



SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Average mark 6.68/Available marks 10

There were a number of excellent scripts. The most successful students were able to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of their chosen texts through a sophisticated and close reading and an ability, not only to explore written language, but also to express themselves coherently and expressively, thus reflecting their understanding of language in their own writing.

The most popular texts this year were *Pride and Prejudice*, *Shark Net* and Blake's poetry. *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Cherry Orchard* were also common choices, the answers on *Antony and Cleopatra* often being excellent. Several students also wrote well on *No Sugar*. Responses on *The Leopard* were particularly good; perhaps the richness of the writing, especially in passage 1, gave students an opportunity to engage with and explore the language.

The ability to work close to the text remains the most significant determinant of a student's result. Some students paid scant notice to the passages on the paper or were unable to do more than paraphrase parts of them. The student who wrote, with reference to the first of the given passages on *Pride and Prejudice*:

Miss Bingley coldly examined Elizabeth from top to toe and pronounced her abominably conceited and blatantly unaware of social protocol

demonstrated an ability to take in Mrs Hurst's and Miss Bingley's comments on the blowsy hair and muddy petticoat and also an appreciation of Austen's tone and deeper concerns. The following excerpt from an outstanding essay shows a similar awareness:

Passage 1 abounds with criticism of Elizabeth, derived chiefly from two sources, her personal 'impertinence' and her low social connections. The opening lines of passage 1, consisting of Mrs Hurst's and Miss Bingley's scathing repartee, are distinguished both by the vehemence of their criticism and the hollow grandiloquence of the speakers. 'Very nonsensical to come at all!' Miss Bingley asserts, her tone as judgemental as her opinion is inflexible. Both ladies' speech is laced with superfluous words such as 'indeed' and 'really'. The context of their criticism, as well as the conviction in their voices, divulges the existence of rigid expectations of femininity shared by members of the upper class that both ladies occupy, such that Elizabeth's spontaneous display of love for Jane is marginalised as 'scampering around'.

Writing on the Yeats poem *Easter 1916* another student observed:

In the first section the repetition of 'polite meaningless words' gives a different impression each time. At first it seems as though they have passed by one another and as a matter of formality exchanged words. Yet the second time it is given more emphasis and 'polite meaningless words' expresses feelings of emptiness, of vacuous courtesy. This is a stark contrast to the world of the club which is powerfully evoked as a cosily secure environment, a place of companionship where Yeats feels comfortable.

The same student writing on *Antony and Cleopatra* passage 1 said:

Here, Antony's own language breaks the bonds of space and time. His 'space' (his love and mutuality with Cleopatra) seems infinite. His time can stretch a minute into an infinity. But by the end of the play, physically at least, their space becomes very narrow – the couple finally confined to Cleopatra's tomb.

The same student later in the essay discussed passage 2:

Shakespeare through the structure of the play – as it so often alternates between Roman and Egyptian scenes – contrasts the richness, fullness and diversity of Antony and Cleopatra's lives with the less than appealing world of Caesar and his followers. This direct contrast can be seen in Caesar's contemptuous use of 'market maid' which reveals his deep disgust for the common man. His single-minded pursuit of empire is apparent when he greets his sister upon her return. It is not a joyous meeting but rather one filled with bitterness and disappointment as Caesar sees an opportunity for a public, imperial show pass by.

The following comment on passage 1 on *The Leopard* similarly engages effectively with the language:

The very prose, the lengthy sentences, the evocative, vivid imagery of 'Flora', of 'magnolias drooping', even the 'sweetish odours' of the 'young soldier' – all coerce the reader into the confirmation that in Sicily sensuality plays a significant part, despite the 'relics of certain saints', despite the ritualised prayers every day. There is a sense in Salina's scent filled garden that here is a place where stagnancy and languor are the foundation of life.

Such perceptive comments stand out even more when set against the cavalier and dismissive approach of some students to the given passages and to the rubric which asks students to use one or more of the passages as a basis for discussion of their chosen texts. A few students wrote: 'These passages do not give a good indication of the novel/play and to really understand it we must go to the text as a whole'. This was usually the prologue to what appeared to be a prepared response. This was particularly the case with some answers on *Arcadia* and *The Book of Evidence*, where the same examples, not taken from any of the given passages, recurred in several scripts.

A major problem remains with prepared answers. Clearly many students derive considerable help from revision lectures. However, they should see these as one of many ways of approaching a text, not as the definitive interpretation of it. Such lectures and extensive and lively discussion in class lessons should provide a basis on which the student must create his or her own construction. There were many similar answers on some texts, and these the students lose that subtlety and originality which are important features of the best answers. Prepared answers were also in evidence when a student selected a theme, such as 'noise', 'politics', 'power', 'change', on which to base his/her answer rather than on a close reading.

Students should be encouraged to realise that they are being asked to use the passage/s as a basis for a discussion of the text. Some still think the requirement is to discuss the passage – usually in isolation. Other students actually headed their essay 'passage 1' or 'passage 2', effectively locking themselves into a narrow discussion.

One of the pleasures in reading the papers is the variety they offer. The ways in which students engage with the passages and structure their responses will vary. Teachers should advise students that the passages allow for a range of approaches.

Many students wrote on Drewe's *Shark Net*. The following student started with passage 2:

Robert's first view of 'Roberta Ainslie's shoulder-blades' elicits a sense of awe in the inexperienced, but eager young lover. Robert explores his awakening feelings towards girls, which Drewe deals with both compassionately and with an ironic air of reflection.

He/she then looked back, fairly briefly, to passage 1:

Robert's desire for pleasure and sexual excitement links him in a tangible way to the 'legendary monster' of passage one, Eric Cooke. Eric too, liked 'the idea of doing it in the sand'... The disturbing connection between Robert and Eric, further explored after Dorothy's death, highlights the intrinsically linked 'prospects of pleasure and danger'. In passage 2, Robert is blissfully unaware of where his pleasure-seeking will lead him.

Finally, the student moved to discuss passage 3:

Robert's freedom and youthful vitality displayed in passage 2 contrast sharply with the more resigned and fondly reminiscent tone of passage 3...Whereas passage 2 is a vigorous affirmation of youth ending with an up-beat, giddy announcement by Robert of 'it's my birthday', passage 3 ends on a subdued and sombre note – 'Dorothy's eyes were cloudy where they were supposed to be green'. These two very important passages reflect different stages in Drewe's life and the dramatic shifts between them. However, in spite of the trouble Robert faces, and his feeling that he is 'dazed, randy and mentally paralysed' and that is how he will 'feel forever', the book ends on a tentatively optimistic note. Robert, to some degree, reconciles his 'good and bad halves', reflections of which we see in passages 2 and 3, and returns to Melbourne. Robert journeys 'into the desert' (the last words of the haunting memoir), which evokes hope and also 'increased prospects of pleasure and danger', seemingly a constant desire in the 'swirling sandstorm' of Drewe's young mind.

The following excerpt from a response on *Everything That Rises Must Converge* shows the student's ability to consider all three passages:

This 'Grace', in this case, forces Mrs Turpin's 'vision' to 'reverse itself'; she sees 'everything large instead of small'. As O'Connor herself said, there is a point in each of her stories when supernatural forces enter, and in passage 3, we witness that very moment. It is as explicit as in *The Enduring Chill*, or even as in *Parker's Back*, but the difference here is the optimism with which the reader leaves the story. Indeed, *Revelation* is violent, but not gruesome, and this is the major contrast between this story and *Greenleaf*. As in passage 1 we have an egotistical, highly judgemental, even embittered, protagonist, caught between the old world and the new, like Julian's mother. In *Greenleaf* however is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of a 'bringer of grace' – that 'bull', the 'patient god', with 'a wreath across his horns'.

The most successful students, like these two, can move seamlessly between the passages.

Some of the reasons students did not perform as well as they might have in the examination were:

- an emphasis on story telling rather than an attempt to offer an interpretation
- a lack of the plausibility (a requirement for any response to receive a higher rating)
- a concern with the views and values of an author which, having been already studied as part of Unit 3, if used at all, should be only as background

- historical inaccuracies and anachronisms, such as Lopakhin from *The Cherry Orchard* being referred to as communist and a member of the proletariat and Jane Austen writing in both the seventeenth-century and the Victorian period
- an over-emphasis on either or both the historical setting of the text and/or the social background of the author
- extraneous comments, such as a listing of other plays by Shakespeare, and an over-concern with the sonnet form, the identity of the Dark Lady and the importance of Petrarch and Plutarch.

The best advice that teachers can offer their students is obvious but worth restating; they should know their texts thoroughly. This understanding will enable the students to place the passages correctly in context and give them the confidence to work closely with the language, offering a plausible interpretation and exploring the relationship between language and ideas and between different levels of meaning.

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