very suggestion as the protagonist laments the plight of a “negro slave” he encounters outside Surinam. That this man’s misery and suffering is merely “the price [he] must pay for the sugar you eat in Europe” first – if only briefly – causes Candide to stray from his instilled “Optimism” and declare it “the mania for insisting that all is well”. Rather, by denouncing the slave trade so integral to the 18th century world, Voltaire subverts the Ancient Regime in his own French society, questioning the foundations of the idea that the aristocracy may marginalize common people as such, and indeed that humans may treat each other with such brutality. With the earthy paradise of Eldorado providing a poignant counter-model, in which all live in harmony because they do not seek wealth or advancement beyond one another, Candide’s decision to leave to become “richer than all the Kings in Europe together” seemingly mirrors the Fall of Man as Voltaire extends his condemnation of material avarice to his audience. Just as the encounters with Pococurante and the six deposed Kings show power and riches to be fleeting, ultimately worth little, the novella portrays the impulse as a root cause of conflict and misery in the world.

Hence, Voltaire’s conclusion to the novella may be considered his final message to readers. Metafictionally subverting the very society of which he was a product, that the protagonist

settles into his small farming community advocates, in Gopnik's words, an ethos of "liberal meliorism". As their microcosm embodies the ideas of 'love and work', the characters revert to the inherent morality and empathy in leading their lives in unity, forgoing prevalent social constructs or selfish impulses that may lead them astray. The final declaration by Candide that "we must cultivate our garden" is not, therefore, suggestive of material acquisitions, but personal growth, and only in doing so does Voltaire offer that we may lead lives of true happiness and prosperity.

Sample 4

Nominated text: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – Tennessee Williams

Williams' play fundamentally exposes the corrosive and malignant impact of repressed feeling and persuasive mendacity in 1950s America. The 'disgust' which plagues all of the characters is a manifestation of both self-denial and performed truth, as Williams' reveals this post-war America to be built upon constructed facades and artificial politesse. By setting his play on a southern plantation, Williams comments on the 'inadmissible' structures of slavery which are not discussed directly by the characters but which underpin the action of the play with a sense of hidden oppression and tainted American Dream of capitalism. Both individuals and relationships suffer from an inability to confront truth and non-normative practices in the text, as repression causes both an individual detachment from society but also the destruction of interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, the failure to confront the 'inadmissible things' of life only serves to continue systems of oppressive patriarchy and capitalism, as characters fail to deal with reality.

Williams reveals the crushing impacts of self-denial on the individual as they fail to confront their own psychological truths and real identities. The crisis of homosexuality is present in the text from the outset in the form of the spectral figures of Jack Shaw and Peter Ochello, whose relationship and memory permeates the text with a 'tenderness which was uncommon'. This homosexuality, however, remains 'inadmissible' as Brick's relationship with Skipper becomes the site of his own emotional struggle, but also of labels of 'dirty' from other characters who perceive this relationship as something 'not exactly...normal' as Mae contends. This hint of homophobia which exists epitomises the McCarthy-era paranoia which saw Americans hunt for the subversive 'other', who strayed from socially accepted roles dictated by the heteronormative patriarchy. It is here, that Brick fails to confront the reality of his relationship with Skipper and his own sexuality. In being questioned about his relationship with Skipper, Brick's language becomes insistent on adjectives of 'clean' and 'pure', almost desperately trying to convince himself that his relationship harboured no hint of homosexuality. Furthermore, Brick invokes a litany of homophobic slurs, citing 'sissies' and 'queers' and 'fairies', seemingly over-correcting for any accusation of this inadmissible homosexuality. Regardless of Brick's actual sexuality, this reaction still highlights an inability to confront or accept non-normative masculinity or sexuality, causing him to reach immediately for his beloved 'Echo Spring'. Brick's 'devotion to the occupation of drinking' is a manifestation of his desire to escape the difficult truths of reality and typifies Brick's detachment from society as a result of this repression. Big Daddy astutely comments that Brick's 'disgust with this mendacity is disgust with [himself]' as he has internalised the hatred of a judgemental society and detached himself so as not to confront the truth of his situation. Critic George. W. Crandall whose work 'The Gaze of Narcissus' deals heavily with Brick's own tortured psyche analyses his detachment is indicative of a 'cultural shift from the religious to the therapeutic' as Brick becomes engrossed in his own therapy and self-absorbed drinking. The fact that Big Mama recognises that 'something is wrong' with Brick's drinking, speaks to Williams' commentary that this detachment is unhealthy and destructive. Brick's transformation from 'superior creature' to a man 'hobbling' due to his physical weakness exemplifies a man destroyed by an inability to confront his truth. Williams uses the crushing transformation and social isolation of Brick to show the isolating impacts of self-denial.

Moreover, Williams tracks the issue of mendacity through the relationships in the play and highlights the way in which artifice forces even those in marriages and linked by relational bonds to become isolated at the hands of lies. Brick and Maggie's marriage serves as one extensive performance of togetherness throughout the play, as they fail to confront the reality of

their crumbling relationship. Maggie's first description in the stage directions outlines her 'vocal tricks' and sees her in a sultry 'slip of ivory satin and lace', presenting a woman who uses her voice and her clothing to manipulate and perform. Williams constructs this portrait of femininity and rehearsed beauty, filled with 'mascara' and 'rows of bracelets', to portray a woman who is acting a part rather than presenting an honest depiction of herself. This is most clear in the transition between Act 1 and Act 2 as Maggie shouts to Brick 'Here they come', as if they are going to begin their own performance of marriage and happiness to the other members of the family. The contrast between Brick's admission that he 'can't stand her' before the transition, and then Maggie's obsequious language of 'love' and desires to 'propose a toast' in front of the rest of the family, contrast the internal marital discord against the outward presentation of happiness and adoration. In utilising this convention of theatre to create this effect of a performance within a performance, Williams makes his audience starkly aware of the artifice in the play and its deceptive nature. This makes Brick's 'conditions' of marriage seem even more loveless and fake as the audience becomes aware of their internal crisis versus external appearance. Maggie, here, seems most alone as she loves Brick and thinks he is a 'wonderful person to go to bed with' but must conform to a loveless and sexless marriage for the sake of social appearances. Big Mama and Big Daddy's relationship also highlights an inability to deal with the truth of their relationship as Big Daddy reveals that his wife 'makes [him] sick' and berates her, saying she does 'not know a goddamn thing', but Big Mama's only response to this is the stage direction that she 'presses a fat fist to her mouth' as if bottling her true emotions inside rather than confronting the reality of their relationships. Williams, here, through these relationships highlights both the powerlessness and isolation of women in relationships in the play, but also the damaging impact of a failure to confront reality within these relationships.

Ultimately, the isolating systems of mercenary capitalism and exclusive patriarchy are only furthered and worsened by a failure to confront their flaws. The transformation of Maggie from a woman denouncing the roles of women as 'breeders' and doting wives – through her proclamation of Mae as a 'monster of fertility' – to a woman who accepts her role as a 'breeder' as a means to access the inheritance of Big Daddy marks the overwhelming power of patriarchy and the inability to confront its downfalls. Whether or not Maggie is empowered by her fake pregnancy, this power still exists only with a patriarchal vision of female roles and Maggie becomes isolated as a woman who both dislikes socially mandated roles of women but is forced to conform to them. Similarly, all characters are pitted against each other in a 'deliberate campaign of vilification' for material acquisition as family bonds are broken due to a necessity to conform to the dominant structures of consumerism in post-war America. Williams suggests the 'resent' that builds as a malignant cancer, and isolates all characters.

Sample 5

Nominated text: *North and South* – Elizabeth Gaskell

In the wake of Industrial Revolution's exacerbation of the North and South dichotomy and reconfiguration of the global constellation of power and economy, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* depicts the conflicts that arise as the social conditions of nineteenth century England are fragmented and reformed. The diaspora of the British people, within both the domestic and international landscape, epitomises the "change" that Margaret perceives to be "everywhere, slight yet pervading all", and thus "Britain and her citizens struggle to reconcile national and international allegiances in the face of shifting political and economic interests" (Julia Sun-Joo Lee). Amidst an evolving social landscape and the new demarcation of the borders between the domestic and the global, Gaskell's characters endeavour to prevent themselves from becoming diminished by a society that has not "stood still". Thornton and the "hands" must disrupt class division as Industry is subjected to the trade influence of the "Americans", Margaret's dislocation provokes her exposure to both internal and external conflict, and Frederick is expelled from England due to his involvement in a conflict that rejects the mores and conventions of a ossified domestic society. Throughout *North and South*, Gaskell employs the symbolism of the "railway" to connote her endorsement of movement and progression. As Margaret and Mr. Bell journey to Helstone they observe "stations" emptied by a people "too lazily content to waver" and "wonder

what" these people "could find to do when the train whirled away". As the "travellers" contemplate the emptiness of a life detached from the mobility of the "train", Gaskell's movement motif represents the necessity of displacement, mobility, and exposure to the "foreign" in order to not "retrograde and become corrupt" amidst changing social conditions.

The impact of the Industrial Revolution upon the British 'nation' both polarises wealth distribution in the domestic landscape and exposes Britain to infiltration of the global world, - and thus "the intersection of the national and international axes owners in Milton" (Sun-Joo Lee). Thornton's desire to "possess the influence of a name in foreign countries and faraway seas" is provoked by such "intersection", and it is this desire which evokes conflict both within himself and in Industrial society. The public craving of "worldly success" is inherently discordant with the private intention to "attach class to class as they should be attached" due to the rift between the transnational prospects of the master and the man. In order to realise "worldly success" Thornton must subscribe to the Industrial paternalism that renders workers like Higgins "machines" who "had only hands", whilst the master can "move off to some other country" if the "American house(s)" compel business to fall "like a pack of cards", and yet the workers are bound to their nation. As the "terrible wild beast" – the anthropomorphised embodiment of the working class – "made battering rams of their bodies" in the strike, they subscribe to the common language of oppression" (Sun-Joo Lee) that compels the proletariat to disrupt the global "system of commerce" which subjugates them through its perpetuation of the divide between the divisibility of "worldly success" for workers and masters.

It is Mr.Hale's perpetuation of the Victorian 'crisis of faith', his act of societal transgression that is his emancipation from the Church of England, that provokes Margaret's geographical, social, and cultural deracination. As proclaimed by the Habington epigraph of 'Doubts and Difficulties', Mr.Hale is "cast...upon some naked shore" by his disruption of the mores and conventions of society, and thus, as Margaret is geographically displaced by the acts of "her father the dissenter", her dislocation is both an act of societal transgression and a perpetuation of the "change" that permeates her society. Suddenly estranged from the "plans and visions which she entertained as to her future life in the country parsonage, released from the "luxurious house" and exposed to the "bare knowledge of the existence of every trouble or care", Margaret's immersion in an evolving societal landscape causes an inner conflict of identity to erupt and reconstruct her selfhood. In Milton, Margaret's "old tirades against trade" dissolve as her acknowledgement of manufacturers like Higgins and Thornton, once as abstracted as the "Indian shawls and scarfs", is expanded. Margaret begins "asking the lower classes upstairs" and submerging herself in the "crowded narrow streets, embracing her changing society and adopting the view that "if the world stood still, it would be retrograde and become corrupt." Unlike Fanny who "long(s) to see" only "two places", Margaret's identity conflict and reconstruction renders her stultified with "sit(ing) long hours upon the beach" as she does in Cromer, hypnotised by the "waves" that represent the barrier that segregates her from a "foreign" world "so far from home". Exposed to the "instantaneous ferocity of expression" of her brother and the "black lace mantilla" of "his bride's country" Margaret is compelled to undertake the "Spanish Journey" – to expand her imposition into a changing global landscape and remove her self from the ossified 'nation' model condemned by Gaskell.

Frederick's exile and "renunciation of England as his country" exemplified the burgeoning disillusionment of the British people with the stagnant 'nation model' and migration towards a "cosmopolitan identity" (Sun-Joo Lee). Aboard the 'Russell' Captain Reed "eerily recreates, in microcosm, the horrors of slavery" by "flogging" his subordinates, and by "defy(ing)" Reed's "arbitrary power", sanctioned by Britain, Frederick's allegiances are not to his country but to something loftier – to universal ideals of freedom untethered to any particular individual or nation" (Sun-Joo Lee), and this upholding "justice" in the mutiny Frederick exemplifies the capacity for transcendence of British society and adoption of a cosmopolitan identity. The changing social conditions in Britain are paralleled by a changing international constellation of power and economy, and by transporting himself into this constellation Frederick unearths a conflict within himself – a dialectical "ontological divide" between his "status as a British subject and his status as a cosmopolite (Sun-Joo Lee)". When Frederick returns to Milton, Margaret

realises that “he had not forgotten her – or Helstone either – all the time he had been roaming among distant countries and foreign people”. He is “infected” by his “bride’s country”, he has adopted the negative moniker “Frederick Dickenson”, and yet remnants of his identity remain entrenched in his homeland. Frederick is labelled a “traitor of the blackest dye”, by his act of transgression and subsequent entanglement with the “natives of wild or southern countries”, and thus his exile both parallels and is provoked by the changing societal conditions of his homeland. An “ontological divide”, an inner conflict between the ‘nation’ model and international, cosmopolitan realm, perpetuating Gaskell’s discussion of the conflicts produced by changing social conditions.

Sample 6

Nominated text: Agamemnon – Aeschylus

In the chorus’ desperately repeated lament: “My King, my captain”, crying out towards the desecrated and bloodied corpse of the fallen king upon the stage, the tragedy of Agamemnon’s death is clearly displayed for the audience. In the denouncement of his death “by the wife’s hand” as being a “sacreligious death”, it may appear that Agamemnon’s downfall is a brutal, unjustified crime committed by the “warlord’s woman”, “mad with ambition”. However, by reading the play through a feminist lens, it is evident that Agamemnon’s death is truly a “masterpiece of justice” and that it is his own horrid actions that causes him to be ultimately responsible for his own death-with Clytaemnestra standing trial over him. Indeed, in recognising how Clytaemnestra dominates the stage, awe-inspiringly commanding the threshold and powerfully moving with her own self-command, the power and subjectivity of women is clearly evident in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, and Agamemnon’s crimes against the women become paramount.

As the King of Argos, Agamemnon is the ultimate patriarch in the play, and in his elevated position, he is unable to recognise the subjectivity of women. The herald exonerates him through the epigraphic “Agamemnon Lord of men” and the chorus further celebrates the king upon his return through the idolising tricolon of honorifics “My King, the scourge of Troy,/son of Atreus”. Agamemnon’s inflated self-importance is further apparent in his assumption of centre stage upon his return, failing to recognise the shift in power in Argos to Clytaemnestra. It is thus elevated self-worth as the head of the patriarchal society that causes him to be unable to recognise the subjectivity of the women in the play. In the chorus’ terrible recount of Iphigenia’s pathetic death, the direct speech of Agamemnon’s tortured cry “rend my child, the glory of my house”, emphasises Agamemnon’s commodification of Iphigenia through the possessive pronoun “my”. In removing Iphigenia’s experience and instead identifying her as a part of his household for his own use, Agamemnon finds flawed justification for his murder of his daughter. In failing to recognise his crime in his inability to understand Iphigenia’s subjectivity, Agamemnon is ultimately culpable for his act without realising.

In addition, Agamemnon’s oxymoronic command to Clytaemnestra to “conquer with compassion” when inviting Cassandra into the home, reveals his failure to understand how his victory at Troy is fundamentally brutal and appalling for the victims of the violence such as Cassandra. Indeed, the positive connotation of “compassion” juxtaposes the visceral and bloody description of how he “raped Troy”, with “[his] bloody lion lapp[ing] its fill, / gorging on the blood of Kings” in which the violent verbs contradict all “compassion” and reveal the horrors of victory. In failing to understand Cassandra’s subjectivity which is emblematic of the subjectivity of all the violated Trojan, Agamemnon fails to recognise the abhorrence of his actions and his guilt for the crimes at Troy in the war.

Furthermore, in Clytaemnestra’s crescendoing tricolon of accusations: “he sacrificed his daughter, our child, the agony I laboured into love” in justification of her execution of Agamemnon, it is clear that Clytaemnestra holds the consanguinous bond between mother and daughter as paramount. Indeed, in his act sacrificing “the glory of [his] house”, Agamemnon does not recognise the importance of the maternal bond, instead asserting the ultimate significance of his patrilineal rights. It is in Agamemnon’s failure to understand the legitimacy of the consanguinous bond between mother and daughter that results in his failure to recognise

his violation of the sacred matrilineal bond. Indeed, in Clytaemnestra's elevation of her "daughter" in the Homeric epigraph "Iphigenia, girl of tears" that gives her epic status and her citation of her maternal rights in "By the child's rights / by Ruin and by Fury", it is clear that Clytaemnestra's execution of Agamemnon serves as punishment for his violation of the consanguinous bond between mother and daughter and an assertion of the legitimacy of the maternal bond.

In understanding the play with a feminist lens, Agamemnon's undeniable guilt for crimes against women is clear. Whilst ostensibly, the death of the king is tragic, ultimately it is evident that his execution is deserved and justified. In the active voice of "he slipped his neck in the strap of Fate", it is evident that Agamemnon is fully responsible for the murder of his daughter. Whilst he is faced with a terrible choice: "Pain both ways but which is worse?", the very of belief that he has a choice opens Agamemnon as a moral agent and places him morally responsible for his crimes.

Section B samples

Sample 1

Nominated text: *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* – Seamus Heaney

"To go out and under and beyond those radar systems". Thus, the *Opened Ground* of Heaney's poetry seeks to illustrate an intimate knowledge of the poet's personal boundaries, and strives to evade the confines of the material world in search of renewal in the face of fanatic brutality.

A child's growing understanding of the natural atmosphere is illustrated within the whimsical '*A Transgression*'. Recalling a rural childhood, the gay rhyming scheme and simplistic language reminiscent of a nursery rhyme depicts the poet's naive imitation of the "big boys". Indeed, confessing sheepishly, as if embarrassed, with pureness "(in scanty nineteen forty-six)", it is evident that Heaney is illustrating a more youthful innocent era. Thus, the vivid speed of the evocative description "under a raggedy, hurrying sky" evokes sheer awe at "heaven's dome" – this potent metaphor reestablishes the limits of the natural world. Yet such enlightened joy transitions suddenly into peril with the harsh consonance of "lied", "desire", "displaced, afraid", "loved" and "ahead". Here the onomymous, perhaps apocalyptic scene is marked by the symbolic dangers of "gypsies' fire" and the bad omen of "one magpie rose and flew". The emotive compound noun, "escape-joy", can hence perhaps be compared to the sheer horror felt beneath the gaze of the "great slime kings" – '*the Death of a Naturalist*' is then a similar turning point in childhood, as Heaney juvenile memories are brought with the tumultuous splendor of the pastoral landscape.

Yet, this youthful '*Transgression*' is tied to the evasion of the familiar world. Confessing, "I wanted out as well", the enjambling phrase "what I dared to be ahead/of time" illustrates the disastrous consequence of escaping temporal limits. Indeed, the whispering sibilance of "grass" and "rags" evokes the frigid "cold" wind felt on the "edge" of reality. The poet's lesson, then, involves returning to the comforting warmth of family – the reassuring final phrase "their knowledge that lived on without ado" impresses the importance of familial connections. Such terrestrial lessons, "to come down to earth", can be compared to the sentiment "we favoured the earth bound" in '*The Swing*'. Despite his youthful disobedience jackknifing between safety and hostility Heaney is truly a poet of the earth.

Yet, the natural world must be wielded by the Poet in his lamentation of the 1200 lives lost on the 1798 Irish Rebellion. '*Requiem for the Croppies*' captures the magic breathlessness of guerrilla warfare through the use of dashes – with "no striking camp –", the haphazard rebellion is characterised with the driving speed of "we moved quick and sudden". Here the founts of the agrestic experience are corrupted by war: "the pike" and "cattle" become weapons of violence clearly impressing the connection of the Irish people and "our own country", Heaney's assumption of the voice of an anonymous "Croppie" is in itself suggestive of a "terraced" people.

Yet, the sonnet turns to “fatal” disaster as the alliterative “terraced thousands” fall prey to British imperialist aggressions. Here the sibilant “shaking scythes” foreshadows their eminent doom – the weapon of death itself transitions into the mournful personification of “the hillside”. “Blushed and soaked”, the “broken wave” of war is similar to the “bog burst” in ‘Act of Union’. Thus, Heaney’s atypical sonnets pay tribute to Ireland’s turbulent past.

Yet, it is from the ‘Opened Ground’ of sorrow and anguish that the poet is able to plant the seeds of renewal. The circular narrative allows the “barley” to return in a defiance of political lines – “the barley grew up out of our grave”, as if the countryside is awash in a scar-like tapestry of greenery. Thus, Heaney interweaves the motif of the natural world to provoke a sense of rejuvenating hope after a bloody “wave”.

Similarly, Heaney’s eulogy for his cousin Colum McCartney, murdered in random sectarian violence in 1975 applies the fantastical to a powerful political statement. ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ opens poignantly with the epigraph from “Dante’s Purgatorio, I” in order to provoke a mythic atmosphere. Thus, Colum is entrusted with Dante’s heroic mantle, as if stepping out of the Mount of Purgatory onto “a high, bare pilgrim’s track”. Here Heaney combines Irish mythology, alluding to mad “Sweeney”, to depict Colum’s aggressors in a fiendish light. Indeed, the demonic amalgamation of “the bloodied heads, / Goats-beards and dog’s eyes in a demon pack” can only characterise sectarian murders as absurd in inhuman. The ominous onomatopoeic sibilance of “snapping and squealing” thus renders the “sudden brakes and stalling” in horrifying detail, while the poet’s evident desperation heightens the fearful atmosphere with the hypothesising “what blazed ahead of you?”. The driving force of the fragmented phrase “engines, voices, heads hooded” and the callous “cold nosed gun” then provoke the frenetic chaos of fanatical religious violence. In this sense, Heaney turns to mythology in order to reconcile the incomprehensible: Gunnar in ‘Funeral Rites’ equally serves to harness some sense of understanding in the “bewildered gaze” left by death.

Yet, this hellish landscape is juxtaposed with the warm familiarity of ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’. Colum’s death, then, is explained as the consequence of straying from the “lowland clay’s and waters”, and entering a eery liminal space beyond the ghostly “white glow of filling stations”. Drawing upon pagan mythology, the “soft tree line of yew” recalls traditional folklore associated with the “yew”; an eternity of both life and death entrapped beneath the bark thus characterises Lough Beg as a languid locality of lethargy. Indeed, the slowness of the phrase “long before rising time” coupled with the comforting rhythm of “you and yours and yours and mine” likens the perhaps Arcadian society to an apolitical peaceful group who “could not crack the whip”. Such pastoral scenes are similarly evoked in the “leafy road” depicted within ‘In memoriam Frances Ledwidge’. Yet, the idyllic scene is violently disrupted by the fragmented phallic imagery of “acrid, brassy, genital, ejected” – “ejected from the safe sphere, Colum is unable to rejoin the “slow arbitrators of the burial ground”.

To this end, Heaney draws upon the motif of “rushes” to create his own makeshift burial rites in an ethereal, transgressive landscape. The allusion to Dante’s epic poem thus illustrates a spiritual location “where the breakers strive” atop of Mount Purgatorio. Indeed, the “early mist” and lyrical rhyming “unbewildered gaze” and “haze” evoke the union of land and water perhaps akin to “some far briney zone” in ‘Limbo’. It is in this breach of neutral confines that the harder caesura “to wash you cousin” forces the reader to assume the qualities of an intrusive voyeur. Heaney’s baptism is founded in intimacy, combining Catholic and pagan imagery to cleanse away the disturbing carnage, “blood and roadside muck” from his cousin. “Dew” and “moss / fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud”, as if from heaven, become the tools of purification, while the “rushes that shoot green again”, biblical symbol of redemption complete the ritualisation of poetry. In this sense, “Vinegar Hill” and “the Strand” give birth to a refreshing sense of rebirth and hope that the pain of tragedy may be assuaged. “the purpose of an elegy is to resurrect the dead in a benign landscape”; Heaney’s words ring true in his recollection of memories both personal and historical, during to transcend the boundaries of the familiar landscape in order to rescue the unjustly murdered.

Sample 2**Nominated text:** *Twelfth Night* – William Shakespeare

Shakespeare discloses the celebrations of carnival through the mistakes and protestations of the main plot and the carousing and wit of its subplot. The audience is introduced to the performing, Lord of Misrule, Sir Toby, and his fellow revellers, whose household comedy, the self revealed thorough the homophonic wordplay of 'eye' and the letter 'I', establishes the humour and cozening which supplements the elements of Saturnalia. As the play continues, the excess of fooling and celebrating undertaken by the boisterous is counterpointed by the disproportionate indulgences and 'green and yellow melancholy' of jilted lovers, exemplified by Orsino's 'tears' which Olivia 'abhors', whose divided identities and unrequited passions tangle them in the chaos which pervades the world of Illyria.

Following the conventions of courtly love prevalent within Elizabeth theatre, Orsino performs as a Petrarchan wooer, where 'love can give no place, bide no deny', as he is obsessed with the object of his 'love' and with melancholy. Through his hyperbole – 'so strong a passion' – and his smile, clamping the 'appetite' of his love 'is all as humans as the sea', Orsino depicts a melodramatic and distorted portrayal of love. Following the notion of performance, Malvolio is commended by Maria's letter to 'appear fresh' and adopt a 'simulation'. With imperatives including 'Be', 'let' and 'put', Orsino is ordered to 'be opposite with kinsmen, surly with servants' and act like a nobleman. He eagerly accepts this role, announcing declarative statements such as 'I will be proud' and 'I will baffle Sir Toby'. Following this moment, Malvolio personates a 'cross-gartered' and infatuated suitor, as he is fuelled by his own self-love and ambition. Correspondingly, Viola adopts a new role during the third passage, as following her twisting of words she acknowledges 'now I am your fool'. Consequently, instability and deception infuse the world of Illyria, as characters exchange and adopt new roles, expressing the mutability of ideality and coinciding with the madness which infuses the play.

This lack of 'reason' coincides with an uncertainty that is reflected within the language of the play. During Passage 2, language becomes vague, as not is the 'fustian riddle' effective in deceiving and manipulating Malvolio, but it also discloses an instability within the language of the play. Malvolio tries to logically reason and 'work it out', and subverts his appreciation that 'this simulation is not the former', with 'yet, to crush this a little', as words and what they signify are either manipulated or disregarded by the characters in Illyria and lose their fixed meaning, comparable to how other commonly stable conceptions such as gender and social position are subverted during the play. Similarly the ambiguity of language resurfaces during Viola's obscure and tangled illusion – 'My father had a daughter loved a man' – before she admits that she is both 'all the daughters' and 'all the brothers' in her family, with her narration, destabilising her identity. Correspondingly, the triple negative of 'nor never none' during Viola's refusal of Olivia's 'passion' augments the confusion surrounding her identity and the play itself. Consequently, the play is wrapped within a cloak of sepia incertitude and equivocation, where anything seems equally possible and impossible, as the world of Illyria is exposed as being inherently unstable.

This confusion is heightened by the romantic fervour and appetite of the different characters within the play, as including the delusion of Malvolio. The fantasy which he entertains is reflected during the second passage, with phrases including 'doth sway my life' and 'I may command where I adore' emphasising his delusion. Similarly, the audience is amused at the irony of his statement 'I do not now fool myself to let imagination jade me', as he is persuaded by the theatrical device of the forged letter. Moreover, the absurdity of his ability to be persuaded coincides with the presence of an on-stage audience, with the eavesdropping convention allowing the off-stage audience to take pleasing in both the spectating restrained revellers and their exclamations such as 'Marry, hang thee, brock!' Correspondingly, Olivia and Orsino establish their own realities based on their assumed identities, those of an aching lover and griever, facilitated by their position and influence with Illyria. However, Olivia's initial image of 'grief', constructed by her conformity and her thespian mourning for her brother, is penetrated by the 'beautiful' Cesario. Thus, Olivia whilst resuming her control and exerting her power over others, revealed through the imperative 'Stay!', solicits Viola, and Sebastian later in the play,

with 'haste', as she continues to indulge in her 'passion' and fancy without moderation or caution, and is thus comparable to the hedonistic revellers. Therefore, forced to sustain personality in its struggle with reality, and more frequently against it, Shakespeare's characters often remain in their 'imagination', preferring to avoid confrontation with truth in the hope that 'Love' or 'Fortune' will facilitate the actualisation of their fantasies.

Coinciding with this evasion of truth is deception of Viola's character, as even she admits 'I am not what I am'. Through her cross-dressing and subsequent gender transformation, the audience witnesses the formation of an androgynous identity, with her feminine traits blurred by the masculine clothing and behaviour she adopts as Cesario. She consequently becomes equivalent to her brother Sebastian in both appearances and 'habits', as the twins smudge gender boundaries. This disruption of sexual norms within the play is justified by the comedic genre and by the title and subtitle, the whimsical *What You Will*, from which the audience anticipates the anarchy and the transgression of propriety associated with the misrule of *Twelfth Night*. Nevertheless, through the 'grief' of Olivia and Orsino, Shakespeare nuances this comedic notion of fretting with a strain of melancholy that pervades the world of Illyria, resulting in *Twelfth Night* differing to the conventional romantic comedies of the era.

Sample 3

Nominated text: Selected Poems – Robert Browning

Robert Browning enacts a movement away from the traditional Romantic voice and its naive belief that love and the triumph of humanity can overcome the inevitable erosion of time. Whether it be the airy insubstantiality of his pastoral 'Love Among the Ruins', the melancholic reminiscent saturating 'Youth and Art', or the vivacious resistance of mortal demise in his dramatic monologue 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church', the paradoxes ripe in Browning's poetry destabilise the yearning for immortality as well as the transcendence of time as heralded by Romantic forms of the past, in search for a bleaker truth of a modernist reality.

Browning destabilises the absolute authority of the Romantic voice in his pastoral poem, 'Love Among the Ruins', denouncing the speaker's yearn to over-come the destructive and yet constant force of time as well as his confident assertion that "love is best". The speaker invites the reader into the tranquil atmosphere of the poem through a calm, even lyrical rhythm imbued with Romantic imagery of "quiet-coloured end" and "solitary pastures", a gentle quality to his words from the open, sighing vowels of "smiles" and "miles". Already the promise of love constructed by the prescient title begins to fulfil itself, the natural imagery whispering of the tender emotions "among" our midst. However, despite the smooth syntax and unperturbed lines of the speaker, the contradiction between the flowing first line and its short staccato counterpart lend the verses a dissatisfaction, the foundations of the poem beginning to crumble at the tension between form and meaning. The three-syllable lines which struggle to meet the grandiose flow of beauty skew the gentleness of the atmosphere, suggesting instead a diaphonous malady siezing hold of the language as the speaker grapple with thoughts that ultimately elude him. This evanescent veneer is also echoed with the "city great and gay" that desperately clings on to permanence through concrete symbols of "gold", "stock", and "stone" but inevitably succumbing to the "caper over-rooted", "o'erspread[ing]" the majestic visage of human civilisation. The "men" armoured with "marble", although glor[ious] in their "fire" is extinguished with the constant reminder of "now", emphasising the distance separating this "ancient time" from reality of the bare "single turret that remains", reiterating the speaker's pitiful inability to transcend time as well as his reality; that love is not the liberating force that can be dileneated, but instead found through distorted perception "among the ruins" of humanity.

'Youth and Art' further Browning's deconstruction of love as the saviour from the harsh realities of the world. Browning unwinds through a lyrical ABAB rhyme scheme rift with soft vowels of "once" and "housetop lonely" achingly melancholic memory an almost-love affair, that had dissipated by the surrender to the "business" of the world. The feminine speaker and her lover, a hopeless "sparrows pair" dreaming of the glory of their art as well as the liberating love that

awaits them, imbues the first seven verses with a relaxed atmosphere, evoking a conventional image of starving yet content artists “lodg[ing] in a street together”. However, the jarring emdash of verse 7 that disrupts the languid pace previously constructed “rankles” the pristine memory, the sharp plosive p in “weak points” eradicating perceptions of a tranquil love affair. What arises is a tense interrogation of the speaker at the flames of reality that had burned the idyllic love to ashes, violently demanding “why did you not pinch a flower” and “I did look, sharp as a lynx”, exposing her anxiety at not achieving the amorous affair as promised by Romanticism. Despite living gloriously as a “queen” and a “knight”, the loyalty to this past love chains her to a “life unfulfilled”, chasing an illusion that “could have happened once” that renders her “patchy and scrappy”, language remaining course and grating as the speaker arrives at an empty destination, love not the beautiful promise it pretends to be but a lie that “hangs still” perpetually before her, never under her control.

Whilst ‘Love Among the Ruins’ and ‘Youth and Art’ denounce love as the liberating force as heralded by Romantic tradition, ‘The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church’ witnesses the fierce refusal to be succumbed by death, and the speaker’s inevitable demise at his desire for immortality. Pioneering the genre of the dramatic monologue, Browning constructs anxious and fallible speakers that struggle to control their poetical form, ultimately exposed in their hypocrisy. Much like the austere Duke in Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’, the bishop “dying by degrees” in his “state-chamber” refuse oblivion in an act of self-preservation, setting plans for a grand tomb that would live long past the last of him. This assertion of permanence through hard images of “marble” and “slab of basalt” however is continually undermined by the freshness of their description, “peach” and “onion” thrumming with life which refuse the pull of the grave. The speaker’s vivacity, carried by exclamation marks as well as the unrelenting momentum of his speech further betray the inhuman permanence he appropriates, anchoring himself to his decaying reality which corrode against the speaker’s crumbling authority.

Ultimately, Browning’s poetry challenge the Romantic assumption that love and humanity can withstand the overwhelming forces of time, catalysing a movement away from conventional form in an exploration of the inconsistency’s of love’s illusion.

Sample 4

Nominated text: *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems* by Wisława Szymborska – Wisława Szymborska

A Szymborska poem is vigorously alive, even playful and animated, which draws us to her life position of getting the most out of what she believed to be a single go at mortality. But as the meaning emerges, she discards what may be a decoy title, laying bare critical life questions about being that is temporary, that in her view, cuts us off all eternity. In passage 1 Szymborska assembles for us a parallel between the mythical Atlantis and our absence to be once human mortality is spent. The passage begins with a series of questions without their conventional question marks: ‘Did they exist or not’, ‘On an Island or not’. We feel the comfort of completion already because of this simple omission, but signs of insecurity occur, evident in the word ‘swallowed’, plus the pattern of vagueness in ‘them’, ‘someone’ and ‘everything’. And once this question mark absence is redressed, an unease is present. ‘Did someone have someone to love? The passage carries a deluge of negatives, such as ‘nothing’ and ‘or not’, which gradually marks out a pathway into what may feel like the discomfort of nihilism. The strength of the line, ‘There stood seven cities’ is imposing yet Szymborska painstakingly punctures its effects as she abhors the facts declared in her world of uncertainties. ‘But are we sure of that?’, ‘Where then is the proof?’ She continues with capitalised words as single sentences to create a stabbing effect; ‘Hypothetical. Dubious. Unimmortalized.’

At some indeterminate point, depending on the approach of the reader, we cross a frontier between the passage’s title and the haunting belief system of Szymborska as she takes us to the brink of human impermanence. The pulsing of distinct moments, with each a separated microcosm is felt by unnerving doubt, ‘Someone yelled something’, followed by the emphatic

pause of a period and line-ending, then 'No, no one did'. The passage ends with our ending covered along with the mathematical 'plus, minus', which brings us once more back to nothing. And thus is delivered the central irony of the lost island state being us, as the abyss of death looms over mortal life.

The idea of mortality enveloped in travel, in Passage 2, is given a mournful air with the sense of an elegy extinguishing any light feeling of holiday. A trek through Europe is therefore made solemn by the influence of a requiem to come, and thus Szyborska builds already on expectancy. Symbolic 'goddesses of their heads' have flaws in terms of veracity and completeness. And so, the elegy or dirge is an authentic viewing free of the nimbus of fading memory, fragments lost as well as impressions muddled or inhibited. Samokov came and went as 'only rain' whilst 'Paris from Louvre to fingernail' is bathed in a 'film' that reshaped the viewers subjectivity. Szyborska is telling us that our journey is very much about the impressions that we personally and intuitively gather, and those we miss. Already in the passage is an absence compounding, overtly revealed as the ultimate absence that awaits us all; 'Of Boulevard Saint-Martin the steps remain and lead to extinction'. Brimming instances of lives riches are refracted or lost. A 'bridge and a half' seems to be caused by an interruption, the 'hapless dancer of Sofia' becomes her dance only; 'a body without a face'. At this point, the ephemeral nature of events and visitation and perceptions are interrupted as Szyborska steps into her poem directly to issue a reminder about the life wasting away, 'All is mine but nothing owned' and '...mine only while I look'. The passage shifts into a delicate phase despite the transition to reinforced vulnerability. Through words and phrasing such as 'filament', 'drop of water' and 'one blade of grass in a sharp contour', we feel ephemeral vulnerability as we are caught in between 'greeting' and 'farewell'. The alternation between 'excess' and 'lack' leave us with what might have been indulged or experienced, what might have been neglected before it is all gone.

The passage in 'Psalm' is a temporal elegy with a spiritual borrowing from formal religion. Added to her style of boundless suggestibility is the backdrop of the natural world that Szyborska cherishes. Liberty balloons in the opening stanza of the passage with 'clouds that float unpunished' and 'the desert sands that shift from land to land'. It is through these expansive visions of a naturally free world that Szyborska builds her central parody of man in the capacity of created behaving in the manner of the Creator. The category mistake is the subject of derision through exasperation, registered by a string of exclamations, 'Oh how porous are the boundaries', 'Must I enumerate' along with the enigma of disarray as order; 'Oh, to see all this chaos all at once'. The tone of vastness, assisted by the repetition in language as 'numerous' and 'numberless', govern the feeling of universal breadth in the opening phases of the passage. Grouped in an unlikely display of unity is the mere art that foils the 'borderguard', the bird that '...lights upon the lowered barrier' and the primitive and gauche 'cuttlefish', maligned absurdly by its apparent violation of the 'sacred sphere of territorial waters'. 'What a fidget' is simple verbal representation of the poet's scorn towards sustained violation. Szyborska virtually takes us beyond our imaginings when she travels to the 'stars' as an exercise of futile wish-fulfilment; '... to know which shines for whom'. The poet steps into her poem directly to mock and mimic the voice of the speaker. The mood is didactic and undercut instantly by the sobering line; 'Only that which is human can truly be alien', the real point of the poem. Szyborska then exits the passage through humble, sussurrant whisperings, conveyed by the natural sounds and movements of the 'burrowing of moles, and wind'.

Szyborska approaches the meaning through the artful and subtle way of asking questions. Despite her firm and unyielding position on existentialism, she offers her truths free of any tightly held claim to subjective superiority. We uncover life-meaning through the glass of plain language, with a structural framing. Poems have titles which may or may not yield hints on the meaning of a particular verse, but Szyborska uses the distraction to engineer a bleaker view of universal nihilism. Her poetry brims with the vigour of life before darkness in her view settles forever.