

2021 VCE Literature external assessment report

General comments

In the Literature examination, students are asked to write on two different texts, from two different categories in the prescribed text list: novels, plays, short stories, poetry and other literature. There are 30 texts on the Literature text list, all chosen for their literary merit and potential for assessment tasks across the year. While teachers will choose some texts only for school coursework tasks or for tasks completed early in the year, they are encouraged to consider a range of possibilities in their choice of texts for student examination preparation.

Most students attempted the complete examination; there were few responses that were substantially incomplete.

The two sections of the paper, Section A and Section B, are constructed differently, with separate assessment criteria, and students need to be aware of the different requirements of these tasks. The revised 'Expected qualities for the mark range' for Section A were published on the VCAA website in 2021 in order to clarify and emphasise the idea of relevance to the topic. Students should clearly indicate which is their Section A response and which is their Section B response.

Some students appeared not to have understood these requirements, writing on two novels or two plays, for example, writing about a film adaptation, or even writing two essays on the same text. Many other students wrote hybrid essays that attempted to use the Section A topic and the Section B passages for both their essays. While students are not prevented from drawing evidence for their argument in Section A from the Section B passages on the examination, to base the Section A essay exclusively on the passages is a limitation. Students should be demonstrating wide-ranging knowledge of the text in their discussion of the proposition. Conversely, students who set up the Section A topic as the focus for their Section B essay missed many opportunities for demonstrating how they built their reading of the text on the basis of the specific passages offered.

Several instances of prepared essays were noted. In Section B, prepared introductions often did not relate to the passages on the examination, and students found it difficult to combine their prepared ideas with the material offered. In some cases, students gave lengthy discussions of passages not on the examination, ignoring much of what was there. While some references beyond the set passages may be necessary to support an overall interpretation of the text, these should be both pertinent and incidental, serving very clearly to advance the discussion. In Section A, prepared student responses often addressed only some aspects of the topic.

Many students wrote very long essays. More is not necessarily better, however, and length is not a criterion in the assessment. Students are encouraged to slow down: write less, think more. Write more concisely and relevantly, write more legibly and write with a more considered focus on the task. The task is not to get down on paper all that the students know in as short a time as possible. That approach leads to irrelevance, rushed and poor handwriting and often some lack of coherence, as students are not selective in their approach to the tasks. The duration of the examination allows ample time for students to plan and respond to the tasks on the paper.

Some students appeared confused about the period in which their text was set or written, frequently misusing terms such as 'Edwardian', or revealing some confusion about centuries, dates and reigns. When

students want to invoke the historical context or social conventions of a particular era, as Section A in particular invites them to, it is important for them to understand what those conventions are and to use appropriate terms.

In Section B, many students seemed to be content with merely labelling features of a text, such as rhyme or metre, without elaborating on the effects on meaning. Terms such as ‘assonance’ and ‘alliteration’ were not always used correctly.

Responses that scored highly, some of which are reproduced below, displayed an agility in responding to the topic in Section A, giving relevant arguments and evidence and expressing their ideas clearly and eloquently. In Section B, many students wrote on poetry, and responses that scored highly engaged thoughtfully with the language of the passages – the imagery, connotations and intertextual references, rhythm and pacing of the language, tone and voice of the speaker(s), and so on – to offer a sense of the writer’s work as represented in the poems selected on the text list. Students are encouraged to explore these features in their discussions of prose texts and plays as well. Although not represented in the student examples below, the Shakespeare plays *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* were popular in both sections and students generally wrote well about them.

Specific information

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.

Section A

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0.2	0.2	0.4	1	1	2	3	5	5	7	8	12	11	13	10	8	5	4	2	1	12.55

The most popular texts for this section were *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Othello*, *North and South*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Ladies’ Paradise*. In this section, specific comments are made about student responses to different texts and suggestions are made about advice to be given to students.

In Section A it was essential that students respond to the topic in order to score in the higher ranges. As noted above, the revised ‘Expected qualities for the mark range’ were designed to clarify the idea of relevance. As Tennessee Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was the most popular choice in this section, it is worth giving some attention to this question.

The question on the paper asked: In Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, lies are less damaging than the truth. To what extent do you agree?

Many students, however, wrote responses that appeared to present related, but different, contentions, such as:

- In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, many characters lie to each other and themselves.
- In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, lies are damaging to all characters.
- In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, many characters are afraid of the truth.

These are all defensible propositions but they do not address the question. The comparative question asked students to consider the impact of both lies and truth and to compare the effects as they evolve in the play.

Students should practise ‘unpacking’ examination questions, in order to explore the shades of meaning in a topic or prepare to debate its absolutes. They should understand the term that is the subject of the topic: the author, the text or an issue. For example, in the question on *A Taste of Honey*, the text is the subject of the topic and a significant idea about ‘control’ is introduced: Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* suggests that individuals have no real control over their lives. To what extent do you agree?

The ‘To what extent do you agree?’ question is crucial in the topic, inviting students to find points of agreement and disagreement. Students should also consider whether all individuals in the play have ‘no real control’ and what that complex term means. What is the difference between ‘no control’ and ‘no real control’? Does this idea relate in any way to personal autonomy or social conditions? Do circumstances change for any of the characters as the play progresses?

There is no obligation for students to agree with the proposition and merely illustrate it. Nor, on the other hand, can they simply dismiss it and put forward a proposition of their own. They must engage with the terms offered in the topic.

A third example is the topic for Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, in which students were asked to ‘consider the proposition that ... Gaskell shows that the deepest divisions between people can be resolved’. Few students actually identified what they saw as ‘the deepest divisions’, although most did offer a perspective based on gender or class and saw those as elements of social division. In many cases, these ideas could have been developed further and some consideration could have been given to the extent to which Gaskell’s views aligned with those of Marx, or the extent to which a feminist reading would endorse the novel’s ending. In other words, students could have done more to critique the novel in the light of their chosen perspective.

Sample essays

Foreign Soil, Maxine Beneba Clarke

“New and Foreign” voices dominate the short story collection of Maxine Beneba Clarke. Foreign Soil explores a diverse range of experience and empowers those traditionally excluded from the literary arena by amplifying the African diasporic voice. Clarke honours those who have been subjugated and excluded by a lack of representation while also empowering their lived experience by defying the stifling thematic restraints of so called ‘book club material’.

Clarke discloses that to be voiceless, is to be on “Foreign Soil”. In ‘Shu Yi’ protagonist Ava feels alienated from her suburban Australian culture – neither a “real Aussie girl” or like “Salt N-Pepa and their black as [her] friends”. Through characterisation of Kellyville as “blonde-brick” suburbia where the “white-picket-fence dream” is alive. Clarke reveals the extent to which white washing can alienate those who are viewed as ‘other’. Ava heartbreakingly yearns to be “a little bit less” like herself, rejecting her blackness as “the hulking beast” in every room. Written in a first person narrative voice, the reader comes to understand and empathize with Ava. Clarke reveals the extent to which a lack of representations leads to a fetishisation of ‘othered’ bodies as Ava interprets the new girl Shu Yi to be “other world[ly] and the most “beautiful creature” she had ever seen, robbing her of her humanity and subjectivity. Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle argue that we “at once fear and desire” the other, shown analogously by Clarke as Ava shocks the reader by victimising Shu Yi. Robbed of any voice of power in her position as the school-victim, Ava enacts the ultimate role of conformity by similarly becoming an “oracle” spouting hate and labelling Shu Yi with a racist slur. Clarke additionally demonstrates the consequences of being pushed to the margins in “Railton Road”, as “rebel” history lecturer Solomon is reduced down to the sum of his “African originated” parts. Lacking voice and agency in the face of “White hate” and a history of exploitation, as a black man Solomon fights against being silenced. He fights against being “filed away” by the “slim-hipped, silky haired” curious white women who effectively silence him by robbing him of his

discrete identity as an individual. To be viewed as different and “exotic” as a result of a lack of authentic representation is shown by Clarke as the lived experience of those not offered a voice.

Then, *Foreign Soil* becomes a meeting place where characters are allowed to take agency through storytelling. Solomon’s lecture to the youth at the “rebel hub” becomes a powerful retelling of theological narratives which have previously enabled the “pacification of the subject race” (Edward Said). Clarke contends that by reclaiming the very “words” from Genesis that “the annihilation of the African continent” was “hung” on, outsiders can take control of their own narratives. In his dream that he was “Ancient Africa” and that his history had “no beginning” Clarke actively subverts Genesis in order to detail a more authentic experience of blackness. In ‘David’ Clarke also give voice to two mothers demonstrating how storytelling can be used to forge connection and surpass external limitations of gender, nation and age. Though “Little Sister” and “Aunty[‘s]” interaction is undeniably laced with conflict, Clarke’s dual narrative allows empathy and insight into both women’s lived experience. The unnamed narrator’s “short hair” and “jeans” are viewed as “not like a woman” by Asha, and “little sister” automatically assumes that her elder will take issue with everything she does. Clarke reveals though that “the patchwork” bike as a symbol for freedom and motherhood has the ability to surpass this cultural dissonance inherent to an intergenerational Australian identity. The narrative authority granted to Asha allows her to reconstruct and reclaim her final memory of her murdered son. The “red roar spraying” from David’s mouth is able to be separated from the laughter and joyous freedom of “flying” as the narrator does above the ground. Clarke grants Asha an opportunity to be heard not just be a fellow mother, but by a wider Australian audience rendering her experience, and her tragedy, visible. In the Villawood Detention centre in “The Stilt Fisherman of Kathaluwa”, Clarke moreover gives voice to Asanka, while respecting the Sanctity of his unique experience by writing in a third person narrative voice. Though he may feel he has “no tongue”, in *Foreign Soil* Asanka’s story is released from the confining “cage” he suffers so deeply in. If nothing, *Foreign Soil* is an opportunity for disenfranchised individuals to be heard.

The form and language which Clarke achieves this with are central to the collection as the role of the traditional reader is challenged. While English is recognised throughout the collection as the “Kings English” imported as part of a cultural colonisation, it is this language that is used to challenge such frameworks. While it can be argued “language and colonisation are inextricable” (Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle), Clarke refuses to shy away from using it. “Big Islan’ is written in an accented English as Clarke defies the notion that any form of English is any more ‘proper’ or acceptable than another. Though Nathaniel may describe his illiteracy as a “problem” Clarke challenges this. Repetition of humorous and insightful, observations like “A is fe Ackee” but also “acrid” and “acrimonious” uphold Nathaniel as an intelligent and playful narrator. His rhythmic and patois inflected speech allow him to articulate a unique connection to his “Islan home” with “blue pon green pon, navy pon, khaki” sea. Furthermore, Clarke reveals through this contentment that has desire to “stay” put in Kingston is powerfully yet effortlessly anti-imperial. Though the reader may strain to interpret the unconventional spelling in “Big Islan” this only works to forge a connection between them and Nathaniel. We meet Nathaniel on his own turf as his journey with reading instead of liberating him, exposes all the places to “stumble an fall”. Clarke upholds through the visceral severance of connection to home for Nathaniel as discontent “courses” through “im own self skin that any reader frustration is only superficial. Thus Clarke implores the reader to open up their own negotiations with language to include voices that honour the diasporic African experience and subjectivity as conventional British English is an imperfect fit.

Though *Foreign Soil* bares witness to the pain of those silenced by exclusion from the supposed ‘mainstream’, it swells to embrace these unique experience. Clarke uses the collection as her “literary armour” forging a path forward for those with “joyously off harmony” voices waiting for an opportunity to have their story heard.

As centred, from the very beginning of the text in the epigraph, like literary forefather Chinua Achebe, Clarke “intends to do unheard of things” with English, her role as story teller, and a practitioner of language.

Picnic at Hanging Rock, Joan Lindsay

In Picnic at Hanging Rock, Joan Lindsay exposes the fallacy of traditional and Western Society and its expectations, exploring the fragility of colonial Australia's foundations. Examined from a post-colonial perspective, the novel reveals the flawed nature of colonial society's roles in the unwelcoming setting of the Australian bush, mocking the Empire that founded it though neglecting many of the significance implications of Australia's colonial lie. Lindsay questions the social structure of an artificial England on Australian soil ultimately collapsing under the strain of nature.

Lindsay examines the superficial and often ridiculous nature of colonial Australian society in Picnic at Hanging Rock. This critique is founded in its minor characters such as the Fitzhuberts, often foils to 'naturalised' Australians whose mockery is achieved through dry humour. Lindsay subtly criticises these 'pleasant, comfortable people' for whom the approaching Jubilee of Queen of Victoria, ruler of the British Empire, is a 'world-shattering' event in a hyperbole that aptly describes their misplaced values and surface level understanding of the world. Colonel Fitzhubert is symbolic of the 19th Century's imperialistic glory, a representation of colonialism's ridiculous elements who humorously questions the 'popycock' of a person being 'too English'. Compared to Michael, who realises when surrounded by the total wilderness of flanging Rock that Australia would be 'his home', Colonel Fitzhubert exists in a 'holiday background' environment of the wealthy upper classes in colonial Australia, a dying trend of English patriotism that Lindsay criticises. However, a post-colonial examination may also reveal inconsistencies in this deconstruction – what Colonel Fitzhubert calls the 'ingratitude of the Boers towards our Gracious Queen' exposes the lack of consideration from the tangible and serious effects of the Fitzhuberts' ideology on colonial people, as nowhere in this history, for example, do the native people of South Africa feature. Similarly, the connection to India exposes a significant colonial relationship – Mrs Fitzhubert decries 'Indian chickens' and Irma members 'moonlight on the Taj Mahal' but perspectives beyond the British Empirical entitlement do not feature. Despite this, Lindsay does not fail to critique the 'blindness' of the colonial perspective. In the face of the 'monumental configuration' of Nature that is Hanging Rock, Irma, symbolic of the Empire's next generation, remarks her father 'made a million out of a mine once— in Brazil'. Lindsay acknowledges the colonial mindset of this white, wealthy elite, in which serious issues are ignored or found insignificant, and the world's cultural resources are exploited for the entertainment of colonisers.

The post-colonial perspective may find particular increase in the character of Michael through whom Lindsay rejects many of the social expectations of colonial Australia. Mike's characterisation reveals a surprising openness to the natural Australian environment, which he ultimately favours above his home country, a place where 'everything' was already done 'by one's own ancestors'. His information to Australian, symbolised in language through the alternating uses of 'Michael' and 'Mike', allows Lindsay to present an argument against the pursuit of traditional ideals. Michael, however, is still alienated in an utopian landscape of Lindsay's lurid white settler imagination, perhaps, Lindsay suggests, because his ability to comprehend Australia is rooted in his upbringing. Lost in the bush, Michael thinks a rock to be his 'pillow', he feels himself drowning in a 'strange land'. Post-colonial critics would note the fear inherent in Michael's perspective, including his 'nightmares' of the Rock that metaphorically appears like a 'dark reality' in the comfortable lie of the colonial Lake View property. The mysticism of this fear fails to acknowledge the Indigenous view of Australia, in which the landscape is not a threat but deeply connected to human existence. Tilley explores these 'spaces' of anxiety in the gothic world of Lindsay's text, arguing they 'aid and abet' the erasure of Indigenous claims to the land, contributing to their erasure. The role of Albert as Michael's counterpart, a man who 'knows' the Australian bush 'like the back of his hand', may add to this, opposing Michael's naivety and fear with a naturalised Australian whose presence is equally colonising, equally invasive. Excepting these omissions in Indigenous recognition, though, Lindsay explores many complexities in the relationship between Michael and the land. He is once the 'gentle youth' whose deference for Englishness and more emotional, effeminate characterisation mark him a traitor to the social roles of the era, and the 'clumping monster' in the landscape, bringing 'death and destruction' in a reflection of his forefathers' imperialist designs and brutal colonial outcomes.

Through the character of Michael and his deep, perhaps unbreakable connection to the structure and world view of British colonialism, Lindsay questions the traditional status quo and highlights its incomparability with the Australian Bush.

The construct of Appleyard College and its residents, including the missing girls, too, offers critiques of social roles such as White Western femininity and British imperial tradition. It is no mistake that Michael first recognises Miranda through the simile of being like 'one of the swans' on his Uncle's property – Lindsay represents her character through conventions of purity and graceful white femininity with her 'yellow hair' and beloved existence. Her loss to the bush represents a significant threat to this social role, a disruption to the order that Mrs Appleyard imagines was 'surely intended' to exist. Miranda calls home a place of ferns and binds and is admired by minor characters such as Mr Hussey for apparent affinity for bush life – she was 'born and bred there. Though effective in deconstructing the fallacy of this restricting form of femininity, but symbolised through the girls' clothes that keep them from all 'natural contacts' with the elements, Lindsay's Miranda is not aligned with the real violence inflicted by white femininity in a colonial environment. Her substitution as a 'natural' element of Australia's landscape in place of the Indigenous population represents an erasure of Aboriginality. Wiped from the landscape, Lindsay suggests if the mystic, strange Hanging Rock ever did have tracks, they are 'long since obliterated' – a fantasy version of Australia's colonial history, as the real Indigenous population was only forcibly removed from the Hanging Rock area in 1863. The post-colonial perspective would recognise further Indigenous displacement and dismissal in the 'black tracker' who is brought from Gippsland to fail searching for the missing girls. It stands a part of what Cameron critiques as attempts to 'relegate' Indigenous existence the 'spectral past. It is nature mysticised fantastical amorally violent – that bring about Appleyard College's being 'totally destroyed' by fire and attempts to assign spiritual vengeance either haunted mansion or haunted land inevitably fall into this trope of white vanishing stories. Lindsay's novel, while presenting the inexorable collapse of the confines of white femininity and colonial domination of the land, does so out of concern for Nature's sometimes malevolent powers not oppressed peoples. Attempts to recreate English society in the Australian bush fail because of the trauma carried in that tortured wood' and 'Castlemaine stone', ironically used to 'withstand the ravages of time' but the blame is laid vaguely. Colonial structures appeared 'like fungi' in Lindsay's words, removing responsibility from the accepted role of 'coloniser' in the society in which her novel is set. Traditional expectations are not met and are cast aside, but the post-colonialist view cannot help but notice the absence of the other, human side in 'mans' failed war against the Australian bush.

In Picnic at Hanging Rock, Lindsay questions and condemns many of the social expectations associated with colonial Australian Society at the town of the twentieth century. The roles of class, femininity and colonialism are depicted ultimately collapse despite their traditional roots. Despite this, in an allegorical scene for the colonial society, Michael renovates it was 'good fun while it lasted'. Perhaps so, from the white settler view, but from the perspectives of those Indigenous peoples absent from Lindsay's novel, the 'fun' of colonial social structure may not have been as apparent as it was to others.

Buried Child, Sam Shepard

As the festering secrets of incest and infanticide pervades Sam Shepard's 'Buried Child', the consequences of suppressing a sinister secret are uncovered. Set amongst the social and political disillusionment in 1978 Illinois, the direct impact of the denial of the actions of the past is explored as the characters cling to mechanisms to comfort themselves. The 'responsibility' that is inflicted on the entirety of the family, due to this collective 'pact', however, garners unfathomable effects on the characters own psyche. It is however, through this familiar secrecy and concealment that the dangers of suppressing the truth are understood.

As the actions of the past decompose within the psyche's of characters, the extent to which this damages their functionality is evoked. Through Shepard's construction of the dilapidated 'setting', as involved through the 'old' 'frayed' ad 'faded' characterisation, as well as the TV's 'flickering blue light', the initial

decomposition of the family home is established. This already conveys to the audience the effects of the horrors of the past have instilled. Through the 'form of Dodge' 'gradually' appearing, this decomposing nature is paralleled within his appearance as he is 'thin and sickly looking'. Through Shephard's construction of Dodge this consequences of suppressing a sinister secret is evoked as the truth festers within despite him holding 'the past is passed' in, not only his mental decomposition, but his physical. This is constantly conveyed to the audience through his 'coughing' which permeates the stage, reminding the audience of the physical toll the suppression of these memories hold. Moreover, through introducing the character of Halie or just a 'voice', that is heard from 'upstairs', the incongruity of Halie and Dodge is established. This further alluded to by Dodge's constant need to speak 'louder' as Halie is seemingly incapable of understanding him. While this seemingly acts as a moment of comedic release for the audience, this depicts the inability of the family unit to communicate effectively as they have become conditioned to accept dishonesty, or a consequent of the denial of the truths. Shephard's further exemplifies the characters lack of cohesion through Halie's avoidance of veracity, a manifestation of her psychological denial of the past. This is evident as she tells Tilden 'there's no corn', rather clinging to the past to avoid the consequences within the present. Essentially, Shephard conveys the increase effects the past have had on that of the present, even that of physical determination.

As the family maintains a closed unit from the outside world, the 'responsibility' tent is placed upon the entirety of the family only further ignites this collective shame. Although the secret dysfunctionally holds the family together in their quest to maintain solidarity, this is however at their expense of individual growth. Shephard alludes to this through his construction of Tilden, who despite being in 'late forties' is depicted to have regressed to that of infantile behaviour. Through his child-like mannerisms which are exemplified mistake his relationship with Shelly, Shephard is able to convey to the audience the damaging effects of the suppression of the past. Through his 'conversation' with the 'very beautiful' Shelly as he asks to 'touch [her] coat', this infantile behaviour is exposed, which is a result of Hallie's subversion of 1970s a nurturing [mother] who instead instils this 'responsibility' in Tilden to deal with the consequences of her psychosexual desires, Tilden yearns for maternal nurture. Once receiving this in this form of Shelly, who essentially acts as a vehicle for audience expression on stage. Tilden seemingly allows his suppressed memories to surface. This is evident in, his mention 'I had a son once, but we buried him' and reminiscent when he was 'independent'. Furthermore, this regression is further involved within Bradley who can't even look after 'himself', depicting this familiar reliance on each other as they all are silenced by the past, which only reinforces their shame. As a result of this Freudian regression in identity, the characters are ultimately left to grapple with their primal instincts to garner attention, in a house filled with chaos. Through Bradley's violation of Shelly by 'putting [his] fingers in his mouth', this act of violence, is ultimately successful in gaining attention and power, as Shelly 'freezes' and the audience truly comprehends the danger that is evoked through the characters suppression. Shephard thus exemplifies how this deterioration in individual identity has imbued chaos within the characters as this ability to function as a regular family within 1970s American society has been deprived.

It is however, through the family's turn to secrecy and concealment as mechanisms to suppress the past that this dangerous cycle of perpetrating a myth of happiness and familiar grandiosity is established. Due to the traditional values of the unattainable American Dream that p 1970s Mid West Society, the family's struggle to preserve this familiar image of a family tent 'could fill Lake Michen twice over' with milk is evoked. This is evident in Dodge 'kill(ing) it' as they 'couldn't let, something like [that] live'. The connotations of 'couldn't' suggests there family's lack of choice, all in order to preserve the image of this 'Norman Rockwell cover' to the outside world. This need to establish financial grandiosity is epitomised in Harlie's reliance on the past, constantly reminding those around her not to 'forget' that Tilden was an 'All-American' despite 'forgetting' the details, ultimately suggesting her cognitive dissonance, while trying to project an image aligned with the values of American society pertaining to that of prosperity and recognition. All this deep-rooted psychological damage that is instilled within Shephard's characters and its effects are suggests in this final act, or despite the 'sun' appearing in contrast to the torrential rain of Acts one and two, as the truth becomes unearthed, the damage of characters is echoed through the dissociated ending. While the moment of regeneration occurs in Dogde's death 'which should have come

completely unnoticed' depicting his truly obsolete position in the play as a result of his actions of infanticide and debilitation as a result, the cyclical imposition of Vince, as he 'takes Dodge's cap and places it on his own head', this ongoing cycle of perpetuated secrecy is evoked. This is evidence in Vince's return to the house after his arduous journey, 'drunk', where the sounding of a 'bottle smashing is heard, depicts his turn to alcoholism to cope with the already damaged nature of her family unit, which is only continued despite Tilden 'carrying' the 'corpse' of the buried child upstairs. Thus this depreciation of the classic Hollywood ending that pervaded 1970s society acts to allude to this continued cycle of psychological damage that is instilled within this family.

All in all, as the 'lights go black', Shephard seemingly suggests the lack of resolution in evading the dangers of suppressing the painful action of the past as this generational cycle continues.

Section B

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.5	1	2	3	5	6	7	10	13	12	12	9	6	5	4	2	1	12.35

What is 'close analysis'? It is not simply the Unit 4 Outcome 2 task nor is it the Section B examination task of using 'two or more of the set passages as the basis for a discussion of [text name]'. Close analysis, working with language and responding to its nuances, structures and features, is a habit of mind, not a task. It underpins every area of study from Unit 1 Area of Study 1 to Unit 4 Area of Study 2 and therefore students should be developing those skills and approaches from the very beginning of their studies in Literature.

A significant number of students wrote on plays for this section, especially *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, making it the second-most popular text overall. Students were able to make effective use of the passages in their responses, invoking a narrative development as well as key ideas to link them. They also often incorporated discussion of stage directions to good effect in their essays. Although they are not represented in the sample essays provided in this report, the two Shakespearean plays, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*, were popular and students generally wrote well about them. Two-thirds of students wrote on poetry in this section, with Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* accounting for more than half of those responses. It is therefore worth making some general observations about the responses to poetry and to Plath in particular.

In relation to Plath's *Ariel*, there were fewer essays relying on mere biographical evidence and many more that recognised an image or observation as the starting point for a reflection in a poem. Many students chose to focus on the despondent and despairing elements of Plath's work, which they found in *Sheep in Fog* and *Tulips*. While it is not required that students respond to all three passages for each text, students who included *You're* in their essay were able to incorporate another aspect of Plath's work, the excitement and anticipation of motherhood and the joy of watching the yet-unborn baby, the 'little loaf', 'Clownlike, happiest on your hands', grow and develop its own identity, 'a clean slate, with your own face on'. They were thereby able to add another dimension to their discussion.

There were many excellent responses to *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*, alert to the voices of Indigenous people and the stories that underlie these poems. In responding to the poems of Petra White, in *A Hunger*, students appeared very engaged and responded well to the language. In the case of both these texts, students showed some understanding of the use of free verse and other forms, although, surprisingly, few recognised White's allusions to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 in *By This Hand* or to Keats in *Truth and Beauty*. There appeared to be many thoughtful responses to Emily Dickinson's poetry this year, with students able to contemplate the uncertainties and doubts presented in the poems.

In their reading time, regardless of which text they have chosen, students are encouraged to consider what the three passages may offer in relation to the text as a whole.

Essay structure

Whereas in Section A, a fairly conventional essay structure with a conventional introduction was most common (though not required), in Section B in particular there is no expected structure and there are many ways of approaching the task. There is no expected length for a paragraph and no expected number of paragraphs for an essay, although a one-sentence introduction often appeared to be a topic remembered from classwork or school assessment and was not developed at all. Some students chose to write a conventional introduction as their way of beginning; where these were prepared introductions, they were unlikely to set up the discussion in a useful way and tended to delay the student's real engagement with the task. Far better are introductions that engage directly with the material presented on the paper. The sample essay on Plath provided in this report offers a succinct example of this, linking the set passages and the text as a whole.

It is worth noting that in all cases the passages are printed in the order they occur in the text, so ideas of changes in a writer's concerns over time, narrative and dramatic development, or commonalities and differences may be considered, but the essential features of responses that score highly are that they offer a reading of the text as a whole and focus closely on the language of the passages in doing so. The criteria relate to the quality of analysis of language features and their effects, not to a given essay structure. Many students who moved from passage to passage did not appear well-organised in their thought and, indeed, prevented themselves from developing depth and insight in their discussion. A case can be made for incidental use of references to what has already occurred and what is being foreshadowed in a continuous narrative text such as a novel or play, but the approach is less helpful in relation to poetry and short stories, because it ignores the uniqueness of individual poems or stories and tends to conflate their speakers' voices instead of individuating them and the experiences of the works.

Sample essays

Smoke Encrypted Whispers, Samuel Wagan Watson

Through the imagery of a 'dying heart beat' Wagan Watson's poetry collection 'Smoke encrypted Whispers' demonstrates the damaging effects that dominant ideologies of Modern Australia have on Indigenous people and the land.

'On the River' acts as a facet through which Watson navigates the finality of good-bye in a relationship whilst simultaneously exposing the desecration of a formerly pristine landscape. The immediate personification of the "Industrial giants" as 'sleeping' ascribes a calming feel for the reader which falsely softens the metonymy of destruction. Watson is the speaker and the poet, which lends a certain gravitas to the 'Secluded' feeling of the poem, whilst making it emotionally accessible to the reader. However Watson sets up immediate contrasts, particularly true in the fragmented discourse between the lulling sibilance of 'Serenade' and gentle verb of 'kissing' against the jarring plosives of 'billowing' and 'studded', to establish the disconnect between the land and what inhabits it, which is further condemned in Cribb Island.

The recurring motif of modernity evident in the repetition of '30 minutes before a flight' infuse the verse with the assimilation of Indigenous culture as it struggles to sustain itself. The magical 'secluded spots' in the previous stanzas become sibilance of burdened by the weighted verb 'abandoned' and colloquial 'iron hulks' which work in tandem to create a metaphysical 'electric fence' where nature's 'sea breezes' struggles to exist within the domestic sphere of modernity and its 'dead things'. Rather, land and these two lovers become the 'Swans' encumbered by 'gloom' in 'gloom Swans' as a result of existing in the stultifying world of 'blow-torches' and its cacophony of 'union disputes'. The giving feeling of 'vein' is incomplete paradox to the poem's 'dead things' which demonstrates to the reader, what the speaker purports, claiming they are 'home amongst it all' is in complete opposite to what the poem is actually about, suggesting reality is fraught with contradictions just like this landscape. The lingering suspended

'good bye' leaves the reader with a devastating image of an unresolved feeling of sadness and loss which is later answered by the 'skeleton's' whispers of 'Cribb Island'.

Opening in the conjunction 'and', Watson positions 'gloom swans' amidst the continuation of an ongoing story 'Shrouded' in 'Wreckage', suggesting the readers a complicit voyeurs in the assimilation of his culture. The haunting image of a 'vicious' death is amplified in the ambiguous paradox 'Shelter in decay', as the speaker's outpouring tone of despair and awkward rhyme in 'decay....ballet' underpins the slowness of the lines.

In the patterning of the text, the broken lines cleverly reflect the speakers own fragmented emotions of loss and grief. The lingering sounds of vacuity in 'Corpes' becomes an emotional condemnation of the Indigenous people and their lost culture. This is supported by the visceral image of 'fingering the broken glass', creating this intangible concern of misguided energy which is critiqued through the youth's of 'night racing'.

Silence is broken by the reverberated echoes of 'ruin' in the suspended line 'a death march of sinister beauty' and the adjective 'gloom that modifies these swans, emphasising a paradox of a poignant death that initially employs lyrical language of 'ballet' and 'graceful' to act as a façade to mask the ostentatious 'gloom' of its genocidal destruction conveyed though the language of 'Sterile' and 'Death', that has left the readers with a 'tearing departure' from "on the River".

Watson's frustrated tone 'fuels' his biting critique for the adult generation and their loss of culture and identity, also evident in labelled, and other poems that lament disenfranchisement. The anaphora of 'why' coupled with the exclamatory hyperbole 'oh' sound becomes the pleading 'cry' that mimics the echoes of 'cleansing' as a result of the stolen generation. The poem's final metaphor 'mockingbird departure' leaves for the reader an ironic bitterness that has left these Indigenous people displaced, only appearing in the 'Shadows' of 'Wreckage'. However the speakers tone of despair is resolved in Cribb Island.

The speaker's condemnation of the destruction of Indigenous culture moves towards closure in 'Cribb Island', providing a poetic eulogy that mourns a dispossessed people and their lost history.

The 'deserted houses' and the 'mass grave' construct a bleak funereal setting emulated in the speakers' sombre tone appropriating a range of death imagery and widespread trauma. The plosive alliteration of 'debris and detritus' coupled with the lingering repetition of 'empty building after empty building' work to emphasise the gothic horror of this 'ghost town', aggrandising the emotional intensity and expressionistic dejection of the collection. Further, the simile in 'like some fiction filmset' creates a defamiliarisation and distance between the speaker and the reader yet uses the tone of childhood awe just like the speaker in 'Jetty Nights'.

Referencing the title of his collection 'Smoke encrypted Whispers', the speaker suggests stories of the land are not lost, simply hidden under the 'dust' that 'keeps it appeal' compounding this is the mystical 'cadence' and whimsical alliteration in 'Streets strewn' which invoke the metaphysical presence of the Indigenous spiritual ancestors who still inhabit the land. However, the oxymoronic 'Apocalyptic merchandising' and loaded word 'Armageddon' remind the readers this land is tainted by the corrupt, consumerist culture of modernity, that has 'silenced' the 'whistling breeze' of the ancestors, leaving only their 'skeletons' to 'whisper'.

However, in Watson's concluding celebratory haiku the speakers tone shifts to one of optimisers conveying messages of hope and beauty. The final lines are indented, decelerating the pace of the poem, creating a lingering moment of self-reflection. As such, the speaker leaves the reader with a moral imperative; to amplify, remember and preserve the integrity of the Indigenous voices that have been buried by this urban 'dust'.

Watson uses language to express the views of assimilation and its effect on his land and culture, however rather than dwelling in the 'gloom' of its effect, Watson empowers the 'encrypted' whispers of the past and aspires for hope in the present and future generations of Indigenous identity.

Ariel, Sylvia Plath

From the euphoric anticipation of a mother in “You’re” to an agonising quest for selfhood in “Tulips”, Plath exposes a fraught struggle for identify whilst weaving the intricate strands of the visceral female experience together in her collection Ariel.

Entirely consumed by the maternal experience, the speaker in “You’re” paints a kaleidoscopic, wondrous world as she affectionately addresses her “Little loaf”. The absent speaker centres her child in an intimate environment, reflected in both the comfortable contraction “You’re” and the second-person address of “you”. A whimsical and entertaining lexical field of the “clownlike” baby “happiest on [its] hands” and the “grilled fish”, coupled with Plath’s free verse and irregular rhyme scheme, indicate the speaker’s unbridled excitement and marvel at motherhood. The speaker then describes the “dodo”, an extinct species, further signalling a fantastical reality where the playful assonance of “dodo’s mode” mimics a baby’s first repetitive sounds. “Wrapped up” inside the speaker, the child is comfortable “trawling [in the] dark”, a contained image which contrasts the vivid expanse of the “bent-backed Atlas” and indeed the world. Consolidated by the contrasting images of the dazzling “stars...and moon” and the “vague...fog”, Plath explores the expecting mother’s apprehension and insecurities in the following stanza.

Plath saturates the poem with marine imagery of the “fish”, “sprat”, “eels” and “prawn”, alluding to the fetus’s amniotic state whilst simultaneously limning a shapeshifting identity for the unborn child. A stream of short, sharp phrases, punctuated with full stops echo a stumbling elation of a mother, amplified by the effervescent anapestic trimeter in “jumpy as a Mexican bean”. All at once, the stuttering speaker halts and removes from her child all previous identities; from the “owl”, the “dodo” and the “turnip” emerge a child with their “own face”, their identity “a clean state”.

Within “Tulips”, Plath constructs a sterile, liminal space restraining a listless and weary speaker who years to “efface” herself and relinquish her identity as a woman, wife and mother. Although the speaker craves to be a “nobody”, she accuses the “too excitable” tulips of “eat[ing] [her] oxygen”, rendering them intrusive and parasitic. The speaker eerie “peacefulness” within the chillingly clinical “winter” of the hospital contrasts with the vibrancy and vitality of the tulips, reinforcing the speaker’s unwanted tether to life which denies her the “utter empt[iness] she seeks. A recurring motif in Ariel, the speaker, “sick of baggage”, repudiates the weight of a constructed domesticity, whilst the bizarre “smiles” of her “husband and child” inextricably “hoo[k] her to her role as a housewife. Contrasting the ebullient joy of an expecting mother in “You’re”, the speaker of “Tulips” only wishes to “let things slip”. Claiming that she has “given [her] name up to the nurses, the speaker’s wrestles with an unwanted identity, reinforced in the repetitive active “I” subject. The internal rhyme in “stupid pupil”, aggravated by the aggressive plosive heightens the speaker’s frustration at having to “take everything in”, an instance of the discordance between body and mind, reminiscent of “Cut”’s “Hormunculus” thumb. In a quest for self-effacement the speaker simultaneously strips the nurses’ identities, where “one [is] just the same as the other” and all of whom cause less “trouble” than the invasive tulips. Instead, the nurses “bring [the speaker] sleep” and “numbness”, their sterile “bright needles” alarmingly contrasted with the “smoothing” water “over the “pebbles” to achieve an eerie “peacefulness”. The repeated “pass and pass” reinforces the nurses’ mechanical procedures to “swab” the speaker “clear” of an identity. Emerging as a “nun” the speaker feels that she has “never been so pure”, symbolising a reincarnation removed from the confines of domesticity. However, the tulips, breathing “like an awful baby” serve as a haunting reminder of the speaker’s child she has abandoned. Suffocating “lead sinkers round [her] neck”, the tulips threaten to shatter the carefully constructed peacefulness” with the “white” thresholds of the hospital. The tulips Anchor the speaker back to reality, where she becomes “aware of [her] heart”, the “red blooms” redolent of the vivid “bloom[ing] heart” of the woman in “Poppies in October”. This converges a previously disconnected mind and body, whilst the speaker reflects on their “far away” health.

Plath limns vivid visual images within a vast bucolic landscape to establish a liminal threshold that the speaker finds themselves stranded in. The title lacks articles, and coupled with desolate, expansive landscape, grants the speaker a sense of anonymity. The speaker is a “threaten[ed] passive object to be

“regarded sadly” by the observant eyes of the surroundings. An image reinforced by the active “hills” “stepping) off into whiteness”. Plath inverts the active “I” subject with surrounding objects to diminish the speakers’ identity. The following tercets centre shifting aspects of the rural landscape, where the alliterative phrases “leaves a line” and “far fields” mimic a cyclical, inescapable destiny, echoed in the final lines of the poem where the speaker confronts the “starless” “heaven”. The “blackening”, monotonous colour palette of the poem suggests a funeral timbre, exacerbated by the rolling assonance in “O slow” and “bones hold”, ultimately creating a slow, melancholic movement within the poem. The homophonous “morning” indeed evokes a sense of mourning, representing the bleakness of the liminal space which imprisons the speaker, reminiscent of the delirious “peacefulness” of “Tulips”. The “rust[ing] landscape further indicates the speaker’s decaying identity, whilst the “hooves”, reminiscent of the “indefatigable hoof-taps” of “Words”, suggest a cosmic eternity which dwarfs the speaker, mourned by the “dolorous bells”, which reverberate on the lingering em-dash. Faced with an unknown “dark water” that simultaneously allures and repels, the resigned speaker seems strangely calm before an implacable fate, finally escaping the dismal transitory threshold.

Ultimately, Plath’s *Ariel* charts tumultuous struggle for identify within the bleak liminal boundaries of “Tulips” and “Sheep in Fog” swiftly intercut by the vivid unadulterated maternal experience, which ultimately coalesce to become the mesmerising reality of the female experience.

A Hunger, Petra White

As the speaker in *By this Hand* restlessly begs “Listen”, White explicates a collection fraught with a desperate yearning. Throughout White’s *A Hunger*, beings in a variety of circumstances must reconcile their ephemeral, fickle human lives with an impartial, effacing cosmos which cares not for our transitory existence. This struggle manifests in *By this Hand*, where White conveys the impetus to immortalise and “preserve” one’s love by engraving it in the ostensibly permanent ‘black lines’ of poetry. White employs a subversion of structure, as *By this Hand* fulfils the typical fourteen line convention of a lyrical sonnet, yet omits the corresponding rhyme scheme. White’s stylistic decision exudes a subtle displacement and incompleteness which pervades the speaker’s urgent attempts to chronicle their love. As with the zenith of a “thousand suns” in *Truth and Beauty*, geological time is imbued throughout White’s collection, and arises in *By this Hand* through White’s tangible simile of “whispered words that try to put a dint in stone”. This evocation mirrors the fickle actions of humans against the greater scheme of space time. White imbues the speaker’s urgency with high modality in “these words must preserve, and outthrive” in order to highlight the desperate human initiative to reify their existence, especially in the face of the encroaching “crowy lines” which underscore the collection wide theme of decay which incites self-preservation, a notion which resounds strongly in *Truth and Beauty*. The speaker is lulled in close proximity with the self reflexive half-sonnet as the poem denotes its own terminal consumption with “line ten”. “four more lines to kill your absence”. Ultimately, the reader’s impulse to “bury” their love is successful, as the speaker makes direct reference to the “cold reader”. However White evinces the limits of the textual medium through the dual faceted connotations of spring” which exude seasonal and cyclic undertones whilst accentuating the vivacity of love’s “rushing and stillness” which the “black lines” cannot encapsulate. The poem concludes with a bleak tone with the speakers lamentation “Oh words that cannot spring you here”, and “hungry time” tragically prevents.

White furthers her exploration of the combative human spirit in *Truth and Beauty*, observing the speaker’s struggle to confront the gradual erosion of her youth. Similarly to the marching indomitable pace of *By this Hand*, the “young woman” is placed on an inexorable trajectory, as White evokes the imagery of “coming at her is an older self’s body ever so slightly angled towards decay”. The inconsistent lineation of the first stanza emulate the speaker’s total disassociation from her “older self”, which White elucidates through the metaphor of the woman who “grabs handful of her youth”. The woman’s fragmented sense of self as she traverses the “Styx of middle age” are understandably erratic, as portrayed through the atomisation of the celestial forces which “ration her beauty” into obscure and disturbing headless “figures”. The deceptively uplifting galvanisation of action and defiance is unearthed when the woman “does not grieve”

and asserts that she “will be radiant”, willing her inner “radiance” to shine as her outer beauty fades. The effervescence that White prescribes the woman is redolent of the “slim girl’s” “mounting dance of being” in *Ricketts Point*, as White examines the contrasting facets through which the self exerts its fleeting significance. As White deploys the polarising metaphor of the “Styx of middle age”, the process of decay and the irrational terror which arises is powerfully evoked. And as White extrapolates her personification of the forces which inflict decay through the “Darkness, it whispers” the excruciating reality of aging is evinced; ultimately, the “stomaching power” “pushes her forth” into “middle age”, analogous to the “hungry time” which consumes and digests the reader’s attempts at preservation. Thus, White contemplates the glaring reality of our lack of agency in the face of intangible and cruel forces which efface our “fleshbound mystique” and all remnants of our ephemeral existence.

However, this unfortunate reality dissolves into the background of *Ricketts Point*. Through its self-contained, stable stanza, White tacitly reminds the reader that they are experiencing a “brimming” immediate moment, rather than the passage of time which plagues the other two passages. Indeed, unlike the metaphysically displaced women in *Truth and Beauty*, the “slim girl” communes with the web of existence and enacts her place within it, deliberating whether it is “large or real enough to include them”. White gently critiques the girl’s self-centric approach, however, as she evokes the theme of exchange in its most unadulterated form through the “separate joy of the girl” who “magnifies” the joy of the other beings in the poems. White’s deliberately unspecific characterisation of the “two bearded men” is evoked through the colloquial “perhaps her father and Uncle”, thus, White decides that the “separate joy of the girl” is predicated on her feeling of connections and subconscious protection which the “strangers” exude even participating in their own buoyant joy that won’t stay under”. Yet, White’s sated and [picturesque] portrait of the human experience is complicated by her capricious personification of nature. The amniotic undertones of “sea water cool as milk” oscillate between the “hospitable” nurturing, and a sibilant hostility as elucidated by the “sea’s hearth’ and “hissing welcome mat”. Nonetheless, the girl is able to indulge in the grandeur of the numinous natural world and “marvel” at its momentary, albeit capricious beauty.

From the three passages, White cultivates a collection which anchors the woes of the human experience in tangible, yet tantalisingly relatable illustrations. As the speaker definitively asserts “never say love is mortal”, White enriches the human spirit with an indomitable quality, despite the inescapable and “stomaching” forces of cosmic and natural world which pervade all facets of our existence.