



A-Level

English Literature B

7717/C NEA Theory and Independence

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Overall performance

This is a well-established unit, and many teachers are very experienced in guiding students through it to reach successful outcomes. Moderators were often delighted by the essays that they saw. This was the result of the different ways in which centres had introduced their students to theoretical ideas and had allowed them independence.

Areas where students excelled

- With good text choice and sensibly phrased tasks, students engaged in precise debates about meanings.
- The majority of centres are encouraging independence, leading to enthusiastic responses from their students.
- Students who had studied the theoretical approaches carefully were able to write subtly and perceptively about them.

Areas where students struggled

- Tasks which did not set up debate, or allow independent thought, limited students' opportunities.
- Students who were not familiar with the Critical Anthology struggled to use literary theory effectively in their responses.

Students' performance

The non-examined unit offers students an opportunity to plan their essays carefully, to write slowly and to proofread their work before submission. Moderators are therefore often impressed by the quality of students' writing. Essays in which students have taken advantage of these opportunities are a joy to read. It is also clear that slowing down the essay-writing process in this way will be of benefit to students when they must write under pressure in the examined units. An obvious sign that a student has not exploited this advantage is that the conclusion to an essay comes as a surprise. In addition to this, when assessing the work, some centres overlook errors in writing, awarding high marks to students who regularly make basic grammatical errors. Centres are encouraged to acknowledge and promote the importance of accurate and well-organised writing.

Students who were successful in this unit demonstrated that they were interested in and engaged by their chosen writers' work, particularly when placed under the lens of their chosen theoretical approach. These students could explore the processes in which meanings are created with clarity. Writing about the forms and structures that writers use is an excellent starting point here. Students who focus solely on language analysis can sometimes miss the wider significance of the choices that writers make.

It is pleasing to report that very few students are still including 'bolt-on' sections of biographical or historical context in their NEA essays. Those few who did, used-up words that might have been better deployed in other ways.

Comments from a handful of centres on their students' work reveal a slight misconception about literary context. There is no requirement to refer to the work of other writers. Students who put their chosen text under the lens of a literary theory, and use the Critical Anthology to explore meanings, are looking at their text in the context of other texts. When students feel that they need to refer to other literary texts, often ones that they have not read, they risk losing focus on the questions that they have been set.

Students must be encouraged to set up genuine debates about meanings in their texts. Task-setting is key here, and centres are urged to play an active part in making sure that students are set tasks that connect their text to an aspect of the Critical Anthology in a way that encourages debate. Tasks which asked, for example, for a 'Marxist reading' of a text, or asked students to 'examine nature' in another text, did not encourage students to debate. The suggested 1500-word limit is a maximum, and not a requirement. Tasks which were complex or opaque in their wording often led students to flounder and write far too much. Short, direct, open tasks usually work best.

Task-setting and Text Choice

Good and bad practice

Successful task-setting is key to this unit. Where centres are actively engaged in helping students phrase their questions carefully, outcomes tend to be more successful. Tasks should encourage debate about meanings in literary texts, informed by ideas taken from the Critical Anthology. The very worst tasks seen by moderators ignored the anthology altogether. Not asking students to focus on a particular theory prevents them from accessing AO4.

As the assessment objectives are the same across the specification, centres are encouraged to look at tasks set in the examined units for models of how to set tasks in the NEA. Tasks that open with a critical position and ask students to debate its validity, for example, usually work well. Key stems such as 'To what extent...' or 'Explore the significance of...' have, over many years, been successful starting points. Centres are reminded that we cannot reliably know an author's intention. This specification, in its focus on independent applications of theory, privileges reader response over authorial intention. Tasks that asked students, for example, to prove Atwood's Marxist intentions, or Duffy's feminist ones often led students into some ill-informed biographical Googling, and away from the texts themselves. Successful tasks are therefore focused on the text, not the author. For example, 'To what extent is Sylvia Plath a feminist?' is not as helpful a question as, 'To what extent does *Ariel* promote female empowerment?' The latter question invites a genuine debate about how a student might respond to *Ariel*, and implies some understanding of feminist literary theory, and debates about female empowerment, as outlined in the Critical Anthology.

Pairing the right theory with a text is important. Dystopian fiction is a popular choice on this unit, with *1984* very commonly used. Eco-critical, feminist and narrative approaches to this text often open a clean line of argument through it, building to a well-supported conclusion. However, students often find Marxist readings of texts depicting imagined, futuristic societies difficult to construct. They too often fall into the trap of simply describing the systems of oppression that writers such as Orwell think up or getting side-tracked by authors' possible views about communism. Here again, following careful study of the Critical Anthology, students are able to find more fruitful routes through these texts. Centres are encouraged, as always, to contact their NEA advisers for assistance with task-setting.

It was pleasing to see a good range of poetry used in this year's submission. Students had been allowed and encouraged to explore some interesting contemporary poets: particular highlights were Kim Moore, Najwan Darwish, Ocean Vuong, Gabriel Okara, Luke Wright, Mahmoud Darwish, Jason Purcell and Warsan Shire. Of course, more established poets work well, and very strong essays and re-creative responses were produced about writers such as Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, Allen Ginsberg, Wilfred Owen and Robert Frost.

When considering text length and complexity, looking at the examined units is again advised. One centre had allowed students to explore complete epic poems such as *Omeros* and *Paradise Lost*. Choosing a section from these long works gives students a better chance of dealing with the authors' methods than expecting them to be able to manage an analysis of the entire text in 1500 words.

The unit is entitled 'Theory and Independence'. Moderators have long noted that centres that allow students a degree of guided and well-advised independence, over task-setting or text choice, tend to achieve very successful outcomes. Developing independent thinking in this way will also help students in the examined units, where knowing how to think is more valuable than knowing what to think. There are still centres who take the path of least resistance through the unit, teaching a limited number of poems and short stories to an entire cohort, and then setting a small number of questions. Students who are taught the unit in this limited way, do not benefit from being able to work independently, often feeling obliged to integrate specific points into their arguments, some of which do not fit particularly well.

Administration

What centres did well

This was the first year in which students' work was submitted to moderators electronically. Moderators reported that, in the vast majority of cases, centres managed this very effectively. Markers' comments were legible, and it was easy to see the marks that centres had awarded individual students. Moderators were similarly pleased to report that any problems or errors in uploading material to Centre Mark Submissions were rectified quickly by centres. A handful of centres are marking students' work on screen and saving their comments electronically. Electronic submission meant early submission by large numbers of centres this year.

Common misunderstandings

A few minor inconveniences were seen and could be avoided in future. Some essays had pages out of order, upside down and, very occasionally, missing altogether. Some centres had defaulted to scanning essays double-sided, resulting in a lot of blank pages. Sending JPEGs of photographed work is to be avoided if possible. Also, please remember to include a Candidate Record Form for each folder, on which the marks for each essay are clearly visible.

In Conclusion

It is common to read on moderators' feedback forms that, 'It was a pleasure to work on this centre's sample.' Centres are warmly thanked for their efforts in making this the case. They are encouraging the joy of literary discoveries in their students, guiding them through the process of forming a meaningful argument, assessing accurately and in detail and finally supporting their students with careful administration of the sample. Moderators are aware that this is no mean feat.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [results statistics](#) page of our website.

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Professional development

Attend one of our feedback [courses](#) where you can review example responses from students and commentaries from our examiners.

Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

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