

Examiners' Report

Summer 2016

Pearson Edexcel IAL in English
Literature (WET01) Unit 1: Post-2000
Poetry and Prose

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Introduction

This paper has two equally weighted sections, A and B, to be completed in two hours. Students are required to write one essay for each section. The assessment objectives tested are as follows: AO1, AO2 and AO4 in Section A which requires students to choose one of the two questions offered on *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry 2002 – 2011*; AO1, AO2 and AO3 in Section B which requires students to choose one of the two questions offered on their set novel.

The difference in Assessment Objectives tested means that the poetry answer needs to be a comparative essay, addressing AO4 ("explore connections across literary texts") whereas the novel essay needs to address AO3 ("demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received."). These requirements are clearly flagged up in the questions, the Section A questions on this paper this summer beginning with the injunction "compare the ways in which..." and the section B questions have the reminder "In your answer, you must consider relevant contextual factors."

As will be seen later in this report, the requirement to offer useful context points in answers sometimes caused students problems; it was a common feature across all the set texts that less successful responses either failed to address context at all, or handled it inappropriately by not relating knowledge of context to the text in an appropriate literary way. The best answers were able to demonstrate how their understanding and interpretation of a text was enhanced by an appreciation of the period in which it was written or by different receptions over time, or across different cultures. Context, of course, does not have to be about history – the different ways in which different readers respond to a text is significant too, and the assessment objective is about contexts in which texts are received as well as those in which they are written.

Overall there was some very interesting writing about both poetry and novels which showed a real engagement with the texts.

Section A

Question 1 was the more popular choice here, with many answers showing real engagement with *You Shiva and My Mum* sensing the awe in which the poet describes her adventurous eighty year old parent. Some of the best answers were able to make sense of the third person in the poem – the person mentioned specifically in the last stanza in "the miracle / Of your breath in my ear?" but sensed throughout the poem as a whole with its series of questions addressed to him/her. One answer suggested that "the narrator wants a miracle, just like the miracle of her mother travelling to India, to happen between her and her boyfriend / husband." Although this is rather speculative and might not be exactly what the poem is saying, the idea of a miracle is a good one and shows a sensitive reading. Successful answers were able to make useful points about structure here, others struggled rather more – "each stanza alternates, and this shift can reflect

the mother's journey as she climbed up a rock side" seems a rather too literal reading. Students often find it difficult to write about structure – "Padel uses no rhymes to hint at how natural her relationship with her mother feels" is again a response that feels rather forced, as if the student has to say something about rhyme at all costs.

Because comparison is so important in this section of the paper, the best answers made wise choices of a second poem, without simply falling back on a poem they knew best, and made links throughout the answer rather than simply writing two shorter essays, one on each poem, which would fail to attract AO4 marks. *Effects and Material* were popular choices and worked well. The best answers were often the ones most able to judge the tone of the poems they were looking at. It is not easy to write about but credit was given for listening to the poems, sensitivity of response and noting when the tone of a poem changes.

Fewer students tackled question 2, perhaps because they saw Turnbull's *Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn*, with its references to Keats' famous ode and, in contrast, the modern British urban setting, as more challenging. Students who could not pick up on these references were less successful, struggling to make sense of the poem. There was room for different interpretations – some answers saw the poem as celebrating youth culture without irony, others saw that beauty was in the eye of the beholder, others found irony and humour in the poem. As with all answers, interpretations that were backed up appropriately with clear reference to the text were rewarded. A popular choice for comparison was O'Driscoll's *Please Hold*. Again the best answers were ones that spotted differences of mood and tone within the same poem – "internal rhyming in the last stanza also provides a sense of a never-ending cycle. The words 'told', 'old,' 'cold' may at first seem humorous and arbitrary, but beneath those words lies foreshadowing – the narrator seems to suggest that he will grow cold and old while waiting for the apathetic robot to understand his needs."

Section B

The Kite Runner was by far the most popular text chosen in this section, with again a strong majority of answers being on the first question. This may be because a question on forgiveness and forgiving oneself is so clearly central to the novel as a whole and may be therefore familiar ground for students, but there were some excellent answers on the second question – "at first sight this is a story about men and boys. But look more closely. It has a great deal to say about women." Answers that did not simply talk about one character after another and overlook context (some, unfortunately, did this) gave interesting insights into the novel. Especially impressive were the answers that picked up on the suggestion in the assertion that the novel's being about men only might be a misleading first and superficial impression – "it is true that the novel is populated by male characters, but it is far from removed in commentary about women. Hosseini's novel is very sensitive to the ways Afghan customs and perceptions affect women..." makes the point nicely. There was plenty of

opportunity for a context response here too. One essay began by referring to an interview given by Hosseini in which he claims he wrote *The Kite Runner* as a story of a "father-son" bond and, feeling it did not have as much of a role for women in it, was inspired to write *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depicting the relationship between mother and child. All this gives the essay a chance to address the issues and although there are no specific AO5 ("other interpretation") marks for this paper, engaging with the terms of the assertion in the question, and not necessarily agreeing with it, always helps to achieve a robust argument for the essay as a whole, rewarded under AO1 as an "informed, personal and creative response".

Some answers to question 1, the most popular choice on the whole paper, were disappointing because they were too narrative. Forgiveness is a topic that will have been talked about in class and so be familiar ground to students; some answers overlooked the part of the question which asked about "forgiving oneself" or did this simply by saying what happens. The small number of students who wrote about *Life of Pi* had clearly enjoyed the narrative strength of the novel but often found it difficult to break away from excessive narrative themselves and introduce the all-important contextual element. The most popular choice was the question that gave an assertion that the novel was simply a "happy story about survival"; the injunction that followed however asked students to explore the ways in which Martel takes the story beyond survival. "Ways in which" is a phrase which underscores the need to write about a writer's craft and it may be useful to ask students how often they use the writer's name in their answers, rather than just the names of the characters in the story. The question about conflicting ideas in the novel had some thoughtful responses, but again these needed to be rooted into an appreciation of context. It is hoped the mark scheme makes the context requirement clear for any who may be in doubt; points such as these are made there:

- The novel's ending presents readers with two conflicting accounts, leading them to decide which they prefer. The two separate stories might be said to represent two separate ways of making sense of the world.
- The political conflict in India. Mrs Gandhi imprisons her rivals; in 1976 the Tamil Nadu government is brought down. As a result of their fears for the future of India, Pi's family decide to emigrate to Canada.
- The story goes beyond survival: it is a search for religion, love, and an ultimate purpose in life.

There were very few answers on *The White Tiger*. Those that were received showed an ability to enjoy, but also criticise, this brilliant book and not to accept at face value its depiction of modern India.

Of the two questions asked on Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn*, the first, which asserted that "the reader is always kept wondering what is going to happen to Eilis next" was overwhelmingly the most popular. So many of the answers however were totally narrative, and ignored the part of the assertion which said "although the writer drops hints" indicating that this is again a question about a writer's craft. The injunction stated "explore the way Toibin develops the character of Eilis" and, if they were not excessively

narrative, a number of answers simply wrote about the character. Again a useful tip for students would be to look in their answers at the number of times they mention Toibin, the author, not just Eilis, the character. Students need to be reminded to write about what writers are doing, and also how their books are read in different times, by different people. The mark scheme makes some comments on possible ways of addressing context here – how the development of Eilis’ character is so dependent on the social, cultural, political situation she finds herself in, and what therefore the novel has to tell us about Ireland and Brooklyn in the 1950s.

A small number of answers wrote about Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. Context was addressed quite well here and there were not so many narrative answers as with *Brooklyn*. The focus of both questions was on “the ways in which Adichie presents...” and when students made this their own focus they did well.

Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

- Address the assessment objectives, making sure you put special emphasis on comparison when writing about poems in Section A and context when writing about your chosen novel in Section B
- Remember the context is not simply writing about history but can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, etc – that influence both the writer and the reader
- Never allow yourself to get carried away by retelling the story – narrative answers are not likely to be successful
- Look carefully at the starting point assertion and the injunction which follows it and make sure your answer does not simply latch on to only part of the question.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

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