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# **Examiners' Report**

## **Principal Examiner Feedback**

**January 2017**

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

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## Introduction

There was a small entry for this unit in January, but congratulations are due to those centres and their candidates who made the most of this paper, tackling it in a way that made good sense by dividing time appropriately between the two equally weighted sections, prioritising the need to compare poems in Section A and giving due weight to considerations of context in Section B.

To recap on the format: this paper has two sections to be completed in two hours. Candidates are required to write one essay for each section. The assessment objectives tested are:

- for Section A (where candidates 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 AO4.
- for Section B (where candidates choose one of the two questions offered on their chosen novel. The novels are modern, lend themselves readily to discussion of contextual issues and are set predominantly in Afghanistan, India, Ireland and the US, Nigeria and, in the case of *Life of Pi*, the Pacific Ocean) AO1, AO2 and AO3.

## Section A

Question 1, which asked candidates to compare the ways in which poets reflect on the past in Ros Barber's *Material* and one other poem from the Anthology, was the more popular of the two choices here, with answers making good links and finding suitable poems for comparison (*Inheritance*, *Effects*, and *To my Nine-Year-Old Self* were the most frequent.) One answer begins:

The poem, *Material* by Ros Barber, provides us with an extremely nostalgic viewpoint on the past and how, comparatively, the present seems insincere and detached. Similarly, Eavan Boland's poem, *Inheritance* also focuses on the past and its continuity, but through an exclusively female line.

This is the kind of opening which works well, setting out ideas clearly and opening up lines of argument that can be developed as the essay proceeds. Similarities and differences are observed and there is sensitivity to the tone of the poems.

The essay goes on to consider the feeling of alienation from the past in both poems: here consideration is given to how the effect is achieved through language (sometimes candidates treat the poems as being primarily involved with themes, focusing on what is said rather than how it is said. Here we have:

The past is given a great sense of innocence and simplicity in both of the poems. The close community in *Material* is described with great familiarity. The speaker references the greengrocer and the dance teacher by name, and goes on to speak of "the friendly butcher". The poet's choice to use "the" butcher emphasises the close, friendly community of her past as well

as depicting how small everything was. All of these shops and people existed in close encounters: it was a time when innocence and small did not mean minimal.

Less high scoring is an answer that divides up the response under subheadings: *Development of themes, Language and Imagery, Poetic Techniques and Tone and Conclusion*. This particular essay has good things to say, for example noting the change of tone in *Material*, arguing it starts with “a happy memory” then speaks of sadness and loss before finishing with “a more optimistic ending” but the essay suffers from a lack of fluency as a result of an excessively formulaic and mechanical approach.

One pleasing aspect of many answers was a neatness of construction: most seem to have been taught to start with an introduction finding similarities and differences between the poems in the first paragraph and end with some sort of conclusion. Conclusions are good in the sense that they show a writer in control of his or her material, leaving the reader with a final, good impression; but candidates should be warned not to waste time making too long a conclusion and consider it may be better to have no conclusion at all than one that simply repeats points that have already been made.

The alternative question offered Burnside’s *History* as a poem for comparison, looking at the ways in which poets write about “the sense of danger”.

Vicki Feaver’s *The Gun* was the usual additional poem, and the better answers were sensitive to the disturbing undercurrent in both poems: candidates explored the imagery in *The Gun* with Death’s “black mouth / spouting golden crocuses” and a number noted the odd juxtapositions in both poems, the innocence of the children playing on the beach alongside the threats from outside, and, as noted in the example below, the oddness of the gun’s ability to “bring a house alive”:

“At first it’s just practice” sounds like the speaker is involving themselves in an innocent practice. However this innocence is juxtaposed with elements of death highlighting the dangerous aspect of the gun when we read, “soon the fridge fills with creatures/that have run and flown.” Again the poet juxtaposes life and death. The creatures were escaping death in running and flying, both elements that connect with life.

## Section B

With the exception of *Brooklyn*, which had a response from one candidate only, *The Kite Runner* and *Life of Pi* were the only texts tackled in this January sitting. There were some excellent answers in response to both questions on *The Kite Runner*. The first question began with this observation:

“The novel constantly tells us about the loss of innocence, not just in individual people but in the wider world.”

The injunction which followed asked candidates to “explore the ways in which Hosseini presents ideas about loss of innocence in the novel.”

There is a strong hint here in the quotation that some contextual awareness is required, and this was clearly forthcoming in most of the answers received.

Successful candidates did not simply treat context as repeating historical fact, but were able to incorporate cultural, intellectual, sociological, political and historical points into their literary response; they were also able to recognise themselves as readers today and how they are personally situated, knowing that “the context in which literary texts are ... received” is also a significant part of AO3.

One strong answer begins:

In Hosseini’s presentation of the loss of innocence in the novel, there is a distinct violence that underlines each event where innocence is lost; the innocence of childhood, of Afghanistan and of Hassan and Amir’s friendship are all lost in violent acts, signifying the tragedy and huge impact that it has on people and places.

Contextual awareness runs through the whole of this confident answer, as here:

Amir and Hassan’s innocent childhood relationship is lost owing to the exposure to violence on both the boys. Their friendship is symbolised by the pomegranate tree, set on a hill where the boys have a perspective and a view of the wider world they live in, Kabul - it is here that their innocent friendship is its most fruitful, where they shun the constraints of the wider world below them. Their friendship is immortalised in the engraving “Amir and Hassan, sultans of Kabul” which conveys how the boys are free from their social constraints as they are both entitled to the same role.

The alternative question asked about Hosseini’s use of the first person narrative in the novel and here is an interesting response:

Amir’s first person narrative makes the novel emotionally intense since we witness the change in friendship between Amir and Hassan reflect the change in Afghanistan. ... We learn about the Afghan culture through Amir’s father and we get an insight into the escape from Kabul to California. Amir tells us, “Baba loved the idea of America,” but in California the first person narrative helps the reader to see lives in America rather differently.

This essay goes on to see how Baba’s life has changed - his nails chipped and black with engine oil, and how in contrast General Taheri cannot let go of his privileged life in Kabul. It is good to see an answer focusing on this aspect of the novel - life in California - as many answers concern themselves almost exclusively with life in Afghanistan.

As so often when writing about novels, the less successful answers tended to be heavily narrative and quotation, when used, tended only to confirm what we have already been told about the plot.

There were fewer answers on Martel's *Life of Pi*. The first question asked candidates to respond to the assertion that the novel "shows us that the world is a good place by finding beauty and reassurance in the unlikeliest of scenes and situations."

More straightforward answers tended to pick out certain scenes from the novel, when for example, Pi looks at the stars, or notes the beauty of the tiger, and in so doing support the assertion. More adventurous answers were able to bring in contextual links: the post modern nature of the book makes us realise there are no definite truths; the first part of the novel (another part of a text that is often overlooked by answers) asks some serious questions about the "goodness" or otherwise of the world we live in. These answers tended to see the novel in wider terms than just being about a boy and a tiger lost at sea.

On the Pearson website there is some guidance about using context. Here is one point taken from there, again drawing attention to the often overlooked first thirty chapters of the novel:

The texts in Unit 1 have been made popular by highly successful films. But does the magnificent computer generated imagery in the film version of *Life of Pi* change the focus of the novel to a series of survival stunts and away from its far less filmic exploration of philosophical issues in the first thirty chapters?

Other contextual points, outlined in the mark scheme for this question, are:

Candidates might consider the place of religion in modern society; Pi is looking for meaning and discovers that the world has not found any single right answer, neither in religion nor in anything else.

The 1970s in India; the Tamil Nadu government brought down; the zoo needs freedom of speech and democracy; the Greater Good and the Greater Profit are not compatible aims and therefore the family plans to emigrate. They do not find the better life - the beauty and reassurance they had hoped for.

The second question asked candidates to explore the ways Martel presents Pi's learning in the novel. Less successful, answers tended to be very general and drift into narrative:

The journey of Pi's learning did not stop here (learning about different religions and the value of pi) - the major part of his learning was when his father taught him how dangerous a tiger is.

A more adventurous (but rather muddled) answer covers similar ground, but uses it differently:

Pi's learning is presented from the way he learned all the useful yet mind blowing information about the zoo animals to the way he learned how to introduce a mental coping mechanism in his life; to how harsh yet beautiful learning can be from observing eye opening animals to his father's cruel tiger and lamb exhibition. Martel presents effectively Pi's learning of trust, animal instincts as well as brutally honest survival instincts, and religion.

There is, despite the lack of clarity, quite a lot packed in here. The essay concludes somewhat philosophically:

It is seen throughout the novel that Pi's mind has been traumatised irreversibly and this can be seen as a disturbing thought for the reader. Learning too much can traumatise you to the core. The irony is, only learning can undo what learning has put there in the first place. Learn how to feel pain, and then learn how to accept it. This "unlearning process" is one of the very important lessons Pi had to understand.

The answer earns credit for recognising that this is not a straightforward story about how to survive a shipwreck.

## 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:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>





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