
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

7717C / Theory and Independence
Report on the Examination

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Overall

It was wonderful to see the return of the NEA this summer and the vast majority of the work that was seen was as good as ever. Moderators reported that many folders were 'a joy to read' and that students had submitted interesting pieces of work that they clearly had enjoyed researching and producing. There was plenty of evidence of independent work on the part of students and often a genuine sense of critical debate and exploration. Teachers and students are to be praised for their work on this unit; what we saw this summer was as good as it has ever been and that is no mean feat after the last two years of disruption.

What follows are some observations about each of the elements of the unit. They are intended to highlight things that tended to work well and point out potential areas that could be developed or tightened up in future. This is not intended as a comprehensive training document but could provide a useful reminder before future submissions or be an initial guide for those new to teaching the unit.

Text choices

This summer we saw a wide variety of interesting and often challenging texts. Many centres had offered their students free reign with at least one of the text choices, which invariably led to a real sense of engagement and enjoyment being evident in the work. If a text was taught to a cohort it was usually the poetry text and students then selected their own poems from a wider collection. This worked well as an option for students who might otherwise have struggled to independently choose a poet to study but, having said that, many did make individual and independent choices and these were usually very successful. There was, as there has been in the past, lots of Duffy and Plath amongst the poetry pieces but also a wider range of other poets than we have seen before, including some very contemporary ones.

Students often selected their own prose texts and again there was a wide range and variety. No one author or type of text dominated, although 1984 still proves popular. There were quite a few pieces of work based on texts in translation, particularly Japanese texts, and also a very diverse range of contemporary authors which was excellent to see.

Where text choices were less successful it was often because the text did not have enough substance to enable the student to apply the assessment objectives or to analyse and engage in meaningful critical debate. It is worth bearing in mind that it is much harder to write well about a 'light' text than one that has more obviously got critical merit, for want of a better term.

Tasks

Most tasks were framed around AO5 (debate, exploration and argument) and so worked well, particularly when coupled with a well chosen text. The task should enable the student to engage in meaningful critical debate or ask a genuinely open question which the student can then explore and arrive at a conclusion. The questions on the exam papers can be a useful guide to framing tasks around AO5 but most centres have now understood this requirement and therefore most tasks enabled students to critically explore their texts and maximised their chances of developing a debate and line of argument.

This year we did, in a small number of cases, see a return to tasks that asked students to describe or explain how something was done in a text. Asking, for example, 'How does the writer present the female characters as weak' or 'Explain why the female characters are at a disadvantage' just asks for description and there is no requirement to debate or critically argue. Placing AO5 at the centre of every task is key to helping students meet the requirements of the unit and enabling them to fulfil their potential.

This summer most students submitted conventional essays for both the poetry and prose element of the unit but there were a number of re-creative pieces also and some journalistic style writing. Re-creative pieces were often interesting and highlighted a new way of looking at the original text that had been studied. Where they were most successful they were firmly rooted in the base text and shed new light on it from a particular critical angle; where they were less successful the student had tended to write a new bit of text without any clear idea of how it related to the original base text or how it was providing a critical reading of it.

Use of the Critical Anthology

In a unit called Theory and Independence the critical anthology obviously provides the theory element but it also provides another opportunity for students to make independent choices and many centres had encouraged this. There were many centres which had fully embraced the spirit of the unit and required their students to select their own texts and decide which set of literary critical ideas they were going to apply to them. This was not always the case and if there is one aspect of the unit that teachers tend to take more control of it is with regards to the critical anthology. It is permitted for the centre to decide which sections of the anthology to study but within that students should still be encouraged to independently choose the critical ideas that interest them and which they consider to be most relevant to the text they are studying.

Many students had done impressive amounts of wider reading beyond the anthology. This is not a requirement of the unit but it certainly made their work very well informed. It was really good to see all sections of the anthology being studied, although feminism and Marxism do still tend to dominate. There were some excellent and insightful pieces that used ecocriticism and post-colonial criticism to produce very up-to-date and highly relevant pieces of work.

Assessment

Teachers have become very adept at using the NEA markscheme, perhaps because it is the same as that for the examined units, and marking was generally fair and accurate. If there was generosity it tended invariably to be in band 5. Teachers are reminded that there is a narrow band of tolerance for this unit and it only takes each piece of work in a folder to be assessed 1 or 2 marks generously for the marks of that folder, and indeed the whole sample, to be put in jeopardy. Standardising material is available on Centre Services and it would be useful for some centres to remind themselves of the standards, particularly in the upper bands.

Teachers are also reminded not to sub-divide marks between the assessment objectives but to mark holistically out of 25.

Marking and annotating

As well as being given a mark, NEA pieces of work need to have some comments on them from the assessing member of staff. Annotations are useful if they are personalised to the work and point out places where there are particular strengths and weaknesses. Annotating work with AO2, AO4 etc is of little use to the moderator, partly because the assessment objectives work together and it is often hard to separate one out completely and also because such annotations do not indicate what aspect of the assessment objective is being pointed out nor how well it has been executed.

Summative comments at the end of a piece of work are essential and should be addressed to the moderator. The aim of these comments is to evaluate the merits of the work and explain why the mark has been awarded. Moderators do want to support centre marks but there needs to be a fair and reasoned justification given for them.

Internal moderation is undoubtedly a very useful process but if marks are altered during that process there needs to be a comment which explains why the original mark was judged to be wrong and the new one is correct.

Administration

The vast majority of work arrived in good time and the folders were secured and organised. Some centres forgot that a Centre Declaration Sheet is required with each sample that is sent; these can be found on Centre Services. A handful of centres did not secure their students' work so moderators were faced with a pile of loose leaf essays and cover sheets which made moderating very difficult.

A reminder of the key administration points is provided below:

- Submit marks electronically by 15th May and then post the sample of work to the assigned moderator
- Use only first class post – nothing that requires a signature on receipt
- Each candidate needs a completed Candidate Record Form
- The Candidate Record Form and pieces of work should be secured together with treasury tags – please do not use plastic wallets
- Work should be marked, annotated and summative comments provided

And finally ...

As stated at the start of this report, it was a pleasure to read the varied and interesting work submitted by students this summer. They and their teachers had clearly worked very hard and deserve praise for all they achieved.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.