

English A: literature – Higher level – Paper 1
Anglais A : littérature – Niveau supérieur – Épreuve 1
Inglés A: literatura – Nivel superior – Prueba 1

Monday 2 May 2016 (morning)
Lundi 2 mai 2016 (matin)
Lunes 2 de mayo de 2016 (mañana)

2 hours / 2 heures / 2 horas

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Write a literary commentary on one passage only.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[20 marks]**.

Instructions destinées aux candidats

- N'ouvrez pas cette épreuve avant d'y être autorisé(e).
- Rédigez un commentaire littéraire sur un seul des passages.
- Le nombre maximum de points pour cette épreuve d'examen est de **[20 points]**.

Instrucciones para los alumnos

- No abra esta prueba hasta que se lo autoricen.
- Escriba un comentario literario sobre un solo pasaje.
- La puntuación máxima para esta prueba de examen es **[20 puntos]**.

Write a literary commentary on **one** of the following:

1.

Our mother performed in starlight. Whose innovation this was I never discovered. Probably it was Chief Bigtree’s idea, and it was a good one—to blank the follow spot¹ and let a sharp moon cut across the sky, unchaperoned; to kill the microphone; to leave the stage lights’ tin eyelids scrolled and give the tourists in the stands a chance to enjoy the darkness of our island; to encourage the whole stadium to gulp air along with Swamplandia!’s star performer, the world-famous alligator wrestler Hilola Bigtree. Four times a week, our mother climbed the ladder above the Gator Pit in a green two-piece bathing suit and stood on the edge of the diving board, breathing. If it was windy, her long hair flew around her face, but the rest of her stayed motionless. Nights in the swamp were dark and star-lepered—our island was thirty-odd miles off the grid of mainland lights—and although your naked eye could easily find the ball of Venus and the sapphire hairs of the Pleiades², our mother’s body was just lines, a smudge against the palm trees.

Somewhere directly below Hilola Bigtree, dozens of alligators pushed their icicle overbites and the awesome diamonds of their heads through over three hundred thousand gallons of filtered water. The deep end—the black cone where Mom dove—was twenty-seven feet; at its shallowest point, the water tapered to four inches of muck that lapped at coppery sand. A small spoil island rose out of the center of the Pit, a quarter acre of dredged limestone; during the day, thirty gators at a time crawled into a living mountain on the rocks to sun themselves.

The stadium that housed the Gator Pit seated 265 tourists. Eight tiered rows ringed the watery pen; a seat near the front put you at eye level with our gators. My older sister, Osceola, and I watched our mother’s show from the stands. When Ossie leaned forward, I leaned with her.

At the entrance to the Gator Pit, our father—the Chief—had nailed up a crate-board sign: YOU WATCHERS IN THE FIRST FOUR ROWS GUARANTEED TO GET WET! Just below this, our mother had added, in her small, livid lettering: ANY BODY COULD GET HURT.

The tourists moved springily from buttock to buttock in the stands, slapping at the ubiquitous mosquitoes, unsticking their khaki shorts and their printed department-store skirts from their sweating thighs. They shushed and crushed against and cursed at one another; couples curled their pale legs together like eels, beer spilled, and kids wept. At last, the Chief cued up the music. Trumpets tooted from our big, old-fashioned speakers, and the huge unseeing eye of the follow spot twisted through the palm fronds until it found Hilola. Just like that she ceased to be our mother. Fame settled on her like a film—“Hilola Bigtree, ladies and gentlemen!” my dad shouted into the microphone. Her shoulder blades pinched back like wings before she dove.

The lake was planked with great gray and black bodies. Hilola Bigtree had to hit the water with perfect precision, making incremental adjustments midair to avoid the gators. The Chief’s follow spot cast light like a rime of ice onto the murk, and Mom swam inside this circle across the entire length of the lake. People screamed and pointed whenever an alligator swam into the spotlight with her, a plump and switching tail cutting suddenly into its margarine wavelengths, the spade of a monster’s face jawing up at her side. Our mother swam blissfully on, brushing at the spotlight’s perimeter as if she were testing the gate of a floating corral.

Like black silk, the water bunched and wrinkled. Her arms rowed hard; you could hear her breaststrokes ripping at the water, her gasps for air. Now and then a pair of coal-red eyes snagged at the white net of the spotlight as the Chief rolled it over the Pit. Three long minutes passed, then four, and at last she gasped mightily and grasped the ladder rails on the eastern side of the stage. We all exhaled with her. Our stage wasn’t much, just a simple cypress board on six-foot stilts, suspended over the Gator Pit. She climbed out of the lake. Her trembling arms folded over the dimple of her belly button; she spat water, gave a little wave.

The crowd went crazy.

50 When the light found her a second time, Hilola Bigtree—the famous woman from the posters, the “Swamp Centaur”—was gone. Our mother was herself again: smiling, brown-skinned, muscular. A little thicker through the waist and hips than she appeared on those early posters, she liked to joke, since she’d had her three kids.

55 “Mom!” Ossie and I would squeal, racing around the wire fence and over the wet cement that ringed the Gator Pit to get to her before the autograph seekers elbowed us out. “You won!”

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¹ follow spot: a stage light which the operator moves around to follow a performer on stage

² Pleiades: a bright constellation of stars, also called the Seven Sisters

2.

The Machinist, Teaching His Daughter to Play the Piano

The brown wrist and hand with its raw knuckles and blue nails
packed with dirt and oil, pause in mid-air,
the fingers arched delicately,

5 and she mimics him, hand held just so, the wrist loose,
then swooping down to the wrong chord.
She lifts her hand and tries again.

*Drill collars¹ rumble, hammering the nubbin-posts.
The helper lifts one, turning it slowly,
then lugs it into the lathe’s chuck.*

10 *The bit shears the dull iron into new metal, falling
into the steady chant of lathe work,
and the machinist lights a cigarette, holding*

*in his upturned palms the polonaise² he learned at ten,
then later the easiest waltzes,
15 etudes, impossible counterpoint*

like the voice of his daughter he overhears one night
standing in the backyard. She is speaking
to herself but not herself, as in prayer,

20 the listener is some version of herself,
and the names are pronounced carefully,
self-consciously: Chopin, Mozart,

Scarlatti,... these gestures of voice and hands
suspended over the keyboard
that move like the lathe in its turning

25 toward music, the wind dragging the hoist chain, the ring
of iron on iron in the holding rack.
His daughter speaks to him one night,

but not to him, rather someone created between them,
a listener, there and not there,
30 a master of lathes, a student of music.

B. H. Fairchild, “The Machinist, Teaching His Daughter to Play the Piano” from *The Art of the Lathe*.
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on behalf of Alice James Books (www.alicejamesbooks.org) and The Waywiser Press UK, 2002
(<http://waywiser-press.com>).

¹ drill collars: drill collars, as well as nubbin posts, a chuck and bits are all machine components. A lathe (line 9) is a machine for shaping wood, metal and other materials.

² polonaise: polonaises and waltzes are dances; études and counterpoint are also terms associated with music