

# 2016 VCE Literature examination report

## General comments

**Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.**

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Students were very familiar with the task and most drew on the passages to ground their responses, which was crucial to scoring well on the criteria. Occasionally, however, students offered very strong interpretations of the text but paid little attention to the passages on the examination; such essays showed a limited understanding of the task. Conversely, some essays revealed an evident capacity to discuss the passages and explore some subtleties of the language but did not draw ideas together to present an interpretation of the text as a whole, an expectation that is reflected in five of the assessment criteria.

Students were expected to be able to distinguish between the various genres on which they were writing and to demonstrate some understanding of the features of those genres. This notion underlies the requirement that students write on two different genres. Sometimes, students referred to a play, a memoir or a collection of stories as ‘a novel’ or ‘a book’. In such cases, it was difficult for them to comment on specific features of the chosen form and to elaborate on any understanding of the way form affects meaning. High-scoring responses revealed an understanding of such ideas as stagecraft, poetic form and narrative voice, for example. The following two excerpts, from essays on Ibsen and Rossetti, illustrate the ways in which students are able to make effective use of this knowledge.

*Torvald’s power is highlighted through the symbol of the doors, and the stage direction, “[from his study] places him off-stage, just a voice controlling Nora’s actions. Torvald’s study is a room the audience never see, and is thus emblematic of the uneven power inherent in the patriarchy. His emergence from this place of power, at the news of what Nora has “bought” only furthers his dominating characterisation, which Ibsen clearly condemns.*

*In contrast to the hymnal, devotional poem ‘Up Hill’ which employs a steady, measured rhythm which mimics the uphill ascension to moral transcendence in Heaven, ‘Amor Mundi’s erratic, unsteady rhythm evokes a sense of “downhill” movement, a loss of control. The internal rhyming of “grow thickly ... rich and sickly” quickens the pace, heightening this sense of frenzied descent.*

Students must understand that if their handwriting is unclear or illegible the flow of meaning for the reader may be interrupted. The checklist on the back page of the examination advised students to reread their essays to check for such clarity and amend if necessary.

During the course of their study, students should learn to distinguish between like pairs such as ‘childish’/‘childlike’, ‘simple’/‘simplistic’ and ‘animal’/‘animalistic’, or a trio such as ‘ideal’/‘idealistic’/‘idealised’. It is important that students be exposed to examples of written discourse about their

texts so that they do not rely merely on aural examples and are able to develop a rich vocabulary for discussion.

There was a tendency for some students to impose the metalanguage of other domains – such as linguistics, media studies or psychology – on the way they framed their discussion of the text, generally with little good effect. Terminology such as ‘lexemes’, ‘anaphoric reference’, ‘prolepsis’ or ‘extradiegetic’ was rarely useful in advancing the students’ discussions of the text and tended to maintain a distance between the student and the text, mitigating against the close working with the language that Criterion 6 seeks. Students are asked to engage with the imagistic, emotional and cultural resonances and rhythmic voices of the given passages and of the text as a whole. Students are encouraged to read past examination reports to examine and discuss the varied styles of previous high-scoring responses.

Discussion of historical and cultural background to the text is not required, although some background knowledge is assumed; where it is invoked, however, it should be accurate and pertinent to the discussion of the text and the passages. The claims that Austen wrote in the Gregorian era or 17th century Georgian England, that Ibsen was writing in the Victorian era, that *Jane Eyre* was set in the 20th century Victorian period or Elizabethan times or that England was predominantly Catholic in the 19th century display a lack of knowledge of historical context, in which case students would be well-advised to avoid such claims.

Students are often concerned about how to begin their essays and how to structure them. Many students wrote a one-sentence proposition at the outset, isolated from the essay; these statements often did not sit well with the ideas offered by the passages.

There is no single approach or expected structure, and students can demonstrate their insights in many different ways. The following introductions illustrate different approaches.

*The relationship between an individual and the state is central to Shakespeare’s play Coriolanus. Set in ancient Rome, this play explores the life of a man whose vocation is to serve both his family and Rome.*

Compare this with the introduction below:

*When Volumnia bows ‘as if Olympus to a molehill’ the utter demise of Coriolanus is accentuated by the unnatural creation of a fragmented and distorted familial bond. The ‘eyes’ of Virgilia and the ‘cracked heart’ of an otherwise jocular Menenius convey the essence of despair, and imbalance of the Roman body politic, which Coriolanus has engineered. As such, it is the heart of Coriolanus’ internal conflict, caught between his ‘single honour’ and his contempt for the malignant plebeians which forges the tragedy of his demise.*

Whereas the former is generic, making no address to the way the response will draw on the passages on the examination, the latter leads us directly into the passages while still offering an interpretation of the text, with sound contextual knowledge.

The third example puts forward an interpretation specifically based on the three extracts on the examination, clearly indicating that the student is working with the given passages.

*Proulx’s ‘Close Range’ seeks to subvert the mythology of the Wild West, in which men assume the role of the machismo cowboy and women present a superficial accessory. ‘The Bunchgrass Edge of the World’ breaks down these traditional gender roles, while ‘Brokeback Mountain’ explores the conflicting ideals of cowboy heroism and sexuality. ‘People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water’ expresses the desire to escape the barren Wyoming landscape, its inescapability prevailing against all attempt.*

In discussing short stories or poetry, it is important that students are able to present an interpretation of the collection as a whole, as in the example above, rather than viewing the three

passages as discrete entities. They should therefore be aware of the ways in which the selections may represent different aspects of the whole but may not represent the totality of the work; consequently, they may allude to stories or poems that may differ in their concerns or styles, while still maintaining a focus on the selected passages.

Students who wrote essays that scored in the very high and high range demonstrated thorough knowledge of the text and often an ease of movement with the passages. They displayed complexity in their understanding – that is, an awareness of several facets of the text, an awareness of nuances of meaning and an ability to accept and navigate apparent contradictions and ambiguities. They were insightful and subtle in the ways they worked closely with the language and were highly expressive. They were also able to articulate the views and values endorsed or challenged in the text. Many of these students displayed an assurance and confidence that comes from much writing practice during the year. The following examples illustrate some of these attributes.

*‘A Pitch too High for the Human Ear’ shows the same decay of time applied not only to an individual, but to a relationship. Vicki is repeatedly described as having ‘used to say’ and she ‘used to call’. Kennedy draws the past into the present, continually comparing, contrasting the old with the new. Invariably, it is the old which is more generous, more accommodating, more loving. “Inarticulate” conveys a gently patronizing feeling, affectionate but perhaps slightly exasperated. But “withholding” cannot be interpreted without hostility; to be withholding is to be actively disadvantaging the other.*

*Whilst his preoccupation with transience and the encroachment of “evening” persists in his earlier and later poetry, CWC attempts to find value in the gentle and playful quality of the quotidian, “lightly erotic” in Cho Ben Thanh: Richmond (CBT) ultimately urging readers to forego the elusive search for meaning, turning to an appreciation of “love” and the subtle beauty of a life “all transient”.*

*Antony’s speech to his men in passage two his suffused with loss and decay in “mutiny”, “begone” and “lost”, portraying his sense of the corrosive influence of Cleopatra’s “fearful sails” upon his masculine identity and his Roman “honour”.*

*The Chief accountant’s attire is recounted by Marlow in full detail, and the richness of “silk” and “varnished boots” amidst the humble wilderness of nature creates a sharp visual contrast between civilisation and nature — tellingly, it is civilisation which appears to be artificial as the adjective “amazing” and noun “miracle” indicate.*

*...the opposing imagery of the underworld and ‘the honey-breathing heather’ through which they walk reflecting the internal conflict felt by the speaker in her isolation.*

*... the vibrant consonance of “clabber”, “bastions” and “burst” evoking imagery of unrelenting enthusiasm even in the face of hardship.*

*Conrad not only acerbically critiques the hypocrisy of colonialism, but embarks Marlow and the readers on a psychological journey into the “self” that is “monstrous and free”, only to find what lurks at our core is indeed “ugly”.*

*... the rhythmic repetition of “Ham and cheese” encapsulating the dull apathy of Andrew’s perspective.*

Essays in the middle range tended to be more general, lacking complexity or the subtlety of shades of meaning, and did far less close working with the language, often relying on quotation rather than analysis. They sometimes treated views and values as an ‘add-on’ paragraph, whereas high-scoring responses maintained a firm sense of these throughout the essay. Many of these

students seemed to lack the expressive vocabulary for conveying distinctions. It is important that students gain as much practice in writing as possible throughout the year and use those occasions, and the feedback, to develop their vocabulary and expressiveness. For example:

*Equally, Kennedy's characterisation of John in 'Kill or Cure' as well as Helen's inability to adapt to the brutality of rural life, ultimately culminates in the fracturing of their relationship. The violence as John 'yanks him into the chicken shed and ties him too a short rope' is compounded with the pairing as Jake 'strains and chokes, his eyes rolling in panic' eliciting sympathy from the audience. This is echoed in Helen's incredulous tone 'You're joking' further emphasises this idea.*

In the lower range, many students inaccurately paraphrased the passages or the text. A firm knowledge of the material is essential. These students often had difficulty in expressing their ideas with clarity and sometimes lacked an appropriate register for discussing the text, using colloquialisms such as 'between a rock and a hard place' or 'loses his cool', using technical terms such as 'enjambment' or identifying rhyme schemes as mere labels without exploring their effects or significance.

## Specific information

### Response 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	6	6	9	10	13	12	12	9	7	4	3	1	1	12.2

### Response 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0	0	1	1	2	3	5	6	7	8	10	12	10	11	7	6	4	3	1	1	11.6

## Novels

The most popular novels were *Heart of Darkness* and *Jane Eyre*. Responses on *Heart of Darkness* were often high-scoring and there were some sophisticated postcolonial analyses. The passages provided an opportunity for close analysis of the language and examination of the protagonist's psychological development as he was torn between deceitful colonial rhetoric and the cruelty and destruction he saw around him. Students responded well to the evocative images of the grove of death in passage one, the narrative framing as indicated in passage two and the implications of the candle imagery in passage three. *Jane Eyre* was generally well handled, with varied responses across a range of marks. Many students showed misunderstanding of the religious positions held by the characters and some misconstrued the task as an argument for a particular religious view. Most responses focused on Jane's struggle towards independence amid the social and moral dictates of a repressive society. Many students mistook Rochester's words to himself, 'I will like it', in passage two, as Jane's response. Close attention to the punctuation would have shown them how to read this correctly.

*Persuasion* gave rise to some very good responses with detailed close analysis. Many students showed a familiarity with the text as a whole and used it to move fluidly between the passages. Students engaged particularly well with the language of passage three, often drawing on the punctuation and the varied rhythms of the lines to demonstrate the characters' emotions. There were some excellent postcolonial readings of *The Cat's Table*, responses that suggested that students had responded well to the invitation of the passages to address Michael's crossing of

boundaries between colony and metropolis. Students writing on *The Leopard* tended to focus on characterisation often without paying close attention to the language or imagery. There was an opportunity in responding to these passages to detect the poignancy of loss, the gentle unravelling of an era and of the protagonist's certainties. Higher-scoring responses showed this through the imagery of the ants that 'crawled from crevices' and 'mutinous troops shouting and brandishing weapons'. Many ignored the second passage, sometimes opting for a retelling of the story rather than analysis. There were some excellent responses on *All the Pretty Horses*. The passages invited strong engagement with the text and inspired many highly expressive answers. The responses on *My Brilliant Career* often attempted feminist interpretations but many lacked close analysis and tended towards paraphrase. Responses often drew on the passages merely to provide evidence to support a theme essay. These students failed to respond analytically and show how the language in their quoted phrases contributed to meaning. Very few students wrote on either *That Deadman Dance* or *The Man Who Loved Children*. Those who did showed a tendency to paraphrase interspersed with quotes, sometimes resulting in reductive views and values statements.

## Plays

*A Doll's House* was the most popular choice of the plays, followed by *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the quality of the responses on both texts varied. While there were some high-scoring responses, the passages on *A Doll's House* in the main were not handled well. Close working was often absent, as was a sense of performativity or theatre. Paraphrasing was a common error. Higher-scoring responses picked up on the adversarial tension within Nora that hinted at the truth of her chaotic passion to come. High-scoring responses addressed the playwright's construction of dramatic moments and the shift towards Torvald's ultimate ironic humiliation, where the playwright has him face the controls and forces he applied to Nora. Few addressed the subtlety of how this progression was dramatically constructed and the ways Ibsen subverted genre conventions to represent changing roles.

Too many students seemed resolved to write on a particular aspect of *Antony and Cleopatra* and failed to pay adequate attention to the language of the passages. Many wanted to discuss dichotomies of Egypt and Rome or passion and duty, but they needed to use the given passages to do so. The highest-scoring answers located the understanding of the characters in the range and reference of their poetic language and imagery, in the playfulness and performativity of their speeches. Low-scoring responses ignored both the constructed nature of the characters and the genre of the text. Attention to the performative self-dramatisation of Cleopatra in passage one, the raw alienation of Antony in passage two and the powerful lyricism of the poetry in passage three had the potential to open up subtler interpretations. There were some very high-scoring answers that responded to the language and showed complexity and insight.

*Pygmalion* was also a popular choice, and in general it was well handled, with many strong feminist or Marxist interpretations. Students had an awareness of *Agamemnon* as drama, although responses to this play were mixed. There were some outstanding responses on *Coriolanus* and the selection of passages gave students plenty with which to work. High-scoring responses showed a thorough knowledge of the play and responded sensitively to the subtlety of the characterisation. Students who wrote on Albee seemed comfortable with the passages. However, too often they ignored the text as theatre, resorting instead to paraphrase or passing judgment on the characters rather than focusing closely on how the drama in the passages was constructed. *Rhinoceros* was not especially popular, but there were some very high-scoring responses in the light of critical readings. The few responses on *Arcadia* were generally well handled, but some were overly focused on the first passage and relied on paraphrasing to substantiate the rest of their interpretation.

## Short stories

The stories by Cate Kennedy were by far the most popular in this section, and there were many very good responses focusing on the motifs of scripts, time and the limits of language. Some students produced detailed close analyses of the language in these passages but did not develop the interpretation to the level of subtlety or complexity. The highest-scoring responses showed how images of restriction and entrapment informed the language of the stories and subverted the seeming ordinariness of their subjects. These responses often alluded to the ways Kennedy's writing exposed the tensions, anxieties and frustrations that lay barely suppressed behind the facades of normality. Responses on the Annie Proulx stories were very high scoring in many cases, with students able to show a good understanding of the importance of landscape and the techniques whereby the writer conveyed the desperation of characters brought to their knees by the isolating realities of a rugged rural existence. Only a small number wrote on the stories by Nikolay Gogol, and many showed a tendency to paraphrase the passages. More use could have been made of the language and particularly of the interplay of tragic and comic elements in the text.

## Other literature

This was the least popular section of the examination, but quite a number of students chose to write on *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In general, students struggled with this text. While they discussed the concerns of the text, they tended not to work closely with the language, often stringing examples from the passages together within a response that was largely paraphrased. Many seemed not to recognise the need to analyse how the language in their quotes and the features of the text worked to support their interpretation.

There were few responses on Barnes, Fitzpatrick and Stanner. The responses on *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* tended to ignore the ironic, postmodern and intertextual elements of the text and focused instead on its views and values. This was often at the expense of analysis. Students writing on Fitzpatrick focused mainly on the father–daughter relationship without addressing how it was constructed and represented in the passages. The Stanner passages offered a good opportunity for students to respond to the views and values, which they did well. However, they could have paid more attention to Stanner's evocative language.

## Poetry

On the whole, the poetry questions were well handled. Heaney was the most popular poet and there were some perceptive responses, although the poems proved challenging for some students. Students explored the imagery in the first and third passages thoughtfully, but many somewhat implausibly interpreted 'The Otter' as an allegory of Irish history. A large number of students ignored 'Funeral Rites' altogether or merely summarised its contents. Some engaged well with the admiration in the tone of 'The Otter' and with the use of movement and analogy. Low-scoring responses failed to see the metafictional and self-referential aspects of 'Poem'. The Browning responses were, in the main, very accomplished, showing the subtlety of the narrator's voice within the theatricality of the dramatic monologue. However, too many responses on 'Porphyria's Lover' insisted on the centrality of the notion of disease, which often did not prove fruitful for their interpretation. The responses on Rossetti were generally very good, often focusing on the rich natural imagery, the changing rhythms and the verse's echoing tensions. There were some excellent responses on Wallace-Crabbe, showing a mastery of analytical language and an ability to work closely with the poetry to construct an interpretation. Students engaged particularly well with 'Cho Ben Thanh: Richmond', responding to its graphic images, tone and views and values.

There were many high-scoring responses on Szyborska. The highest-scoring answers identified fleeting impressions and niceties of tone as a veneer of fun or whimsical delay before what is typically a stark surprise. Such responses undercut the surface charm to penetrate the unrelenting existential nothingness at the heart of the poet's concerns. Szyborska's chosen subjects pass through the prism of unadorned language into clear thought of deceptive depth. Together, the passages provided an account of ordinary things and experiences through a substance, an advertisement and a mythical island. Low-scoring responses took the passages at face value with straightforward interpretations; students were beguiled by the poet's plain and seemingly contented style. The responses to the Dobson poems reflected a mixed ability, but some were very high scoring. Many students wrote on passages one and three and ignored passage two. There was a tendency to engage more with the story than the poetry itself, especially in relation to the third poem, 'Reading Aloud'. Students are advised to look closely at the language of the poems, at the rhythms and imagery, and to form an interpretation as a response to form, tone and how specific words and phrases contribute to meaning.

### Sample essays

Samples 1–6 are in the very high range, exemplifying work at an excellent level. Sample 7 is in the high range and Sample 8 represents work in the upper-medium range.

#### Sample 1

**Nominated text:** *Heart of Darkness* – Joseph Conrad

*Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness explores the "hopeless despair" of the death of Kurtz's redeeming vision of colonialism in the Belgian Congo. It is a vision which strives to deny the sordid avarice of the supposed Western 'mission civilisatrice', yet is rendered hollow by its commitment to an unmitigated colonial "savagery". Marlow is therefore forced to psychologically come to terms with the consequences of Western brutality, torn between the utter inhumanity of Kurtz and the deceitful propaganda of Belgium's supposedly moralistic imperialism. Yet Conrad provides Marlow, and indeed the reader, with no reductive resolution in language, providing only a vague, impressionistic sense of the "darkness" without an uplifting ideological epiphany or a realistic political alternative to this sordid invasion.*

*Marlow's evocation of the "legality of time contracts" reveals the influence of Western societal precepts in enabling the savage enslavement of the African natives in the Belgian Congo. While promising a just, fair system of legal recourse in "contracts", this inadequate euphemism for forced labour serves as a microcosm of Western propaganda and deceit in the Congo; ostensibly upholding Western values, yet voraciously seeking the rewards of free work and more "ivory". In Conrad's image of the "little begrimed steamboat", we become aware of the physical decay of this Western symbol of exploration and progress, mirroring this moral decay and eroding a sense of Western power and dignity in its actions. That Marlow struggles not to "sink that steamboat" highlights the vulnerability of this imperial beacon of forward movement, a narrative of ideological mutability and frail hegemony which contrasts with a Western narrative of liberal humanism and continued societal development. This is an erosion of supposed Western enlightenment in its Congolese invasion which culminates in Marlow's sardonic proclamation that, for the "pilgrims", the "steamboat" "crawled to" "where they expected to get something"; this is an image of voracious consumption, alluding to the West's fledgling capitalist system and its encouragement of material acquisitions ahead of social values and ideals. In correlating the steamboat to a "sluggish beetle", Conrad thus debases the Western imperialist endeavour to a greedy, animalistic pursuit of "ivory". Moreover, Marlow's sardonic description of the "four pilgrims with their staves" pursuing this ivory insightfully inverts the pious moralisms supposedly driving the West's invasion of the Belgian Congo. Hence, Conrad portrays an abandonment of the Victorian work ethic and Western Christian values in this colonial endeavour, directly undermining the likely patriotic preconceptions of a Blackwood's magazine readership believing in the superficially moral endeavour before the publication of this novella. Thus, the growl of a "listener" on board the Nellie "Try to be civil Marlow" mirrors the reaction of*

a Western society to recent reports of the savagery of this intervention; hoping to reassert “civility” in the language of uplifting Western colonialism, struggling to confront the sordid reality of this expedition and refusing to engage in introspection regarding the influence of Western consumerism upon the incentives for pursuing “ivory” and hence enabling such savagery. Conrad, through the frame narration style of the narrative, thus exposes the inability of the West to conceive of its own savagery, hoping to illuminate to the reader the hollowness of this response and to encourage the reader to challenge Belgian colonialism.

And thus, like Marlow, the reader is plunged into a psychological deconstruction of the sordid reality of Western savagery. Marlow’s portrayal of the “chief accountant” as a “miracle” and “amazing” reflects his desire for a redeeming vision of colonialism as he witnesses this savagery; with a “starched collar” and a “big white hand”, this Western figure seems to embody Marlow’s idealised vision of the possibility of the lofty ideals of a civilising expedition. Yet Marlow’s growing lamentation of the “tricks” that we must perform is suffused with a bitter sardonicism, revealing his disgust with Western delusion and his shift “towards Kurtz” as the last bastion of hope for this colonialism. His comment “you dream of it” relates his colonial experiences to a dreamscape; as he confronts his Western ontological preconceptions, he feels distanced from reality and unable to process the implications of the savagery that he witnesses. That he feels “very small” and “very lost” alludes to Conrad’s philosophical beliefs in isolationism; as he loses his devotion to his “begrimed” and debased Western values, he is left alone to combat the darkness with his “own inborn strength”. This is a nihilistic image of human loneliness and ontological uncertainty and culminating in the “greenish gloom” in passage one; with its conflation of green nature and an ideological opacity, Conrad is suggesting Marlow’s confusion and as he comes to terms with the innate, natural human darkness that underlies Western colonialism. And thus, while Marlow is considered “brutally callous” for refusing to acknowledge Kurtz’s death, we are willing to sympathise with his brooding ideological despair; Kurtz’s death represents to some extent the loss of his ideological precepts, and consequently underscores an overwhelming feeling of “despair”. Marlow cannot fully comprehend the poses of ‘contorted collapse’ and the animalistic images of “creatures” with “worsted” around their necks in an image of strangulation at the hands of a Western object. To Marlow, without the redeeming salvation that Kurtz could provide—which he moves towards “exclusively” in passage two—it is “so beastly beastly dark”. A 19<sup>th</sup> century reader coming to terms with his own complicity in the “darkness” of Western colonialism upon reading this novella can perhaps sympathise with Marlow as he “successfully ignored” the “manager”; Marlow perhaps desires an innocent delusion where he can hide himself from the reality of the Congo and the dissolution of his ideological assumptions of Western morality. Conrad’s novella therefore explores the desire for self-delusion which comes from the almost absurd violence and horror of these Western atrocities, hence reflecting upon the difficulties of introspection and the traumatic nature of this human darkness and atrophy.

Yet, Conrad does not provide the reader with a salvaging message of human redemption and enlightenment. The reader is instead subsumed in the realm of narrative opacity and the gloom of language, epitomised by the obscurity “The Horror! The Horror!”, while perhaps signalling Kurtz’s final recognition of the violent savagery of Belgian colonialism in his “supreme moment of complete knowledge”, the deliberate ambiguity of this final exclamation does not suffice to allow the reader to come to this definitive conclusion. This novella is itself laden with confusion and narrative dislocation, promising an uplifting image of Western progress in its typically simplistic literary ‘yarn’ structure, yet instead delving into a realm of linguistic complexity and ideological gloom. The opacity of Kurtz’s final words reveal the failure of language to fully mimetically convey meaning, as we are left to apply our own subjective interpretations of these words, perhaps in a moment of meta-fictional reflection upon the ambiguity and subjectivity of language itself. Marlow’s descriptions of Kurtz’s “peculiar smile” and his “expression of sombre pride” embraces non-verbal communication and its ambiguity, denying the reader a conclusive, clear sense of his emotions beyond an impressionistic, indeterminate malaise. In fact Conrad’s persistent similes – “like a sluggish beetle”, “free as air” - he promises the reader a sense of understanding through this relational language, yet simultaneously fails to pinpoint for the



reader the exact semantic layer of meaning. Thus, Conrad evokes an “air” of confusion in his novella; a subtle hint at the underlying truth of human darkness, which suggests a perspective or interpretation of meaning to the reader but denies a narrative resolution beyond the opacity of its imperfect language. This is a vision of linguistic failure which contrasts with the certainty and rigidity of Western propaganda and a belief in a “moralising mission”, instead revealing the abyss of uncertainty and the non-existence of a confirmed, constrained and conveyable “nut” of absolute truth.

## Sample 2

### Nominated text: *Selected Poems* – Robert Browning

Whether Browning’s poetry excoriates the petty desires of a man to contain his mistress’ supposed licentiousness or details the pathos of an artist who realises his technical proficiency does not match his encapsulation of the “soul”, it is limited by his insights into the complex realms of the human condition, some of which include his malevolent desires to subjugate, to indulge in the spiritually invigorating pleasures of the temporal world and celebrate all the vicissitudes of life. In many ways Browning’s signature, the dramatic monologue enables him to bestow voice upon his characters and inhabit their psyche, blending the colloquial with the abstract in the process.

In *Porphyria’s Lover*, Browning disparages and details the flaws of the archetypal Victorian male, revealing his own pathetic insecurities to fester within, rearing its head in the form of an obsessive jealousy. The turbulent internal emotions of the speaker are represented by his use of pathetic fallacy of a “sullen wind” that “vex[es] the lake”, the sinister and uneasy atmosphere created by the undercurrents of “sullen” and “vex”. Similarly, the uneven rhyme scheme of ABABB reveals in its irregularity the bitter anger of the speaker as his contempt rewards his mistress’ imagined “vainer ties”. Furthermore, the “spite” of the Lover is exacerbated by the harshness of the “K” consonant in “awake”, “lake” and “break”, the serrating phonology compounding this sense of unease in the reader. However, the speaker appears to be “debating” calmly what consequences he would bestow on his impassioned mistress, the intensity of his keen observations represented in the plethora of commas he uses to list her every move. The extent to which the Lover describes his mistress’ activities is portrayed also by his full stop in “And called me.”, the period mimicking the way “no voice replied” through forcing the reader to physically pause. Such dramaticism revealed in the speaker’s monologue ultimately reveals his utter contempt and possessiveness of Porphyria, distorting his vision of her to the extent that he can only view her as “soiled”. In this Browning reveals the utter arrogance of the typical Victorian male, whose concerns lie narrowly focused on his self-worth, and his fear to repress and denounce any form of female sexuality unless it is directed to him.

In contrast to the pathetic desires of Porphyria’s lover to attain complete dominance over his mistress, *Andrea del Sarto* reveals the tragic story of a man who is utterly besotted to a woman who cares little for him. As a man set in the twilight of his career and married life, del Sarto’s “weary” rumination on his supposed failures as an artist who is celebrated solely for his faultless technique. The mimetic quality of the blank verse in this poem presents del Sarto’s monologue as genuine and sincere, the pleading inherent in his careful questionings is of “does it bring your heart?” “Will it? tenderly?” portraying Lucrezia as indifferent and callous towards his heartfelt confession. This overwhelming sense of pathos is augmented also by his desperation to capture her full attention for one moment in the “Oh, I’ll content him-but tomorrow, Love!” the exclamation serving as a burst of his frustrations with his wife’s detachment. This stringent desperation to be heard stands in stark contrast to the calculated and menacing jealousies of the speaker in *Porphyria’s Lover*, the accusatory accent created by the enjambement of “she/ Too weak” on “Too”, despite Porphyria’s intimate “murmuring(s)” of love and “worship” in dedication to him. Compared to the selfless and a tragically accepting nature of del Sarto, the speaker’s solipsistic need to be “worshipped” reveals his usurpation of the role of God, revealing his delusional arrogance and conceit which overcompensates for his self-evaluated insecurities. This obvious contrast between the attitudes of both men illustrates Browning’s

criticism on the flaws of the Victorian prudery, and the tendency of individuals to pontificate from public pulpits, influencing others to fall into scrutiny.

In *Andrea del Sarto*, Browning also intertwines his commentary on art and its susceptibility to become commodified. The pervasive irony that Lucrezia is simultaneously his muse and a definite contributor to his art becoming a pecuniary interest is the largest tragedy in this poem; as she is the only subject with which he can capture the essences of man's "soul". Lucrezia's "serpentine beauty" is revealed to work to del Sarto's detriment, her indifference to del Sarto and mercenary interests represented by the imagery of the snake: a biblical allusion to Lucrezia's seductiveness and her ability to deprive del Sarto of attaining full "pleasure" in his paintings. Revealed in his suggestion "Don't count the time either" is his belief that even though he struggles with his inadequacy both as a husband and also a painter, he does not regret anything; and that he is content with the meagre "love" he receives. In this revelation del Sarto ultimately triumphs, as he relishes the life he has led and the acknowledgement that in his attempt to attain perfection, he has gained a valuable experience. The 'philosophy of the imperfect' is an ideal endorsed by Browning in many of his poems, and also by his contemporaries. Much like del Sarto's acceptance and recognition of his failure's value, the speaker of *Never the Time and the Place* also comes to this realisation, exuberantly calling upon readers to embrace even the "malice" of a quarrel. Similarly to del Sarto's acknowledgement of this ideal, *Never the Time...*'s brief construction physically represents the fleeting nature of moments and the transitory nature of life, its one stanza structure serving as a literal flash in time. This celebration of life in all of its ailments and pleasures ultimately encapsulate's Browning sentiments, the exclamation marks that populate the poem contributing to the rising sense of intonation overall. Despite the negative connotations of "Never" as the leading word of both the title and poem itself, it is Browning's technical abilities and his belief in the transcendent power of love that bequeaths an energetic vitality on man's outlook on life. Browning purports to instruct readers to engage rather than merely observe the fleeting occurrences in life, placing those such as Porphyria's lover as the true failures against the primordial vastness of time and humanity. Thus, all three poems encapsulate Browning's concerns regarding the complexities of the temporal world, channelling the essences of man's nature. His dazzling inventiveness and ability to occupy the minds of a vast and conflicting array of characters reveals his technical mastery, enabling him to combine form and blank verse, along with the appreciation of art with the acknowledgement that even it is not exempt from limitations. If anything truly unites Browning's work, it is an ultimate faith in the belief that we, as mortals, should celebrate "the life", as man's corporeal existence when set against the grand scheme of time, is a flicker that should be fully celebrated.

### Sample 3

**Nominated text:** *Heart of Darkness* – Joseph Conrad

'They were nothing earthly now - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation' - a description painting a bleak image of the inhuman degradation that had occurred. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a polemic focused on Europe's 'Scramble for Africa': its annexation of it in the late nineteenth century. On a first reading, one may indeed comprehend Marlow's, at times, racist views to be an accurate reflection of Conrad's own. However, through a series of techniques employed to create distance between the two, it becomes apparent that Conrad is constructing the novella, not confined by it.

'It was as though a veil had been rent'. Imagery of sight and the veil are conceits sustained throughout the novella as Conrad aims to position the reader to see how 'blind' - a word reinforcing its permanent, inhibitory state – the 'miracles' – a word whose religious connotations are employed ironically to expose how far indeed the Company's values are from any God other than an ivory one - are to both reality and their humanity. Indeed, this is an idea introduced at the beginning of the novella as on the Thames River, the nameless narrator describes how 'a gauzy, fabric... draped the lower shores' – an observation that immediately includes the British Empire in Conrad's deconstruction of imperialism. One that carries through to the 'Grove of Death' where the Company Chief Account is described as being 'barred by light'. For the effect

of this aims to position the reader to see how it is only when the veil is lifted or torn that a moment of true clarity can be attained – an idea extended by Conrad's premature and atmospheric repetition of 'the horror!' to prompt the reader to question: to what morality is he 'in the dark', to what guise does he reside underneath? The idea regarding to what extent the 'bewitched pilgrims' of the company have succumbed to their infatuation, if not idolatry with ivory – an idea supported by the phrase: 'the word ivory was whispered, was sighed', comma employed to draw out the sentence emphasising its ubiquitous presence – is epitomized through a series of juxtapositions between the 'grove of death': a place of 'moribund shapes' and the chief accountant's reaction to it. For not only is the place itself described in the most bleak, degenerative terms – what is emphasised through repetition of 'dark' and 'gloom' – but when compared to the 'sort of vision': his 'snowy trousers', 'varnished boots' and declaration that 'everything is satisfactory' despite the 'sick man dying' in his office, the reader is positioned to see that 'men going at it blind' is indeed what 'the fantastic invasion' has brought. This lack of the Carlylean humanitarian idea that is to 'do the work for the work's sake', Conrad promotes, is the consequence of both Europe's supposition that it has the right and duty to 'improve, humanize and instruct' 'backwards people' and man's 'rapacious lusts that drive it'. What is ultimately supported by Conrad's employment of euphemistically styled functionary names eg 'Company chief accountant' and the state of the 'grove of death' itself: what with its 'discarded and rusty pipes' alludes to how like them, once their purpose is served, Africa's 'savages' are 'left' to die: discarded. It is perhaps here that the most controversial idea of Heart of Darkness is raised: that Africa and its 'dark forces' unleash or cause the 'de-civilisation' of the European man.

Indeed, it is this idea that founds the basis of critiques made by those such as Achebe as he condemned Conrad as a 'bloody racist' for 'eliminating Africa's human factor': thus reducing it and its peoples to a 'dark continent'. And there are moments when this is justified for Marlow, in numerous moments, strips who he describes as 'cannibals' of their agency. One may initially observe this in how the natives are often described as a collective: 'they all worshipped'. And yet, perhaps its epitome is in the 'grove of death' and after the attack on the steamer as it sailed up the Congo as Marlow characterises the African's as animals: [he] went off on all fours to the river to drink', 'he lapped out of his hand', '[he] let his wooly head fall'. It is an idea again reinforced through the descriptions of them eating 'hippo meat' and the 'restraint' – an idea employed ironically by Conrad to emphasise the company's lack of – they held in 'not eating [them]'. And yet, through employment of frame tale narrative structure and a constant stream of interruptions: 'try to be civil Marlow', the reader is positioned at two removes to acknowledge that indeed, these are not Conrad's personal values, they are Marlow's and the racist voices of those – such as his aunt – that are given time and space to expose the 'not' that is being espoused.

Furthermore, there are as many, if not more, moments in which Conrad's iconoclastic views transfer through to Marlow's and the ways in which he related to and interpreted the shadow. For it is ultimately through Marlow's challenging narrating voice – an idea demonstrated both at the 'grove of death' when he contradicts 'Kurtz's last disciple's' claim that 'the rebel heads' – as condemned by Marlow's grim mirth: 'they looked subdued to me' by stating 'they were not enemies or criminals... they were dying. And later at the death of Kurtz himself as 'all the pilgrims rushed out to see' 'but [he]' remained. That Conrad is able to undermine not only Marlow's, but Europe and King Leopold II's portrayal of imperialism as 'a philanthropic desire is to wean those ignorant millions of their horrid ways': its 'mission' as 'a beacon on the road to better things' – one that all these places left 'in darkness' can aspire to follow. Furthermore, indeed, Conrad utterly condemns the company – the papier maché Mephistopheles - a characterisation oozing sardonic contempt – for the harm they caused Africa. An idea epitomized by the Eldorado Exploring Expedition where fate – as existing consistent with the fabled mother lode – is recalled in a cold tone as 'they got what they deserved.' However, 'the shadow' - what was later described by Jung as the dark part of the ego the conscious self doesn't associate with - is what Conrad chooses to focus on. Once a 'universal genius' who could have been 'a politician' – it was through 'looking over the edge' that Kurtz became so enthralled

*by the commodity he sought that he actually in became it: 'an ivory hall' 'an ivory face'. It is thus here that 'the horror!' is exposed – What Conrad reveals is the rapacious lusts – a seduction to their temptations: eg. the 'wild gorgeous apparition of woman' that one most destructive to oneself and others.*

*Despite the lack of clarity that prevails the novella - what one might expect from a modernist text - on one front the views of Marlow and Kurtz are united. Europe's 'conquering of the earth' was a 'vile loot' where drives exist within all our 'hearts of darkness' what we must take caution in delving into just as much today.*

#### **Sample 4**

**Nominated text:** *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and other Stories* – Annie Proulx

*Set against the "harsh and unforgiving" backdrop of the Wyoming landscape, Annie Proulx's distinctly austere yet poetic prose and rich resonant metaphors elucidate the plight of those struggling to find a sense of self amidst the "violent country" of elemental vastness. Through this gritty realism, Proulx delves into the contradictory, often destructive concept of masculinity, embodied in the characters of Rasmussen, Aladdin, Ennis and Jack, and challenges traditional gender roles in a scathing social commentary.*

*The landscape pervades each short story, omnipotent and God-like in its all-controlling power. The violence of Wyoming society is imbued within all cultural facets, the land both revered as "smooth" and beautiful, and feared for its destructive power. Described using charged, energised language, the "wind rocking the trailer, hissing", the "scratching of fine gravel and sand", the wind conveys the way in which the country encroaches on human life, insistent and invasive. The hellish depiction of the landscape, "a purgatory of monstrous waves and terrible winds", cities "a smoking mass shrugging out of the plains", portrays the utter desolation and difficulty of living amidst the "roaring" elemental forces, the harsh existence of its inhabitants, and the way in which humans are insignificant and vulnerable to the powerful, often brutal landscape which surrounds them.*

*In this dismal drudgery, Proulx highlights the concept of fate and futility, the helplessness of humans in an oppressive society. Ennis' life is dictated by his poverty and inability to go to school as his "truck broke down", "pitching him directly into ranch work". Controlled by external forces, ambition becomes redundant, the characters rendered trapped in a demanding and bleak life on the ranch. 'The Bunchgrass Edge of the World' represents this notion, as bunchgrass is found at the outskirts of habitable land. Similarly, Ottaline stands on the precipice of complete isolation, cut off from human connection through the physical and emotional barrier of the "Red Wall". Constrained by her "height" and her father's refusal to allow her to leave the ranch, Ottaline's desperate loneliness manifests itself on the "tractor", "feeling an awful thrill" from the sense of connection and desire. This notion of survival amidst the uncontrollable external oppression of the landscape and the agricultural lifestyle, the character's mechanisms to cope vary from Rasmussen's "imagined" "distant sea", Ottaline's eating and personification of the tractor and Aladdin's insomnia. "Rising in the black wintry morning", he finds refuge in "breaking loose rusty bolts, cleaning mucky fittings", the mundane tasks to maintain sanity. Prone to the cruel, controlling life in Wyoming, Proulx evinces the desperation of people in a futile, crude life: the necessity to escape the harsh reality of their existence, for their oppressive society "ain't fixable".*

*Proulx explores the deeply engrained societal notion of gender roles, the contrived and rigid ideals of masculinity which ultimately create a destructive and stringent society. The concept of impenetrable masculinity and the myth of the tough unfeeling man is embodied in the upbringing of Jack and Ennis in passage three, who were "brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life". The expectation of men to maintain a harsh facade and repressing emotion results in this psychological turmoil and ultimate demise of those who do not embody the ideal of virile masculinity. Rasmussen, who is "smart with numbers" and "read books", whilst being "indifferent to stock" demonstrates the peril*

of existing in an “invented” world, the danger of being a sensitive and intelligent male living in Wyoming. As Rasmussen is ultimately killed, and physically emasculated through horrific castration, Proulx illuminates the prejudiced and punitive nature of a close-minded society. Ennis presents a metaphorical emasculation, as his inability to survive as a macho, heterosexual male results in him “having to stay with his daughter”, a shameful and demoralising act for a male expected to provide for his family. However, through the strict social expectations of men inevitably arises the oppression of women, who are rendered disempowered in a patriarchal society. ‘Neglected as daughters are’, the only option for women is “marriage”, as their lives are dictated by the male authoritarians in their lives.

By elucidating the constraining gender roles within society, Proulx challenges and subverts heteronormative ideals, and ultimately exposes the deeply destructive societal effect of rigid notions of sexuality. The idea that masculinity and heterosexuality are intrinsically linked is challenged through the characters of Jack and Ennis. Despite the tough and crude model of masculinity both men embody, the tender and caring relationship between them suggests their love is the same: whether heterosexual or homosexual. The lyrical language “rewarm that old, cold time”, the elongated vowels imbues their relationship with a sense of nostalgia, the notion that Ennis’ blissful memory is not marred by the reality of an intolerant society. Whilst the “rocking” wind presents a harsh environment, it also represents change, the shifting between past and present, memory and reality, ignorance and acceptance. The poignant image of “the shirts hanging on a nail” and the movement of “shudder in the wind” convey the societal shift in the perception of homosexuality, the gradual tolerance and understanding that occurs over the span of the narrative. Indeed, as Proulx illuminates the destructive, horrific and violent outcomes of repressive gender roles, evident through the death of Rasmussen, Jack and Aladdin, she incites the same societal change, encouraging readers to move towards acceptance and compassion.

Proulx’s short stories offer a gritty realism which exposes the plight of those living amidst the violent, harsh Wyoming country. Through elucidating the struggles of those pushed to the peripheries of society, and challenging societal perceptions, Proulx ultimately employs the powerful mechanism of literature to engage the transformative and healing power of human empathy.

### Sample 5

**Nominated text:** *Rhinoceros* – Eugène Ionesco

The nascent iconoclasm rife in 20<sup>th</sup> century society gave rise to a culture that critiqued the fundamental value of life. The union of the brutal *Rhinoceros* with human complacency in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* serves to expose the inherent absence of meaning that is to be found in contemporary society.

Constant, sharp interruptions in dialogue permeate the play and create a disjointed rhythm that prevents meaning from being derived from communication. Despite Jean and Berenger’s supposed status as good friends and Jean’s own self-proclaimed “cultured” self, Jean’s constant interruption of Berenger in Act 1 with the patronising “my dear Berenger” and finishing Berenger’s sentences “... that you were making fun of me” are wielded to emphasise the inherent unwillingness of man to partake in discussion – denouncing language and communication as worthless, as Berenger’s attempt to explain to Jean that he does not seek to criticise him is continuously rebuked. The succinct, sharp dialogue that rises in intensity throughout the duration of their argument “that’s impossible” is broken by the action of Berenger who “yawns”. The action of yawning as an attempt to defuse the emotive argument represents the absence of genuine stimulation that an empty conversation brings. Indeed, communication serves no purpose if genuine meaning is unable to be conveyed to one party by another. As a play conscious of the necessity of language and dialogue to create meaning for its audience, *Rhinoceros* remains conscious of this ironic denouncement of conventional speech as it progresses.

*Springboarding from the futility of communication is an overall critique of the media that perpetuates conformity and an absence of genuine attention to important issues. The setting of the office mimics the standard bourgeoisie lifestyle of contemporaries, and Ionesco allows the audience to assume the stereotype that the inhabitants within are of intellect, as office workers ought to be. However, opening Act II as the stage set as a “tableau vivant” renders the universe of the play conscious of its separation from the ‘reality’ of its viewers. The dialogue between the office workers thus mocks stereotypical intellectualism through the absurd “dead cats column” being discussed with sincere seriousness. Botard, who speaks as a “former teacher” hence assumes intellectual superiority and is representative of the issue with intellectualism via the pompous “great stumbling blocks of our time” and “one should never miss an occasion to denounce [the colour bar]”. The inclusive “our” and distant referral to the self as “one” deliberately give Botard as a character self-importance, but viewers who remain distant from the universe as spectators recognise that in fact Botard’s intellectualism is a farce. He, like others in modern society has fallen prey to the trap of assumed superiority and in doing so has prevented himself from genuine, intellectual growth. Whilst humorous on the surface there remains a dark pessimism towards people like him as the sarcastic laugh of Botard “Ha! Ha! Ha!” in his blind arrogance creates an unsettling awareness that it is the collective mindset of people like Botard which contributes to the absence of focus on genuinely important modern issues.*

*Berenger stands alone at the conclusion of Rhinoceros, yet the dialogue he wields through his monologue to the audience reveals the dependence of man on language – and thus purposefully contradicts to some degree the critique on language permeating the play. However Berenger’s moment of weakness is reliant on the words of others. The reference to “what Daisy said” followed by the physical staging of Berenger as he examines himself in the mirror is supplemented by violent, purposeful verbs “rushes”, “darts” and “throws furiously”. The symbolic function of the mirror as a reflection of oneself in conjunction with Berenger’s distorted confusion regarding his own identity represents that who Berenger is examining is no longer himself as a singular being, but humanity as a whole that he exists as a member of. The repetitive “I’m not good-looking, I’m not good-looking” by Berenger as he slips into admiration of the physical beauty of the rhinoceros and its attempt at mimicry “he attempts to irritate them. Ahh, Ahh, Brr!” indicates the instinctual, selfish desire of man to embrace the brutality of instinct and renounce communication. That this desire is able to affect Berenger, the supposed champion of humanity reveals to some degree man’s weakness. However as Berenger in his final line declares “I’m not capitulating!”, Ionesco thus redeems Berenger to his initial appreciative humanity. Berenger’s susceptibility to both vices and virtues are symbolic of humanity as a whole. Ultimately, all humans have the capacity for genuine individualism and morality just as they are equally capable of brutality. Through acknowledging this, in the context of post-WWII society viewers emerge from Rhinoceros with renewed understanding of humanity as encompassing both good and evil.*

*Rhinoceros deliberately both endorses and critiques facets of modern society in order to ultimately reveal what it truly means to exist as a human stripped of the pretence of purpose granted by duty and conversation.*

### **Sample 6**

**Nominated text:** *Coriolanus* – William Shakespeare

*Shakespeare, through the voice of the Third Citizen, immediately presents the tragic dichotomy that is Coriolanus – “never a worthier man” in his service for Rome yet dogged in his refusal to “incline to the people”. In a reflection of a burgeoning political discourse in Jacobean England, as pertaining to local elections, Shakespeare asserts that the blossoming significance of the individual voice through the necessity of obtaining “our (the citizen’s) voices with our own tongues” before Coriolanus can ascend to the consulship. Coriolanus’ fatal miscalculation of the superior worth of the unambiguous sword to the potentially duplicitous language he rejects seals his fate as maligned son of Rome, as Shakespeare warns against a dangerous absolutism.*

*In passage one, Shakespeare illuminates Coriolanus' intrinsic sense of superiority, which fuels his absolute ideology, through his undisguised contempt for the plebeians, whose "voices" he needs. The necessity of attaining these "voices" presents the weight and worth of speech in the public, political realm. This sharply contrasts the dedication to military action and service which Coriolanus espouses, his disdain for the citizens based on their cowardice in Corioles where they "ran from th' noise of (Rome's) own drums", leaving Coriolanus to achieve victory "alone". Coriolanus' complete scorn towards the common people is entirely unchecked, as he tells Menenius "Plague upon't!" and "Hang 'em!". His rejection of this formal ritual and the "gown of humility", along with his wish "they would forget me" rather than be praised, highlight an intrinsic disjunction between Rome and her hero. Coriolanus follows not in the footsteps of other "worthiest men", and his scorn for the very people he fights to protect, who gave him purpose, paints him as not only naive but inherently self-destructive.*

*Shakespeare further explores the misguided ideology of Coriolanus through his insistence in a chain of being which reduces the plebeians and elevates the patricians to "divines". The primacy of Coriolanus' last insult of the citizens in passage one, a request for them to "wash their faces" and keep their teeth clean", highlights Coriolanus' dehumanisation of this group as innately inferior. This view allows Coriolanus to be construed by the tribunes as "chief of the enemy of the people" and "dog to the commonality." The tribunes' manipulation is aided greatly, however, by Coriolanus himself, whose absolutism and unrelenting rudeness mark him as fatally predictable. Shakespeare exhibits the extent of this capacity to be provoked as Coriolanus asserts he "cannot bring (his) tongue" to speak against his heart's truth. His "heart", as described by Menenius, is indistinguishable from his "mouth" and thus the tribunes successfully "incensed the rabble", as Shakespeare depicts Coriolanus' fixedness as catalyst for his exile.*

*In passage two, however, Shakespeare emphasises the opposing side of the unresolved dichotomy of Coriolanus – his unquestionable service for Rome. Virgilia and Volumnia will provide a counter to the hyper-masculine climate of the play as they exalt their husband and son's service over the duplicitous language and political expediency of the Tribunes. The repetition of Coriolanus' "wounds" and "blows" enshrine his service in his physicality, his work for "Rome's good" becoming inextricably linked to the man. The jeering tone that accompanies Volumnia's attack on the Tribune's "wise words" aligns her with her son's ideological preference of concrete service. Despite this, as the Volscies, led by Coriolanus, threaten to "Plow Rome", words and language become the necessary tool to save their fatherland.*

*In passage three, Aufidius ironically praises Coriolanus for his "stopped" ears and refusal to admit a "private whisper" in the face of appeals from Menenius, shortly before the exemplar of action is won over by the words of his mother. The mocking "ha!" that precedes the entrance of the women, and Coriolanus' assertion that he will "lend ear" to no-one else contribute also to the poignancy of his eventual concession. The strong imperative commands "But out, affection" and "All bond and privilege of nature, break!" strengthen the questionable morality and absolutism that Coriolanus so obstinately adheres to, rejecting human affection and cementing his role as an outsider from his city and even mankind at large. The bizarre pairing of "virtuous" and "obstinate" solidifies this obscure and ideology. Despite the exertions of Coriolanus to be unyielding, the feminising capacity of Volumnia, Virgilia and Valeria reigns victorious, as Shakespeare presents the dire need for humanity in a war and politics obsessed society.*

*Although Rome is saved, Coriolanus' innate opposition to the plebeians sees him become the necessary sacrifice to safeguard this fledgling republic, as "What is the city but the people?" The violence of Coriolanus' ensuing murder by the Volscies cements Shakespeare's warnings against a too rigid ideology or absolutism, as he presents a cautionary tale of the dangers of political expediency, dangers which feasted upon the tragically unresolved dichotomy of Coriolanus.*

**Sample 7****Nominated text:** *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* – Seamus Heaney

*Mulling over a personal and national “cud and of memory”, celebrated poet Seamus Heaney draws on the cyclic nature of “cud” to reveal how Ireland’s history is being violently regurgitated into her present. This seamless duality of past and present exposes Heaney’s unresolved fascination with the past which is evident in his continuous swinging and merging between tenses in his works. Simultaneously, the comforting bovine image of “cud” introduces the prevalence of the agricultural and natural world in the social identity of Ireland that Heaney’s poetry works to define.*

*The piercing slim quatrains of poems like Funeral Rites are visually reminiscent of a tool for digging, mirroring the way that Heaney’s poetry exists as a method of exhuming his own identity and the role of the poet from Ireland’s troubled state. He justifies his departure from his agricultural family traditions in Poem where he exposes that beneath his delight in the natural world is an ineptitude with the land. The long vowel sounds when he toils with “heavy spade till sods were piled” denotes and fatiguing effort in manual labour that contrasts to the ease of his father in Follower. This is accentuated with repetition of “sods” and “sow” in the second quatrain that mimic his cycle of agricultural failure and cause him to instead turn to the pen and “dig with it”, maintaining his enthusiasm for the land but in a different area. Yet it is within The Otter that Heaney too comes to regret the shortcomings of his craft where he describes his relationship with lyric as one “close and deep/As the atmosphere on water”. Just like his marital relationship the lateral and elongated vowel sounds lend a profundity to their connection, but he regrets the way that just like the “atmosphere on water”, his words can only hover over the surface of the depth of the “pool of the moment” that he wishes to immortalise in poetry. The continuation of the water motif laden with lateral sounds and languid vowel sounds contrasts to the light “i” sounds of his lyric that “thinned and disappointed” in contrast to its content. Thus, Heaney poetry is undercut by subtle gestures that lament the role of his craft to capture reality and this is intertwined with its role in his identity.*

*Moving away from his focus on his own identity, Heaney encompasses the changing world of Ireland and laments the sectarian divisions that divide it. Introducing the death that filled his childhood with references to the “igloo brows” of the deceased and the “black glaciers” of the funeral procession, Heaney makes use of the cold nature of “glacier[s] and igloo[s]” to depict his detachment from the proceedings where long vowel sounds give a sense of the time and comfort that was allowed in the wake of a death. Yet cutting to Ireland’s present, Heaney presents a world where “neighbourly murder” is rampant. The arrogant plosive sounds act as the same unexpected interjection into the poem that these sectarian deaths of Ireland’s present are for Heaney, a far cry from the deaths in his childhood. The contrast of the loving and familiar connotations of neighbourhood exist in sharp dichotomy to the hateful ones of murder, and Heaney’s unity of these juxtapositions exposes the unnatural anarchy that is dominating modern Ireland. This transformation from peace and comfort into violent chaos is a source of lamentation for Heaney and the basis of his focus on reversing the change to restore unity once again.*

*On both a personal and social level, Heaney champions the power and beauty of union. From the intimate depth that he shares with his wife in Poem for Marie and The Otter arises a pure and uncomplicated joy in togetherness. The first lines of the opening and closing quatrains of Poem from “I shall perfect for you” to “you shall perfect for me” see a reversal in pronouns that accentuates the role of both of them in the relationship. This connection, immortalised with a loving depth in the elongated vowels of “the “slow loading” of their marriage and the reference in “printing the stones” of an otters life partnership, has realigned Heaney’s life “within new limits”. He presents the weakness of his lone self whose “small imperfect limits would keep breaking” and fortifies these with the love of his wife to “square the circle”. Appearing an impossible geometric feat, Heaney presents the insurmountable power of solidarity as well as referencing his domestic joy of house and marriage in the “four walls and a ring”. Aspiring to bring this same joy and union to Ireland on a social level, Heaney adopts the conditional tense to imagine how*



he “would restore” the ceremonies of old where people come “out of side-streets and by-roads” to “nose into line” in “our slow triumph”. The microdetails of the “side-streets and by-roads” demonstrate how all encompassing such a state of unity could be, where the solidarity is validated in the inclusive pronoun “our”. To achieve such a utopic state, Heaney presents the vitality of unifying all facets of Irish identity including the pagan beginnings referenced in “cupmarked stones” and the “chambres of Boyne” which is also a site of Irish Anglican significance. He wishes to merge these with the “little gleaming crosses” of Catholicism and achieves this in the triumphant image of the Irish people like a “serpent” that “drags its tail out of the gap of North”. The pagan reference to Saint Patrick fortifies this image of Ireland working together as a singularity to lead their country out of the sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland and restore a state of unified solidarity and peace

### Sample 8

#### Nominated text: *Pygmalion* – George Bernard Shaw

Written at the end of the Victorian era, Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* scrutinises the arbitrary nature of class in 20<sup>th</sup> century England. Ironically reworking Ovid’s Myth, Shaw provides a commentary on the superior and often misogynistic attitudes that exacerbated a social divide.

Instead of transforming Liza from a ‘flower girl’ to a ‘duchess’, Higgins’ ‘experiment’ allows a naive working class girl to become an autonomous woman. Higgins’ ‘job’ was successful in changing the superficial aspects of Liza, but unable to alter her personality. Liza’s sense of autonomy is evident in her initial protests ‘I got my feelings same as anyone else’ and she is adamant that ‘[she has] as good a right ... as anyone else’. Her more articulate and astute realisations of Higgins’ insensitivity and inability to see the ‘trouble it would make for [her]’ confirm Liza’s everpresent sense of individuality. When viewed thru a feminist lens *Pygmalion* endorses equality for women in society. Predominantly raised by his single mother, Shaw was disappointed by misogynistic attitudes in society of the time.

Shaw often employs minor characters as a mouthpiece for his own views and attitudes. Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins are aware, experienced and autonomous females who are sympathetic to Liza’s situation and advocate for Higgins to ‘look ahead a little’ to the implications of his ‘experiment’. Higgins’ preoccupation with Liza’s ‘voice and appearance’ is criticised by Liza herself, as she protests that her ‘soul’ cannot be kept and replicated with a ‘gramophone’ and ‘photographs’.

Shaw criticises super middle class attitudes, as being potentially detrimental to society. Higgins’ insensitive behaviour, like ‘an impetuous baby’ represents the common disregard for the working class. His assumption to be able to ‘throw [Liza] back in the gutter’ because she doesn’t have ‘any feelings’ presents an ignorance of middle class status. Shaw employs symbols to represent the affectations of middle class luxury. Chocolate and taxis initially symbolise a coveted status for Liza. In her final confrontation with Higgins, she explains ‘what I did wasn’t for the chocolates and taxis’. The motif of Higgins’ slippers also serves a symbol of luxury, while criticising his misogynistic attitudes that expect Liza to ‘fetch’ them. The desperation of the Eynsford Hills to retain the ‘new small talk’ expresses the middle class focus on superficialities and status. Mocking the superiority of the middle class, Shaw criticises such attitudes as harmful to the ‘gulf’ in society.

Shaw exposes the arbitrary nature of class through the juxtaposition of the various characters. The central irony is that Liza, a working class girl, has better manners than Higgins a middle class ‘gentleman’. The more perceptive behaviour of Pickering often contrasts that of Higgins, exposing the random nature of class divides. The Eynsford Hills’ aspiration to stay in the middle-class is exposed in their adoption of the ‘new small talk’ and Mrs Eynsford Hill’s disapproval of Liza’s ‘father [pouring] spirits down her throat like that’. The amalgamation of characters from different social classes allows contrast in their behaviour, thus revealing Shaw’s view that class definition is arbitrary and illogical.

*Exposing the pitfalls of the old Victorian class system, Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion mocks the views and behaviour of such an illogical social structure. Shaw's own disapproval of superiority and misogyny are also conveyed in the play, which subverts audiences' expectations of typical attitudes of the Edwardian era.*