

2019 VCE Literature examination report

General comments

The 2019 examination paper required students to respond to two distinct tasks, using two texts from two different categories. Most students understood the nature of the tasks, writing in detail on their chosen texts and there were few incomplete responses.

Some students still wrote on two novels or two plays, or wrote two essays on the same text, even though this concern has been raised in previous examination reports. Teachers are urged to note this requirement in advising students and checking their students' chosen texts for the examination. Students who ignore this restriction will have only the better essay score counted, regardless of the quality of the other essay.

The Section A task required students to present an interpretation of the text using one literary perspective to inform their view. The Section B task asked students to engage deeply with at least two of the three passages offered on the paper to present an interpretation of the text based on close analysis of the language and features of these moments in the text. Students were assessed using the *Expected Qualities for the Mark Range*, published on the VCAA website.

Although there were responses on all texts in both sections of the paper, the most popular texts by far were *Heart of Darkness*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Ariel*, with Browning's *Selected Poems*, *Twelfth Night*, *North and South*, Chris Wallace-Crabbe's *New and Selected Poems*, *The Passion* and *A Room of One's Own* also attracting a significant but much smaller number of responses. As it appears that a much narrower range of texts was selected by students for the examination this year, it is worth reminding teachers of the great variety of texts available and encouraging a wider exploration of the possibilities in the list.

Of course, it is acknowledged that teachers choose their texts in relation to particular areas of study and timing during the year, and texts studied earlier in the year may not be revisited with the examination in mind. The range of texts that students respond to in the exam is therefore not a true indication of what is studied during the year. However, it should be remembered that all texts on the list have been selected as suitable for the examination tasks and student writing on any text can score highly on the criteria. The samples at the end of this report illustrate responses to a range of texts, indicating various ways in which students may demonstrate these qualities.

Students should be assured that the order in which they write their responses is of no importance. Each essay is assessed on its merits, according to the relevant criteria for each section. Many students choose to write Section B first, in order to make immediate and effective use of their reading time, but they do not have to leave space to place Section A at the beginning of the script book. They are asked to indicate in their answer book to which section they are responding.

It was noted that a number of students relied on film adaptations of texts, particularly *Northanger Abbey* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as the basis of their interpretations, often leading to significant misreading. While film adaptations are important, often essential, in Unit 3 Area of Study 1, and may be useful teaching resources in general, they are not to be substituted for the prescribed novel, play or other text. Students who relied on the film adaptations did themselves a disservice.

In every VCE Study, there is an appropriate vocabulary or discourse. Literature is no exception in this regard. There is an expected formality and seriousness in the language used. Students should avoid using contemporary slang and anachronistic language such as ‘cheated on him/her’, ‘air-headed’, ‘the gender reveal’, ‘morphed’, ‘toxic masculinity’, ‘from the get go’ and so on. Many students used terms such as ‘elucidate’, ‘showcase’, ‘juxtapose’ and ‘disconnect’ incorrectly. Furthermore, many students struggled with prepositions such as ‘towards’ when ‘to’ would have been correct, or ‘within’ when ‘in’ was the appropriate term. Students continue to confuse ‘idyllic’, ‘ideal’ and ‘idealistic’, ‘simple’ and ‘simplistic’, and ‘animal imagery’ and ‘animalistic imagery’. For instance, in discussing Sylvia Plath’s ‘Morning Song’, a number of students described the baby’s ‘moth-breath’ as ‘animalistic imagery’, when the effect is neither base nor animalistic but almost imperceptible and gentle. With sensitive discussion in class, sustained writing practice throughout the year and timely feedback, errors such as these can be addressed.

When students introduce details of the context of the text’s setting or production (not required, although an awareness is usually evident through incidental reference or deft contextualisation in middle- and upper-range responses), they should be accurate and not laboured. Students should not use vague terms such as ‘in that time period’ or mistake one century for another, as in describing Shakespeare as ‘writing for a Victorian audience’ or claiming that ‘the poetry of Robert Browning was written in Renaissance Italy’.

They should be able to use some of the vocabulary or concerns of their chosen literary perspective in their Section A essay to make clear to the reader the lens through which they are reading the text and to demonstrate that they are adopting and evaluating that perspective. It is important, too, to understand that the literary perspective is not an authorial stance but a **reader** perspective; a way of reading the text from a particular vantage point or through a particular lens.

Section A

The mean score for Section A was slightly higher than that for Section B, indicating that students are comfortable with this task.

Students must engage with the terms of the topic, not just present a rehearsed account of the text viewed through their literary perspective. Students who included multiple perspectives often failed to explore one perspective in depth. This task is different from the assessment of Unit 4 Outcome 1, which does require students to address two perspectives.

In the higher-scoring responses a thorough knowledge of the text and an impressive ability to construct a fluent and coherent argument were demonstrated, with students responding to the topic and drawing effortlessly on a selected perspective. This was revealed in the students’ familiarity with the discourse of their chosen perspective, and evident in a strong sense of engagement, not only with the theory, but with the text itself. Students did not need to name or quote authors or label their perspective in order to achieve this, although many students did explicitly name their perspective.

It was noted, however, that many students did not succeed with all elements of the task. In the middle ranges, some ignored key terms in the topic, some did not clearly introduce a literary perspective or use the language of its discourse, while others in the lower ranges made significant errors in reading or made only limited use of the text to present their reading. For example, many students responding on Conrad failed to address the notion that the novel is ‘disturbing’, discussing only the idea of ‘civilisation’. Many students also confused the notion of ‘civilised’ with ‘civil’, or ‘civilisation’ with ‘civility’, thereby revealing a limited and limiting understanding of the topic. Students who wrote on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* often failed to engage with the causal connection explicit in the topic between ‘fears’ and ‘isolated’. Instead, they frequently wrote about ‘loneliness’ and ‘inadmissible things’, drawing on topics from previous examination papers. In responses to

these and other texts, it was not uncommon for students to ignore or merely allude to a literary perspective and then go on to write a very thematic essay focused on views and values.

The following brief excerpt illustrates what can be done: having articulated an ecocritical perspective and noted the absence of elephants in the novel *Heart of Darkness*, the student continues to engage with all three elements of the task, with astute analysis and use of textual detail.

When Marlow is in the living room of Kurtz's Intended, he describes a "grand piano" as a "sombre and polished sarcophagus", alluding to a subtle tribute to the lives of the elephants lost in the seeking of the ivory required for the piano keys. A modern day audience, with an increased awareness of the impact of civilisation over the natural world, is inclined to realise Conrad's tribute, however, his original audiences would have been unlikely to realise this condemnation of imperialism, due to their view of nature as an object prime for exploitation in the pursuit of human gain. Thus, Conrad's novella is viewed by contemporary audiences as a condemnation of the disturbing nature of civilisation ...

Section B

This task has been a feature of the examination since the inception of the VCE and is familiar to teachers and students. Comments on it can be found in previous Assessment Reports available from the VCAA website. The task requires a sustained focus on the use of language and its effects in creating meaning throughout the text, not merely in the three selected passages, although the selected passages must be the focus of the essay.

Students should demonstrate an awareness of the entire text, making pertinent but incidental references beyond the passages where appropriate, without venturing into detailed discussion of passages not presented in the paper. Understandings of contrasts, foreshadowing and echoing are useful ways for students to make connections among the passages. They should avoid merely putting forward a thesis and ranging across the passages to select examples to support it. That approach often fails to respect the integrity of individual works such as poems or the temporal development of novels and plays. Even in works with discontinuous narratives, the selection and use of evidence should reflect the reader experience of the work.

It would seem that many students used their reading time effectively to work through the passages and develop the basis for their interpretations. Some students did, however, digress at too great a length into other passages not on the paper, especially in poetry and short story responses.

More than half the students wrote on poetry for this section, indicating that they have engaged strongly with poetry as a literary form. The most popular poetry texts were Plath, Browning and Wallace-Crabbe. Other popular texts in this section were *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Twelfth Night* and *Heart of Darkness*.

The focus of this task is the close analysis of how language works to create meaning. 'Language' here should be understood as including stage directions, the visual layout on the page, narrative voice, dialogue, the structure and patterning of the text, the stance of an essayist, conventions of a particular form and subversion of those conventions, and all the other ways in which a text is constructed. Many students adopted the discourse of descriptive linguistics to name features of the writing, using terms such as 'anaphora', 'synecdoche' and 'syllepsis', to name a few, but in doing so often failed to get close to exploring the meaning of the text or the effects of the language. Students should not simply label the features of the text, which can lead to a distanced response, but should try to engage with the way the language is working to create meaning, to articulate its effects and to grapple with the subtleties and ambiguities evident. This will help them in presenting their own reading, grounded in the given passages but with awareness of the wider text. Responses in the higher-scoring ranges were able to do this, demonstrating insight, sophistication and an easy fluency.

In the following excerpt, the student discusses the ways in which the imagery of Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' changes, revealing the speaker's developing awareness of the newborn and an increasing connection with the child. Not all readers will agree with the reading, but the student has supported the interpretation.

This is exemplified in the juxtaposition of the initial description of the titular "morning song" as a "bald cry", a wild and unpredictable outpourance of emotion, to the later recognition of it as a "handful of notes". Thus, the speaker, through her developing connection, recognises her creation as an autonomous being in it's own right.

Many students in the middle range wrote an essay very similar in structure and style to their Section A essay, offering a thematic or 'views and values' discussion involving limited engagement with the language of the passages. These responses did not score highly as they were responding only in part to the requirements of this task. Lower-scoring responses sometimes paraphrased the passages or the text as a whole, again with little attention to the language, although most did refer to at least one passage. Many assessors commented that the skills of close analysis have been less evident, a trend that should be reversed.

Specific comments

Essay 1 (Section A)

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	3	4	4	5	7	8	11	11	12	9	8	5	4	2	1	12.4

Essay 2 (Section B)

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	3	4	5	6	7	9	12	11	11	8	7	5	3	2	1	12.1

Novels

The highest-scoring essays revealed an understanding of narrative form and how the different texts are structured. They demonstrated, whether in Section A or B, a detailed knowledge of the text and subtle understandings of the language.

In discussing *Heart of Darkness*, most students understood the structure of the novel, with the frame narrator and Marlow offering different perspectives, the symbolism of the journey up river into the heart of an unknown destiny and possible human depravity, all of which could have been readily discussed from a feminist, post-colonial, psychoanalytical or ecocritical perspective or another of their choice. As noted earlier, however, many students misunderstood the concept of 'civilisation', equating it with 'civility'.

North and South attracted a number of high-scoring responses that revealed an understanding of its explicit contrasts of geography, class and gender and were aware of the social changes heralded in the narrative. They understood the inherent conflict between the past of a genteel southern England and the modernity of the industrial north embodied in Milton, the delineated roles of class and the different presentations of gender roles. They were able to explore how these traditional roles were challenged and how the consequent change was necessary, thus addressing both elements of the Section A topic.

The responses on *Northanger Abbey* varied in quality; many students had difficulty in identifying the wit and irony of Austen's narrative voice, and how characters may be revealed in sequences of scenes, although the highest-scoring were adept at noting such moments as Henry Tilney's teasing of Catherine in her imaginative anticipation of *Northanger Abbey* and the narrator's later comment on her response to Isabella's letter, 'Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose even on Catherine', a signal to readers to distrust Isabella and perhaps reread her character as presented in earlier moments of the novel.

Essays on *The Passion* were almost equally represented in Section A and Section B. Generally, they engaged well with the novel's challenging ideas and drew appropriately on evidence to support their claims.

There were few responses on *The Anchoress*, *Baron in the Trees*, *The Man Who Loved Children*, *The Sound of Things Falling* or *Carpentaria*.

Plays

Increasingly, students have understood the idea of a play as a text for performance and revealed in their discussion an understanding of the way it may be performed on the stage. This was particularly true in student discussions of *Twelfth Night*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Othello* and *A Taste of Honey*. There were few essays on *Speaking in Tongues* and *Desdemona*, but they too would have invited excellent discussions of stagecraft.

Students responded strongly to the plays and found a lot to say about them, although there were instances in which their Section A responses did not address the entirety of the topic and instances in which the Section B responses paraphrased the passages instead of offering a close discussion of how the dialogue revealed aspects of the characters and their relationships. Responses on *Twelfth Night*, *Buried Child* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* often did reveal the expected close engagement with language, drawing on the ways dialogue and action are instrumental in creating the characters and shaping the audience response.

Short stories

In writing on the short story collections, students are asked to construct a response based on the three selected passages, but also offer an interpretation of the text as a whole. High-scoring responses showed an understanding of this and were able to talk about some ideas that underpinned the collections, especially in the cases of *Foreign Soil* and *Only the Animals*. They understood the individual historical contexts in which the stories in *Only the Animals* are set and their contribution to our readings, as well as the general context of human predispositions to objectify and mistreat animals in times of conflict. In responding to the very different stories in *Foreign Soil*, they understood the ideas of characters' dislocation and needing to find new ground for their own narratives. On the basis of those understandings, they were able to construct an interpretation that was often complex and detailed.

Mid-scoring students had clearly engaged with these texts but sometimes devoted too much time to discussion of stories not represented on the paper. While these references can be useful, they should be incidental and not impinge on the main focus of the student's argument in relation to the given passages. Prepared essays rarely address the tasks on the exam paper.

Lower-scoring responses often presented an account of the text but did not succeed in anchoring that in the passages on the exam paper and instead offered paraphrases of the passages or the stories from which they were taken.

Gogol's short stories were less popular and were generally discussed less well. Lower-scoring students tended to identify the stories from which the passages were selected and then retell the stories, with little attention to the language of the passages or the ideas they embodied and were often not able to offer an overview of the concerns of the volume or similarities to other stories.

Other literature

There were comparatively fewer responses on the three texts in this section, especially on *My Father's Daughter*, but there were many high-scoring responses on *A Room of One's Own* and *Candide*, showing excellent and detailed knowledge of the texts and an awareness of the nature of their construction. Students generally understood the ways in which Voltaire has *Candide* explore and evaluate various philosophies of life and the parallels drawn by Woolf between the men's college and the women's college at her fictional Oxbridge to explicate her thesis. The highest-scoring students understood Woolf's multifarious approaches of imaginative fiction (Judith Shakespeare), her analysis of the representation of women in 'books written by men', the different status of women in the universities and her argument in favour of an androgynous sensibility in terms of the needs of society.

Poetry

The popularity of poetry as a student choice is welcome. Most students chose poetry for Section B, although it could be used equally effectively for Section A. Of course, poetry, with its condensed and distilled use of language, lends itself very well to the Section B task, inviting students to immerse themselves in the ways language works to create meaning. Middle-range responses were usually able to offer some discussion of the imagery, tone and aspects of poetic forms, while the highest-scoring responses articulated a coherent and developed analysis of the poems, anchored their interpretation in the detail of the passages and were also able to draw more widely on the poet's work to offer a sense of the whole.

Some students assumed, especially in the case of Plath, that the speakers of the three poems are interchangeable and failed to recognise that each poem is a work of art with its own integrity. They tried to 'weave' among the passages, imposing an idea of 'motherhood' as typifying all the passages in a way that blurred the distinctions among the individual voices of the poems, jumping from one to another. In doing so they lost a sense of the uniqueness of the voices. While students are asked to find and explore connections, they should also try to appreciate the distinct and unique qualities of individual poems. Students often assumed that there was a 'hidden meaning' needing to be 'decoded' instead of responding to the poems as works of art.

Students writing on Browning did, however, usually recognise the individuality of the speakers, even if they did sometimes assume that all the poems depicted 'the hypocrisy of the church' when clearly there are different voices and nuances among his speakers. Passage 3, for example, clearly represents an embrace of love, not a betrayal of religious devotion and churchly teaching in fulfilment of carnal desire.

There were some very good answers on Wallace-Crabbe, whose poetry was clearly attractive to students and encouraged some thoughtful and engaged responses. Some students wrote well on Wagan Watson, revealing an understanding of the cultural context, especially in 'cheap white goods at the dreamtime sale' and 'white stucco dreaming'. The few responses on White mostly engaged well with the poetry, especially in their accounts of 'Woman and Dog'.

Sample essays

The following sample essays have been selected to illustrate a range of ways in which students responded to the 2019 examination tasks. They are all high-scoring essays, although not necessarily in the very top band. They are not offered as models or exemplars but merely as illustrations of achievable responses that meet the criteria in the upper ranges. Essays are included on a variety of texts, including several that remain on the 2020 Text List. All are fluently written, free of jargon or convoluted expression and address the criteria confidently, representing a strong individual engagement with the texts and the tasks. They demonstrate complexity and some sophistication, without pretension. In their approaches, these responses represent different

combinations of strengths; no single essay does all that could possibly be done, and indeed there are some flaws evident, but they do illustrate several features very well.

In Section A, the essay on Williams is fluent and contextualised, announcing its perspective from the outset; we are in no doubt about the lens being used and by the end of the first paragraph all the terms of the topic and the task have been clearly addressed. The essay on *North and South* not only establishes its argument swiftly but draws aptly on a quotation, 'the future must be met, however stern and iron it may be', demonstrating thorough knowledge of the text and invoking relevant textual support for its claim. The essay on *A Room of One's Own* is quickly responsive to the metaphor of 'the grass' and 'the path', leading to a direct engagement with the notion of 'challenge' expressed in the topic, which has been implicitly understood from the outset. The essay on *The Passion* addresses the topic directly, in the opening paragraph, in sophisticated terms that address the nature of historical narrative itself, not only in terms of the way that individual characters present themselves or seem to be.

In Section B, the response on Plath avoids a biographical reading and focuses on the poetry itself, working closely with the language and its resonances through imagery and tone, and shows some overall awareness of the ideas explored in *Ariel*. The essay on Wallace-Crabbe develops a response to the poet's overarching concerns, grounded in the three poems, manifesting close attention not only to detail but also to how the effects are created. The response on Browning looks closely at the verse forms, makes brief but relevant reference to other poems and presents a strong overview of Browning's concerns in the poems, differentiating them carefully. The essay on *Baron in the Trees* adeptly uses the passages in support of a reading of the entire text. It is particularly responsive to the recurring metaphor of the swing and able to trace a development of Cosimo's view throughout the novella.

Sample essays

The following essays are as written by the students. They have not been edited for spelling, punctuation, grammar or factual errors.

Section A Samples

Sample 1

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

Tennessee Williams' seminal play, 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof', closely examines how stringent patriarchal structures ensue profound loneliness and isolation.

As the Pollitt family is presented as a microcosmic depiction of 1950s American society, William's characters are each condemned to personal isolation, due to their fears of deviating from the strict gender roles expected of them. Thus as the destructive malignancy of 'mendacity' and 'pretences' pervades the world of the play, the characters are consumed by an inherent isolation that ultimately devoids them of human connection.

Presenting the concept of gender as directly intertwined with that of biological essentialism, Williams introduces Maggie and Brick in costuming that emphasises their physiques. Presented as physical archetypes of their respective genders, Maggie in a sultry 'slip of ivory and lace' and Brick with solely a 'towel' that reveals him to be 'slim and firm as a boy', are immediately introduced as the typification of American gender expectations. However, as the 'former American athlete' and his highly sexualised wife are revealed to be embroiled in an utterly dysfunctional marriage, they are disclosed to each suffer from a profound isolation engendered

by their fear of deviating from their outward roles, shaped by the cultural values imported on him at 'Ole Miss', and by the deeply engrained cultural homophobia expressed by the likes of Mae, who considers homosexuality as 'not normal'. Maggie's suggestion that Brick's relationship with his recently deceased friend Skipper extended beyond 'clear and pure' friendship sends Brick into a spiral of homosexual panic. As he declines into a litany of homophobic epithets – 'queers, ducking fairies' – it is clear that Brick is fearful of losing the 'early laurel' that his epitomised masculinity earned him. As such, he resorts to 'Echo Spring', and allows alcoholism to utterly detach him from both his familial and marital relationships. Subsequently deprived of Brick's love, Maggie too finds herself, as Williams delineates in his stage notes, 'entirely alone'.

Whilst Brick's fear of failing his masculinity causes his isolation, the women of the play – including Maggie, Big Mama, and Mae – are each confined to the personal pursuit of femininity. Demonstrating an awareness of the performativity of gender, Williams prescribes Maggie a theatricality in her discourse and a lilting voice as she 'rushes to the dressing table before the arrival of her primary audience, the Pollitt family. Claiming she is 'all dressed and announcing 'here they come' at the end of Act 1, Maggie prepares herself for the judgements from her in laws regarding her being 'childless, and therefore worthless'. Exemplifying the way in which Southern misogyny has been imparted on all members of society, is Big Mama as she pejoratively inquires whether Maggie 'makes Brick happy in bed', thus demonstrating how patriarchal expectations has impeded on the same gender bond between women. Her two sons grown up, Big Mama herself finds herself both isolated and fearful for the future, seeing as her biological function as a mother is no longer required. Due to a loss of purpose, Big Mama therefore engages in an exaggerated infantilisation of Brick ('my precious baby') in order to address her fears. Her isolation is perpetuated by Big Daddy's admission that he 'never liked her', and her family's failure to accept her fulfillment of any other role than that prescribed to her – 'you've been gradually taking over'. Even the ubiquitous Mae, who is successful in her role as 'breeder' is rendered a 'grotesque' 'monster of fertility' by her female relatives, who verbally attack her with cat-like 'hissing'. Through exploring the bitter dynamic between female characters, Williams reveals how 1950s patriarchal misogyny renders women to be isolated in their pursuit of traditional feminine perfection, and constantly fearful of the judgement they inevitably receive.

The play's ending ultimately functions to reveal the inescapable nature of the oppressive patriarchy. Under the notion that 'living with someone you love can be lonelier than living entirely alone if the one that you love doesn't love you', Maggie's 'scheme' to 'make the lie [of pregnancy] true', reveals an attempt to fill the void of Brick's detachment with a 'baby' that will enable her to experience human connection once again. However, paradoxically, through producing 'a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy', this vicarious contribution to patriarchal descent will ultimately perpetuate the very system that threatens to ostracise both Maggie and potentially Brick, as the oppressed 'other'. As the curtain falls on an almost violent attempt to fulfil social convention through ingenuine love, Williams suggests that while the patriarchy continues to dictate society, Americans will be dictated by an untameable fear that will ultimately render all individuals to be isolated and deprived of human connection and love.

Thus, Williams positions his 1950s audience to consider the immorality of a societal system that atomizes its population, casting them into a perpetual cycle of fear and isolation.

Sample 2

Nominated text: *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell

In the very title "*North and South*", Gaskell establishes the dichotomy between the more traditional, "stagnant" "South", and the progressive industrialising "North" of England during the Victorian Era. The Hale's relocation to Milton Northern, a place where "North and South [have] met and made friends" exposes Gaskell's intentions in collapsing this binary and promoting progress. Gaskell's frequent use of free indirect discourse blurs the distinction between the

narrative voice and that of favoured protagonist Margaret, encouraging her predominantly middle-class readership to adopt Margaret's perspective. As seen in the authorial assertion that "the future must be met, however stern and iron it may be," Gaskell utilises Margaret as a vehicle for her progressive ideas, insinuating that she endorses the "iron" industrialisation that her "future" would bring. Gaskell's attempts to dissolve binaries extends to the divided social class created by her industrialising era, whom Gaskell attempts to reconcile, as alluded to in the unifying attitudinal epithets of "masters" and "men" in describing the proletariat and the bourgeoisie of Milton-Northern. By collapsing these binaries, Gaskell attempts to advocate for the "progress of commerce" in a manner that abolishes class conflict.

Gaskell presents the plight of the proletariat as a highly culpable factor in her understanding of class conflict, as seen encapsulated by her sympathetic portrayal of Bessy, who has "lived the life of a dog", illuminating her "suff'ring" by comparing her to a "creature" valued as less than human. The "despotism" of the "masters" is thus a factor that Gaskell cannot condone in her progressive ideas. However, Gaskell's aversion to the Marxist notion of revolution as a means of alleviating the "suff'ring" of the proletariat is elucidated in her dehumanising and animalistic depiction of the "fierce growl" of the striking "mob". In using the passive voice to describe the striking men as "poor creatures" "driven mad", Gaskell strips these men of their agency in seeking a more equal balance of power in their society, invalidating their perspective. Gaskell's disdain towards the Marxist beliefs in equal distribution of power and the abolishment of a class hierarchy is further exposed in Mr. Bell's condescending tone as he mockingly accuses Margaret of being a "socialist", Gaskell thereby distinguishing her own ideas as contrary to the Marxist ideology. Gaskell's endorsement of progress and attempts to reconcile class conflict do not therefore ascribe to the Marxist rejection of capitalism, but rather reject only the "cash nexus" system that capitalism enables.

As implied by the inclusive assertion that "we have all of us one human heart," Gaskell advocates for a selective form of progress which involves "giv[ing] the capitalist a Christian conscience". (Lindner). In Margaret's plea that Thornton use his "human hearts" and not his "master's ears," Gaskell endorses compassion over the Marxist idea of equality, insinuating that were the working class to be treated with more respect and care, they would be mollified into accepting their societal subjugation. In John Boucher, Gaskell creates an individual who would not be satisfied with her proposition of a humanitarian form of capitalism, but who would interpret progress as the abolishment of a social hierarchy. Gaskell silences Boucher's views through his act of suicide, denoting him as "sick enough o' living", which was viewed as a cowardly sin in Victorian times, thereby invalidating his perspective in the eyes of her readership, and reinforcing the validity of her own ideas.

By describing Boucher as a "good-for-nothing Judas", Gaskell's allusion to the biblical archetype of betray suggests that by challenging his societal position, Boucher has betrayed the Divine authority of God. Gaskell thus subscribes to the feudal belief that a Divine entity can be responsible for the creation of a social hierarchy. Reverting to this traditional belief in religion as a means of justification of societal subjugation thus undermines the progressive ideas presented in North and South.

During the strike, the men demand higher wages, which Gaskell explains to be impossible due to the "state of trade". By attributing the strike to the "ignorance" of the proletariat, Gaskell implies that the entire conflict could have been avoided, were the men to be better informed. Gaskell therefore attempts to endorse change and simultaneously reconcile class conflict by advocating for "bring[ing] the individuals of the different classes into actual person contact", promoting interaction between the masters and men, yet failing to challenge their societal segregation.

Gaskell's proposed solution of humanitarian capitalism not only enables her predominantly middle-class readership to remain comfortably in their societal superiority, but simultaneously eases their "Christian conscienc[es]" through its claims to abolish "despotism". Essentially, Gaskell presents her readership with a form of progress that defends and preserves the societal hierarchy from which they benefit, yet also allegedly resolves class conflict. However, that

Gaskell's progressive solution of humanitarian capitalism relies on the carefully fabricated events of the novel limits the feasibility of her perspective. For instance, the universal functionality of this humanitarian capitalism is challenged severely by the fact that Gaskell utilises "reconciling lovers" to [heal] "class conflict". Ingham. Furthermore, the relationship between Thornton and Higgins, representing the interaction between "masters' and men," only occurs as a result of both mens' mutual sympathy for Boucher's children after his death. That Thornton's dining hall "experiments", which encapsulates Gaskell's "social vision" (Lindner), depends entirely upon the "chivalry" of these two individuals exposes the idealistic and naïve of Gaskell's "progress[ive]" ideas.

While Gaskell attempts to navigate the challenge of class conflict, in her advocacy for change, her ideas are significantly inhibited by their idealistic and condescending nature. That Gaskell's proposed solution of humanitarian capitalism cannot function beyond the world of her carefully constructed fictional world, and ultimately condones societal subjugation and the presence of a class hierarchy, undermines the validity of her perspective and ideas in reconciling class antagonisms.

Sample 3

Nominated text: *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf

In her essay, "A Room of One's Own", Virginia Woolf confronts a society in which women are treated as "second-class citizens, and thus denied access to financial independence and "a room of one's own", inhibiting their creative expression. Woolf insists that in order to usurp this patriarchal dominance, women must discover and express their individual creative voices, and thus solidify themselves in fiction and the wider social conscience.

Woolf utilises metaphor to exemplify the ways in which women are denied access to equal rights in a society in which social progress is sorely necessary. The "beadle" who casts Woolf's narrator from the "grass" of equality towards the "path" of societal convention, sending her "little fish" of creative inspiration "into hiding" in the process, functions as a symbol for toxic masculinity and its dominating influence in a society founded on male supremacy. Deemed to be of 'less value' than men, women are thus forced like the "willows" to "weep in perpetual lamentation" and "part for the rower", to shape their physical and emotional identities around their usefulness to the opposite sex. As noted by the critic Delaney, they are therefore coralled into the claustrophobic domestic roles of 'wife, mother, housekeeper,' and subsequently subjugated from their own sense of personal identity. Woolf condones the necessity of marriage in order to obtain her required "financial security", as she insists that it functions as a perpetuating factor in the cycle of the repression of female voices. The ability to ignite one's creative spark, and thus solidify their voice in the social conscience, requires more than "snatched moments between cooking and cleaning" (Delaney). Thus Woolf highlights how through the confining nature of their socially defined roles, women are robbed of the opportunity to unearth their creative voices and thus initiate social change as they are "bartered and sold" (Delaney) like slaves, like material goods, in marriage.

It is through this cycle of suppression of the female spirit, Woolf insists, that women are kept subservient and thus unable to challenge social expectations and initiate change. As exemplified by her "kindly librarian" who bars the narrators access to education due to her lack of a "male escort", Woolf condones a society in which female voices are given little merit, whilst male voices prosper. Thus, female stories are communicated through the "masculine gaze", perpetuating a culture in which women are valued only through their utility to men. As noted by the critic Purandya, the portrayal of women as "rulers of kings and conquerors" in fiction due to their sexual prowess only serves to accentuate the suffering of women in reality. This perverse portrayal of female power contributes to the rigidity of the stereotypical feminine roles and thus allows the enslavement of and silencing of female voices to continue. In the case of women whom do succeed in producing creative works, Woolf acknowledges the deleterious quality of internalised rage and it's influence on creative expression. She insists that women who write in

defiance of masculine standards write “badly” and thus their work suffers just as if they had written in concurrence with masculine standards. Woolf exemplifies this point through the author Charlotte Bronte, whom she deems to be in the possession of “more natural genius” than Jane Austen, and yet as producing work of less merit than the latter due to the evident quality of suppressed anger which permeates her works. Woolf thus condones a society in which through the dominating influence of male supremacy, women’s work is tarnished by sordid emotions which they have been instructed to internalise. It is nothing more than “the fact that they were born women” (Delaney) which brings about this suffering. Woolf thus encourages women to rise above such bias and subvert social expectation by writing not as one sex or in defiance of another but as “man-womanly”, as balanced and androgynous in mind. She insists that it is only through reaching this state of equilibrium that women can truly release their full creative potential, reinstating the feminine voice in fiction and in the public psyches and thus induce social change.

Despite her acknowledgement of the suffering of her educated, middle-class audience and the necessity of challenging social expectations in order to inspire social changes, Woolf remains blind to the suffering of the working class and their inability to gain her specified “500 a year and a room of one’s own”. In a flippant tone indicative of her privileged position as a middle-class Caucasian citizen, Woolf remarks that “genius is not born amongst uneducated, servile people... It is not born today amongst the working classes.” She herself thus fails to challenge society’s expectations, deeming class a regulatory factor in one’s possession of genius and thus ability to initiate social change. What Woolf fails to recognise is that it is not the possession of genius and thus potential to influence societal convention which is determined by one’s class, but the ability of an individual to actualise said genius. Deeming Woolf’s titular statement and specificities of “financial security” and “a room with a lock on the door” in order to create reputable fiction and thus challenge social norms “too presumptuous”, Purandya draws on the example of Phyllis Wheatley. An African-American woman, Wheatley was “a slave who owned not even herself,” (Purandya), and yet whom still succeeded in creating reputable fiction, expressing her creative voice and thus sparking the potential for social progress. She, ‘like many women’ (Purandya) thus exists outside Woolf’s physical and emotional requirements. Hence, although insisting for the necessity of defying convention, bows to societal influence herself.

Ultimately, Woolf’s “A Room of one’s own” is a call to arms, encouraging women to defy the suffocating claustrophobic influence of their domestic roles. Despite her disregard for the working class, Woolf ultimately implores women to unleash their true creative voices and thus strive towards a future society founded not on male supremacy but upon equality.

Sample 4

Nominated text: *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson

Jeanette Winterson’s satirical perception of history in ‘*The Passion*’ identifies and deconstructs the false pretenses on the objective nature of the recounting of the past. The romanticising of powerful leaders and the idolisation of the past demonstrate how the past may not truly be what it seems to be. The presence and acknowledgement of the Grand Narrative allows Winterson to explore and display the false nature of history, and reveal the depth of its deception.

The rampant idolisation of power in the text only leads France to ruin, revealing the dangers of assuming all is as powerful as they appear to be. Henri is one of the “lukewarm people” of France, and like the rest is easily enraptured by the god-like status of Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte “wrings France ... like a sponge” with the public’s approval, as he has “turned his passion...into [their] own”. However, as Henri matures, he perceives that in truth “it was a mess.” Winterson’s initial presentation of a historically heroic figure as inconsiderate, egotistical and a disaster, shatters readers’ preconceptions of this era, asserting that there is more to the truth than what is known. Furthermore, the false leadership of Napoleon is identified by Henri, as he believed Napoleon would “end all wars for ever”, but France had instead been dragged

from “one conflict...to the next”. As he deserts, Domino writes “Future. Crossed out,” which is “what war does”. Winterson attacks the blind following of power and asserts that it is the cause of all downfall. Parallels can be drawn to the increasing tension of the world in the 1980s, as conservative leaders rose to power promising great futures, and who believe the “spread of communism anywhere was a threat to democracy everywhere.” As such, through the manipulation of characters, Winterson pleads for society not to follow without understanding, as the true agenda of such powerful figures is unknown.

The presentation of the Grand Narrative and its influence on the past throws into jeopardy the believability of its subjective truths. When asked who Henri would fight, he responds simply “the enemy”, without understanding the true implications of conflict. A sign of maturity in Henri is his acknowledgment that, with Napoleon, “everyone was the enemy”. This understanding reveals the true nature of the Grand Narrative, as a depiction of history with grand conquest and dramatic failures that abstained from the true horrors of war. Winterson criticises the Grand Narrative as being the cause of social demise, inspiring recklessness and leading to disaster. Additionally, the common terms of “war, famine, death” are presented as “lock and key words” that “keep the pain at bay”. Thus, Winterson’s revealing presentation of the Grand Narrative destroys the solid beliefs of readers, forcing them to question whether it is the truth that they have been told. Winterson perceived the path of society as following similar footprints, and promotes the idea that to change, the cyclic nature of history must be disrupted.

The romanticisation of the past throughout the text further confronts whether history can truly be objective. When Henri initially joins the army, he maintains a diary in order to “remember how [he] felt” during these times. Domino is critical of this as he believes that as Henri develops he will “think differently” of the events that transpire and his limited perception. Winterson harnesses this innocent naivety to plant the idea that perception of history transforms with the episteme, or understanding of the times. In the Zero Winter, the diary is gone, and the men have “cut out their hearts” in order to survive devoid of compassion. Through this binary approach, the reminiscence on their homes, which “cess to become a place [they] quarrelled as well as loved”. Thus, through the false perceptions of this objective approach, Winterson suggests the impossible nature of truly seeing history, as such perception will always evolve. History is a subjective view of the past by the current social episteme, and thus is never what it truly seems to be.

The presence of the supernatural appearing as commonplace reinforces the concept that history may not be as it seems. Villanelle is born with the “webbed feet of a boatman”, which implies that such feats are not unusual, if only for the men. Her mother faints but her father is a “man of the world” and is unfazed. Through the inclusion of the supernatural in a satirical alternate history texts, Winterson illustrates the false nature of history itself, and reminds readers that the text itself is fiction. Furthermore, Henri’s fascination with the “mermaids in the Channel” is portrayed as an innocent fantasy. After the disaster of the “drowned” men, such a belief appears as a coping mechanism for his survivors’ guilt, as “the mermaids won’t be lonely anymore.” Through mixing fantastic and mundane aspects into one cohesive narrative of history, Winterson reinforces the notion that one’s perception of history is thwarted by the mysticism of the Grand Narrative, asserting that there is more to know in order to acquire a true perception.

Conclusively, Winterson objectively defies preconceived understandings of history, attempting to direct readers to doubt and question the path of society by portraying a realistic yet inately malicious depiction of the respected historical figure Napoleon Bonaparte. The influence of the Grand Narrative on diverting society is exposed and the dangers of forgetting the mistakes of the past are all capitalised on to assert that everything is not quite as it may seem.

Section B Samples

Sample 1

Nominated text: *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath

The sombre assertion “Perfection is terrible” prefaces a scathing critique of 1960s social mores that suggested that expression of womanhood is most suitably exemplified in external beauty, as captured in the metaphor of the superficially attractive yet lifeless “Mannequins”. Such societal values, the speaker suggests, exudes a chilling sterility evinced by the assonant “cold as snow breath”, an image of the natural becoming corrupted. And so, the insistently villified “it”, the cultural script for femininity, is imbued with a violent quality connoted by “tamps”, effacing the female identity into a reductive model of outward aesthetics. The listless monotony of such existence is aurally evoked by the repetition of phrases and dragging assonance. “The tree of life and the tree of life... month after month, ... the blood flood is the flood of love”. Hence the oxymoronic “sulphur loveliness” evokes both a sense of superficial allure and a crippling toxicity in the image of the domesticated woman whose “smiles” evoke the archetype of Dame Kindness in “Kindness”, a personification of the unnatural ideals of womanhood. And yet in the yearning cry “O the domesticity of these windows” we sense the poetic voice oscillating between a critique of cultural scripts for womanhood and a paradoxical desire to conform to the reified domestic idyll tantalizingly evoked by “the baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery”. And so, while Plath makes highly suspect the sustainability of the 1960s image of the ideal woman, she nonetheless acknowledges the deceptively attractive model of a housewife happy and content in the domestic sphere.

*Yet there is undeniably a celebration of female fertility in Passage Three, condemning the surreal straightness of “silver sticks” which stand in antithesis to a pregnant roundness. But while Plath undoubtedly celebrates the ability of women to birth new life, Passage One evokes the debilitating tensions which plague the state of maternity, suggestion even in the title – while “morning” traditionally represents new hope and life, the possible pun on the homophonic mourning evinces an antithetical lamentation of a form of death, most likely that of the mother whose identity becomes effaced at the birth of a child. Indeed, while the child is described with metaphors of physical objects – “fat gold watch”, “New statute” – evoking a sense of weight and solidity, the parents “stand round blankly”, with the adverb’s connotations of effacement identifying parenthood as a precarious state at risk of attenuation. And so, the speaker of Passage One seems to struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self, mirroring the destructive impacts of stifling social mores as explicated in Passage Three, where a gradual erosion of identity is evinced by the fragmented body parts – “Hands...broad toes” – in a manner that echoes the deconstruction of the self in “Lady Lazarus”. Thus Plath seeks to explicate through *Ariel*, a collection fraught with female identities facing a confronting erosion of the self, as in “Sheep in Fog” and “The Night Dances”, a protestation of a tortured female identity afflicted by both the at times attenuating role of both motherhood and a social atmosphere that places a debilitating focus on exterior appearance.*

And yet we sense in Passage One a palpable emotional shift from an exploration of the oddities of the maternal identity to an effusive motherly affection. Indeed, the strangely detached tone in “your bald cry took its place among the elements” is transformed into a celebration of a baby’s delicacy in the soft alliteration of “moth-breath”. There seems, then, in the uplifting potentialities captured in the verb “rise”, a motherly hope in begetting something pure and beautiful, despite the mother being subject to the corrupting ideals of her society. Indeed the transition of a “bald cry” into a comforting “handful of notes” is suggestive of boundless possibilities, unlike the mother, who is “cow-heavy” from the “Victorian nightgown”, which evokes the historical subjugation of women into a state of subservience and passivity. Such a celebration of the innocence of a child is reflected also in Passage Two, where the perfect rhyme of “babies’ hair” and “lair” lends the stanza a comforting aural quality. And so, while Plath explores ominous tensions of motherhood in her poetry, she expresses also the boundless joy and fulfilment found in the “love gift” of children, which could perhaps redeem the female subject from the afflictions and pains of womanhood in the 1960s.

Yet in the paired but yearning cry “O love, O celibate”, the poetic voice of *Passage Two* expresses a human struggle in the face of pain and suffering. Though the poem superficially establishes an initial mood of “Love”, the enjambment placing emphasis on “Suddenly” and the repetition “turns, turns” signals a precipitous change. Readers are submerged into a metaphorical terrain fraught with the speaker’s pain and anxieties, where natural imagery – “pods of the laburnum” – and urban imagery – “The streetlight splits through the rat’s tail”, both evoke a sinister ominousness, thus crafting a mausoleum with no escape. And yet the speaker adopts a tone of contrived optimism in the anaphora: “I am flushed and warm. I think I may be enormous, I am so stupidly happy”. Such a forced buoyancy is inevitably stripped away in the “thick grey death soup” of depression and uncertainties, as the elongated lines of the first half of the poem devolve into clipped, aborted sentences: “And the wall of old corpses. I love them. I love them like history”.

If in the first half of the poem the speaker expresses her anxieties through various metaphors, the end of the poem contains explicit, poignant lamentations of grief “Nobody but me walks the waist-high wet”. But in the final allusion to “the mouths of Thermopylae”, the poem ends with a resounding tone of defiance in the face of betrayal and potentially death. Thus, Plath evokes hope for a transcendent female spirit able to rise above the confining fetters of societal expectations and become liberated much like the titular *Ariel*, who is at last freed from Prospero.

Sample 2

Nominated text: *New and Selected Poems*, Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Grappling for meaning in a fickle world, Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s *‘New and Selected Poems’* sees the poet undertake an epistemological quest for a deeper, clearer reality. With a distinct reverence for the natural world, Wallace-Crabbe confronts existential insecurity as he eschews binary cognition instead rejoicing in that which is unknown.

Dualisms and dichotomies allegorically pervade Wallace-Crabbe’s oeuvre, as he expounds the many facets of the human experience. Titularly presaging such an exploration, ‘In Light and Darkness’ employs intense chiaroscuro imagery of “darkness” and “daylight” to suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive, instead existing in harmonious concord. Wallace-Crabbe’s implementation of both a ‘high’ and ‘low’ register linguistically parallels the co-existence of these seemingly dissonant forces, as he utilises colloquial phrases, such as “no wonder”, to offset some of his more eloquent, yet grimmer musings on the inevitability of “tomorrow’s choosing”. Moreover, ‘In Light and Darkness’ features a thematic collide between the secular and the spiritual, as the poet’s overt agnosticism pervades his verse. Decisively stating that “gods must be changeable”, Wallace-Crabbe conflates the capriciousness of his spirituality with the ever-changing character of the environment. As such, the poet seeks to attribute tangible meaning to that which we “cannot govern”. His use of natural imagery furthers his examination of religion as the “garden where time itself was congealing” provides an evocation of the Biblical Garden of Eden, as the poet implies that his search for meaning is perennial. Significantly, Wallace-Crabbe’s penultimate decision to “breathe this polluted air and rejoice with the birds” suggests that, while “no one ... endures darkness of daylight entirely”, hope is a prevailing force, acting to counteract the looming “cold” that is heralded by the inevitability death. Thus, the concluding sentiment that “we will neither be simple nor clear till the end of our days”, although ostensibly ambiguous, provides a resounding voice of hope and optimism.

Revisiting the dichotomous forces of “lightness” and “darkness”, “Sunset Sky Near Coober Pedy” confronts that which is “pos and neg”, creating a crowded aesthetic experience to eschew such binary concepts. The sensory overload conjured by the opening evocation of “apricot radiation”, “streak, dash, fluff” demonstrates the visual and verbal play characteristic of the poet’s collection. Aurally, the consonance of the drawn-out ‘r’ sound in the following line, “whorled blurring of a burned edge” emulates a quiet ‘revving’ sound, helping to contextualise the scene within “Coober Pedy”, a mining town.

Yet, while the vivid sunset sky occupies a distinctly Australian landscape, Wallace-Crabbe reflects that the ‘streaking and massing’ image reflects “versions of Crete (and) New Britain”, conveying a unique awareness of the increasingly globalised culture in which we live. This ‘chequered’ culture is mirrored in Wallace-Crabbe’s employment of seemingly dissonant words; “wool, flax, gelato, soapy froth”, as his poem manifests as an etymological examination of the perceived boundaries of language.

With the extravagance of the “mural” overwhelming the poet, its “tune ... hard to hear, he arrives at a conclusion similar to that of ‘In Light and Darkness’, “the meaning of what they are is merely IS”. Here, with characteristic ontological uncertainty, the abstract and the concrete merge, as the poet ultimately accepts the scene of “powderblue ... incandescent copper”, relishing in what it has to offer without actively pursuing a definitive answer to the question it engenders.

Wallace-Crabbe’s holistically hopeful tone is further evoked in “Now That April’s Here”, in which he venerates the vitality heralded by Spring. The energetic alliteration of the ‘p’ in “pastelled, peagreen, purplish-pink” conjures a popping sound in order to represent the proliferation of new life brought by the arrival of a new season. As this new life replaces that which was once “monotone”, Wallace-Crabbe subtly recognises the omnipresence of “light” and “dark”/ “pos and neg”, as he suggests that it is the former that ultimately persists and triumphs in “the goodness of earth”.

The personification of fauna sees the poet employ his common trope of a didactic streak as he instructs the reader to “listen: the almond has something white to announce”. Here, the speaker promotes a connection with the natural world, in turn, fostering a “hunger for difference” and an openness to “new attitudes”. Wallace-Crabbe further assimilates the proliferation of the environment to his own ontology as “confusion (fires his) mind”. This almost exasperated willingness to embrace that which is not absolute speaks both to the humility of the poet, and his overall *modus operandi*; to eschew concrete solutions to that which is metaphysically ambiguous. As such, Wallace-Crabbe’s quest for “crystalline standards” culminates in his exposition of the multi-faceted human experience and the ways in which it is paralled in the natural world.

Sample 3

Nominated text: *Selected Poems*, Robert Browning

In Robert Browning’s anthology *Men and Women*, humanity and its fallibilities permeate all facets of life, rendering fulfillment unattainable. The poetry is largely cast in the detached context of Renaissance and pastoral Italy, to remove from it the potential to critique the Victorian era. Rather, the dramatic monologues are largely concerned with the interiority of the characters and are inconclusive. Within this, Browning demonstrates the way that art and one’s own mind can restrict humans from contentedness. These personas are left in an undesirable and recrudescence state. Resolution is only offered through the realisation of life’s ephemerality, and how reveling in its fleeting, and tender moments is ultimately far more satisfying.

In the poem ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ the disjunction between piety and the enticing nature of the human experience is expressed through the art of the persona Lippi. His inability to depict ‘soul’ despite the beauty of his paintings leaves him in a state of permanent dissatisfaction. Lippo’s dramatic monologue is distinct due to its colloquial vigour. The monk speaks in iambic pentameter, the meter closest to natural speech when caught “at an alley’s end” in the Florentine red light district. This lasciviousness and penchant for “sportive ladies” undermines his role as a holy man. Rather, his use of blank verse demonstrates an uncommon freedom and disregard for morality. So, while his affiliation to “the good fat father”, whose name bears a triplet evocative of the holy trinity ties him to faith, Lippo describes the monastic life with duplicitous imagery. “The warm serge and the rope that goes all round” utilises an image of comfort and warmth – the monastery is a practical place of refuge that has allowed the young orphaned Lippo to survive. However, a double entendre is evident in the constricting image of the ‘rope that goes around’.

He feels stifled by the expectation of piety, and this is particularly evident in his art. The line “Lord they’d have taught me Latin in pure waste!” particularly demonstrates his rejection of the religious linguistic purism of ‘ad font es’ Latin. Instead, the monk turns to the cliché love song “flower o’ the clove / all the Latin I construe is amo’ I love!” The song is coupled, and it is one that initially lures him to satiate his desires among the ‘earthly’ people. Rather than evoking Christ, it is distinctly human; and provides an insight into the human experience of Lippo. From his childhood, he noises the duplicity of man. The juxtaposition of the pure image of the “candle to the sacrament” with the “will wink” emphasises this finding. Moreover, the phrase is alliterated – demonstrating a playful beauty that Lippo notices not in the sacrament, but the character of the “gentleman” himself. The art of the monk is thus reflective of his lived experience. The fragmented imagery of “faces”, “legs and arms” and “eyes and nose” create an ekphrastic parallel to his art. The language is wild, unruly and imperfect, just like the humanity which is his subject. However, the jarring interjection “nay” – by the Prior marks a shift in tone. Rather than express the beauty of humanity itself, the monastery wishes to construct “a front on [the church] that ought to be!” The sanitised connotations of only painting “soul” are unattainable to the painter. Its image is rigid and lacks the vivacity of humanity. Because of this, like the dissatisfied painter in ‘Andrea del Sarto’, Lippo remains unfulfilled despite his talents. His character is in fact, modelled on the successful Renaissance painter Fra Filippo Lippi, however, the conclusion that “a pretty picture [is] gained” denotes his melancholy state. The alliteration demonstrates the superficial beauty without true substance. Instead, like the recrudescence of the psyche of the monk in ‘Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister’, the “grey beginning” marks the return to daylight – and the desires of the prior – marking Lippo’s cyclical state of discontent.

The monk in ‘Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister’ remains in a permanent state of spite and unfulfillment due to the way he imposes judgment onto himself. The dramatic monologue allows the reader closely into the interiority of the monk who obsessively indicts Brother Lawrence. Moreover, the title ‘Soliloquy’ pertains not only to the psychological unveiling, but bears performative and Shakespearean allusions that question the persona’s honesty. Initially, however, the vitriolic claim charged against Lawrence “God’s blood, would not mine kill you!” appears to convey an authentic and revealing insight into his interiority. However, the structured meter and ABAB rhyming couplets tie the charged hellish imagery “hell dry you up with its flames!” within the neat bounds of syntax. His anger doesn’t appear wholly organic. Rather, he utilises the Latin invocation “salve tibi” with menacing sarcasm to contain his wrath within a particularly religious trope. His claim against Lawrence becomes particularly questionable through the imagery of the “dead eye glow”. In this moment, the persona voyeuristically injects himself into the scene of “blue-black lustrous [tresses] thick like horsehairs”. His vivid description of “brown Dolores” and “Sanchicha” act to indict the speaker himself. Moreover, the the aside “(that is, if he’d let it show!)” removes blame from Lawrence. The moment also contains double entendre. It reveals that within the already intimate space of a dramatic monologue, the persona feels the need to hide within the secrecy of an aside, the shape of which mimics the arch of a Cloister. The persona is thus one who is afraid of judgement and actively hides from it. However, as the poem continues, his ability to conceal himself unravels. The structural atrophy of the lines “knife and fork he never lays / cross-wise, to my recollection” which are enjambed demonstrate the collapse of his facade, as well as the waning validity of his claims. The sins he describes are farical, and the persona desperately tries to hide behind them and the pious image of “the cross”. However, the intertextual biblical link to the “twenty-nine distinct damnations” is an invented one. The attempts to sabotage Lawrence with “my [his own] scrofulous French novel” demonstrate a failed ability to suppress himself. The result is a caustic one. The monk turns back to hellish invocations of “Satan” evident in the opening of the poem. It is similar to the pensive state of persona in ‘The Bishop orders his tomb at St Praxed’s Church’, who is caught in a liminal space between life and death. His obsession with physical markers of wealth trap him in a state that is unfulfilling and appears to bar him from actually achieving the eternal peace of death. While the vitriolic monk is not dying, his cyclical state of self hatred is denoted by the guttural onomatopoeia “grr” which bookends the poem. His obsession is corruptive – rendering him in an inescapable state of discontent.

Contrastingly to the two suppressed personas, the speaker in 'confessions' offers resolution through a celebratory outlook on life and its flawed humanity. The persona's dramatic monologue is constructed to emphasise the delicate state of "coming to die". The notion is macabre, and through the intertextual reference to the prayer 'Hail Holy Queen' – posits the typical view of life as one "through a vale of tears". However, the voice of the persona is soothing and the playful ABAB rhyme scheme negates the restrictive moralism created by the presence of the "reverend" by the bedside. The holy man's impact on the persona is elucidated through the incessant onomatopoeia "buzzing" – one that is irritating, however, negligent. Thus, all of the corporeal elements, including the "physic bottles" which symbolically confine him along "the table's edge" are disregarded. The persona, in fact, transforms them into topographical markers of memory, where the "bottle labelled ether" particularly serves as a double entendre. It is primarily "the house o'er topping all" – invoking a transcendental transportation to the past. It is also an anaesthetic-mirroring the persona's anaesthetised state to moralism. Rather, his memory is liberating. Romantic imagery of "old June weather" acts as pathetic fallacy – as the speaker is at ease in the past despite his affair with "a girl [being] improper". He is able to metaphorically escape the ocular imagery of "eyes in the house" which emulate judgement, through the evasive verbs "you crept" and "to dodge". Their evanescent nature is reminiscent of the quickly escaping nature of a memory. However, while the persona in 'Youth and Art' similarly steps into her romantic past – she does not view its passing with the same contentment. Her speech is tinged with regret as she "missed it, lost it all". The dying persona, however, revels in the memory. The elevated location of "the attic" emphasises its purity. Moreover, the line "how sad and bad and mad it was—" is imbued with a rhythmic triplet that upends the negative connotations of the word. Rather than returning to a state of dissatisfaction as the Spanish monk and Lippo do, the speaker concludes with a liberated satisfaction "but then, how it was sweet!" His ability to recognise life's evanescent nature, and find beauty in the brief yet emotive moments is what allows him to attain satisfaction.

Browning's anthology thus constructs a pensive recrudescence that cautions the Victorian reader from seeking static contentment. The transient nature of life disallows such pursuits. Instead, it is the fleeting moments of the human experience, and an acceptance of their impermanence that allows true fulfillment.

Sample 4

Nominated text: *The Baron in the Trees*, Italo Calvino

Italo Calvino in his novel *Baron in the Trees*, explores a surreal world of duality. In defiance against conventionality and traditional "obsessions", Cosimo occupies a pendulum between the enlightened isolation of nature and community driven altruism rooted in the world from which he escaped. Through awe-filled ties to love and practical utilitarianism, the young Baron balances the prisms of satisfaction and resignation resulting from a lifestyle of unorthodoxy.

In passage one, Calvino allegorically encapsulates the world Cosimo inhabits. The symbolism of Viola's swing aptly illustrates Cosimo's fluctuations in philosophical proximity to the world he lives above. Cosimo's description of Viola's feet "touching the earth" being Viola's property and her "in the air" being Cosimo's property, not only demonstrates the expansiveness of his kingdom but also his intrinsic unity with the elements. In Cosimo's resolute ownership of the "branches" and "leaves against the sun", the coupling with his internal monologue rejecting "claims to dukedom" create a line between progressive philosophy and the natural world. This concept mimics the sentiments of passage two, describing Cosimo's "disconnected instinct, as if he were a bird". The ingrained passions of enlightened living with practical "knowledge" is further explicated in this passage. The symbiotic altruism of applying utilitarian values to the community below, Cosimo reveals his innate practicality and links of this to an utopian vision. This is evident in the fusion of nature and work; "pruning trees", with their "irregular maze of twigs", and the "crystalline air" along with the "clip! clip! of shears". The microscopic imagery of nature, combined with the stimulating onomatopoeia of his tools, create a viscerally enhanced

description paralleling Cosimo's "love for this arboreal element". The antipathy of the "hurting, wounding and amputating" severity in thought and rivalance, with the contrasting "growth" and "careful" mastery of trade provides another layer to the complex spectrum of worldly rejection and skillful cohesion with the separated world. Like Viola's swing, stuck in fluctuation between worldly and other-worldly contact, Cosimo's lifestyle is reliant on solitary "lopping" off of traditional conventions and subsequent benevolent immersion in the system spawning them. The crux of Cosimo's dogma rests in the want to "serve not only the interests of the owner", a given in Cosimo's altruism, but also "his own". The harmony derived from the physical imagery of "suppression" of the other trees reflects the intrinsic symbiotic elements to Cosimo's actions, benefiting the owner and the traveller. Further summed up by the blending of "directly helpful" self-preservation with being a "friend to [Cosimo's] neighbour, to nature and to himself" convey the resourceful utilitarianism integral to Cosimo's enlightened ideology.

While Cosimo is seen to gain satisfaction through his unconventional lifestyle in passage one and most of two, passage three unveils the sorrow and disillusionment of an enlightened world. The love that was a source of motivation for Cosimo's defiance for years is seen to devolve into a reason for pain. The conviction of Cosimo's utopian living, is reduced to "wandering aimlessly" and "destructive violence". In the visceral connections and respect of the natural elements, Cosimo instead laments in front of natural decay, the "stripped till bare" trees in which Cosimo's beliefs rest on convey disillusionment not only with the love he lost, but with the lifestyle he relies on. The "whites of ghostly wounds" instead of portraying intense love of the natural world, inspire horror. The subsequent linking of personal values of Cosimo with the intense emotions of love create vulnerability in Cosimo's utopia, providing a side of enlightened life filled with dissatisfaction and emotional isolation. Along with the bleak decay of nature, and through this progressive ideology in passage three, passage two also conveys the transience of enlightened satisfaction. The "improvident greed" and "careless generations" incongruent to Cosimo's enlightenment, reveal further the opposition to social ideals and benevolent change. This can in ways reflect Calvino's own disillusionment with the Italian communist party.

Above all, Cosimo's individualism is upheld. The narrative disharmony in Biagio's perception of him "really [going] mad" conveys Cosimo's singularity in ideas and convictions. Like the trees that "made up ... for [Cosimo's] loss of strength", his singular connection to the natural world is unparalleled, and outlives the perceptions of those unmasked by enlightened philosophy.