Explorations in literature 1

Examination paper

Time allowed: THREE hours

Answer THREE questions: ONE from EACH section. Candidates may NOT discuss the same text in more than one answer.

SECTION A

Answer ONE question.

1. In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale professed to have translated the Bible in order that even ‘the boy that driveth the plough’ should understand Scripture. Consider the ways in which one religious text attempts to make religious experience familiar and accessible.

2. Consider the ways in which the gods of epic literature provide a meaning to mortal lives. Discuss with reference to one text.

3. ‘Pity, the impulse to approach, and Terror, the impulse to retreat, are brought in Tragedy to a reconciliation which they find nowhere else’ (I.A. RICHARDS). To what extent do these apparently contradictory responses characterize one tragic drama that you have read?

4. Write an essay analysing the rhetorical methods employed by one writer to embody a philosophical or a political agenda.

5. Discuss the ways in which one writer has explored one of the following: chivalric codes; revenge; sexual inequality.

6. With detailed reference to two or more poems, provide a critical commentary on the distinctive qualities of the sonnet.

7. Discuss the ways in which comedy can be employed for the purposes of subversion. You should refer to one text.

8. Write a critical introduction to one text which seems to be preoccupied with issues of governance.
SECTION B

Answer ONE question. The answer in this section should refer to TWO texts by the SAME author.

9. ‘Since heroic poetry treats of action and appeals to the love of prowess, its chief figures are men who display prowess to a high degree because their gifts are of a very special order. This does not mean that all heroes are of a single kind’ (C. M. BOWRA). With reference to Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, write an essay which develops this idea.

10. ‘These tragic figures cannot do good without doing evil; they are doomed, not by a random predestination of bad luck, but by a situation in which all roads lead to wrong’ (ROBERT N. WATSON). Discuss Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus and Antigone in the light of this comment.

11. Consider the paradox that Plato’s objections to imaginative literature would probably have excluded him from residence in his own ideal city state. Discuss with reference to The Symposium and The Republic.

12. Describe the ways in which Chaucer provides the Wife of Bath and the Merchant with a complexity which makes them more than simple comic grotesques.

13. [...] Mortimer,
   Who now makes Fortune’s wheel turn as he please.
   (CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, Edward II)

To what extent would it be true to say that Marlowe’s Faustus and Barabas share Mortimer’s ambition?

14. What place has religion in the worlds of Hamlet and The Tempest?

SECTION C

Answer ONE question. The answer in this section should refer to TWO texts, each by a different author.

15. Consider the nature and treatment of one of the following in two works by different authors: family conflict; sexual mores; political satire.

16. Write an essay exploring the use of allegory in two texts by different authors.

17. Discuss the nature and treatment of one of the following in two works by different authors: alienation; dramatic irony; the idea of the city and/or state; relationships between mortal and immortal; violence.
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Examiner’s report

General remarks

This year the Examiners were encouraged by candidates’ willingness to confront the questions in the terms laid out, rather than to use them as pegs on which to hang what would appear to be prepared answers. The latter technique has been cause for complaint in the past, so the improvement seems to be worthy of recognition.

However, lest undiluted praise might suggest complacency, we would draw attention to another dubious approach to examination questions which requires self-monitoring by candidates. On occasion (happily rare), the Examiners were presented with a detailed and perceptive explication of the text with no indication of how this raw material was to be applied to what had been asked. In these cases, the candidate’s familiarity with and understanding of the work were given some credit, but in so far as the Examiners were left to write the answer themselves, it was felt that the task had, at best, been half completed.

One of the more difficult, and perhaps painful, disciplines of examination is the need for discriminating selection. Questions are designed to elicit a debate and, no matter how interesting in itself, superfluous matter will always distort the shape of a discussion. As in most walks of life, padding can be embarrassingly obvious. This approach is sometimes most apparent in the portmanteau questions that are found in Section C. Candidates will be asked to consider the ‘nature’, the ‘treatment’ or the ‘significance’ of a particular subject, usually a thematic concept, sometimes a rhetorical device.

The invitation is to engage in critical analysis, in an evaluation of literary effects and, again, a simple descriptive catalogue will only provide the ingredients of what should be a structured commentary. All essays will benefit from an opening paragraph which establishes an understanding of the terms of the question, and indicates the direction in which the candidate intends to travel. Such a statement will define the argument.

Comments on individual questions

Section A

Question 1

Religious writing has always struggled to embody the numinous and, as John Bunyan suggests in the Preface to Pilgrim’s Progress (see Explorations 1, 2008), it is the business of a writer of ‘things divine’ to give the work ‘solidness’. There is a debate to be had about the nature of fiction itself, given the paradox of ‘lies’ in the service of ‘Truth’, but most candidates will approach this question through a discussion of rhetorical devices; parables, emblems, numerology, allegory, symbols. Given that Tyndale’s target audience is a ploughboy, it might also be worth considering the place of folklore, vernacular language and comedy in some religious fictions.

Question 2

Most of the responses opted to discuss the writings of Homer, and the best revealed a well-researched familiarity with epic culture. There were detailed illustrations of the ways in which the gods variously aided and hindered the successful conduct of heroic affairs, whether on the battlefield, or during the voyages home. It was frequently suggested that in their jealousies, their favouritism and their whimsicalities, they were simply human figures possessed of infinite power and immortal life. It was at this
point that only a few scripts were prepared to pursue the enquiry about ‘meaning’.
The behaviour of the gods seems to contain a paradox: they are immutable, and also
unpredictable. Humanity relies upon them to guarantee a sense of justice in an unstable
and unequal world, and yet their unpredictability embodies an existence which is both
random and dangerous. Faced with an inevitable transience, epic heroes seek to share a
godlike immortality in ‘fame’, and in view of the odds against them it is arguable that
their achievement is the greater by virtue of the struggle.

Question 3
Candidates who chose this question usually recognised that Richards was restating
Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, even if the wording was a little unfamiliar. The echo
from the Poetics may explain the popularity of Oedipus Tyrannus, although there
were several good essays which elected to talk about Marlowe’s Faustus. There was
a tendency in most of the discussions to be too simply assertive. It was claimed that
the audience felt pity at witnessing Oedipus’ fate, but too often there was little attempt
to consider how that pity might be qualified by the ambiguous mixture of integrity
and pride, of transgression and ignorance. The term ‘retreat’ also proved problematic,
especially when it was read as a revulsion at the king’s actions; but even when it was
translated as ‘fear’ (remembering Aristotle), it was limited to fear for Oedipus, rather
than fear for oneself in parallel circumstances.

Question 4
Predictably this proved not to be a popular question. It should be stressed that credible
answers will need to provide more than a rehearsal of ideological content. The rubric
requires that any essay should focus upon ‘rhetorical methods’, so, when choosing from
texts by, say, Plato, Dante or More, the discussion will be of the deployment of dramatic
dialogue, Socratic debate, allegory and satire, or any other literary device which seems
appropriate.

Question 5
There were a couple of essays that took up the issue of ‘revenge’ in Hamlet. Their
accounts of the plotting of the drama were accurate enough, but discussions of the
problem of vengeance were limited to the prince’s procrastination which was explained
as either uncertainty about the veracity of the ghost, or an intellectual’s inability to act.
There seemed to be little awareness of the tradition of revenge drama, with its concerns
about private and public justice, and its tragic observations on the brutalising effects
of a personal vendetta. More popular was the topic of ‘chivalric codes’, and there were
some well-informed descriptions of these codes put to the test in the representative
figure of Sir Gawain, especially in his erotic encounters with the wife of Sir Bertilak.
Unfortunately, no-one explored the ambiguous fact that Sir Bertilak, and his alter ego
The Green Knight, in every particular − language, dress, social behaviour etc. − were
inhabitants of exactly the same cultural landscape as the knights of Camelot.

Question 6
There was no interest in this question, which does not lend itself to further comment.

Question 7
For most candidates, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath was the perfect example of a comic figure
whose presence and opinions were a subversive threat to various forms of patriarchal
and clerical oppression. Her flamboyant clothes, her garrulousness, her financial
independence and her sexual assertiveness were all seen as a challenge to conventional
social hierarchies. A few of the essays commented on the Wife’s mischievous and
pointed glossing of Scriptural texts, which invaded what had always been a male
prerogative. This material lent itself to the question, but it was important that the
commentaries sustained a focus on the nature of the comedy − what it was and the
ways in which it was being employed. Other options might have included black humour
in *The Jew of Malta*, the comic counterpoint scenes in either *Faustus* or *The Tempest*, or the vernacular comedy of *The Second Shepherd’s Play*. In each case, however, it should be clearly established what it is that is being ‘subverted’.

**Question 8**

The issue of ‘governance’ provoked no interest despite the fact that texts like *Antigone*, *Republic*, *Utopia*, *The Tempest* (and others), would have provided rich pickings.

**Section B**

**Question 9**

As candidates were quick to realise, Bowra’s qualified definition of the nature of the epic hero draws attention to the frequently observed distinctions between the primary protagonists of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The earlier poem is about warfare, and the bloody battles between Greeks and Trojans, are a playground for a particular type of military hero: strong, brutal and efficient. Homer opens his narrative with his stated intention to sing of ‘the anger of Achilleus’, but, we note, this is an ‘accursed anger which brought uncounted anguish on the Achaians’. It would appear that the destructive force which defines the warrior-hero can, in a moment of egotistical pique, threaten the lives of his fellow Greeks. These are mighty but dangerous men, with a sometimes overdeveloped sense of ‘honour’. Odysseus is one of their number, yet the conclusion to the war is brought about by a very different sort of skill, which is the subterfuge of the Trojan Horse. This trick opens the gateway to a slaughterhouse, but the *idea* comes from a subtler mind. This is the hero who, in the *Odyssey*, is variously described as guileful, cunning, restrained, an adept in disguise. He can revert to moments of ‘heroic’ bravado, as when he vaingloriously and disastrously taunts the blinded Polyphemus, almost defeating the ingenuity of his escape. Odysseus is driven by different imperatives. A returning hero, intent upon re-establishing the order of his domestic life, he depends upon talents which are less confrontational than a brawny sword-arm. Yet, the fate of the Suitors will dispel any notion that he has gone soft.

**Question 10**

This quotation seems to sum up what is most distinctive about Greek tragedy: the absence of extenuating circumstances. Candidates convincingly argued that, in many ways, the tragic disasters which befell Oedipus and Antigone were the consequence of their own *hubris*. They were driven by a sense of their own self-sufficient rightness. Yet it was acknowledged that what they did, and the qualities they possessed would normally be admired. Tragically, their integrity, their intelligence, their purposefulness led them to destruction. One example must suffice. In Corinth, Oedipus hears from a drunk that he is not his father’s son. Sensibly he questions his ‘parents’ and, to be doubly sure, enquires of the oracle where Apollo tells him the grisly prediction of patricide and incest. He acts in ignorance (a condition about which Greek drama is not forgiving). He is surely right to flee the objects of his predicted transgression, yet he must be wrong to imagine he can outrun a prophecy, a bigger transgression in itself. ‘Knowing’ what he will do to Polybus and Merope, he avoids their company and blindly bumps into Laius. His logic, upon which he prides himself, is impeccable, but he will learn soon enough that he is less clear-sighted than he thinks.

**Question 11**

A question that failed to attract any takers. Two issues would need to be considered. In the light of Plato’s concept of a transcendental world of Ideal Forms, what is it about fictive art, and its effects, that causes him to exile the artist? It would then be necessary to review Plato’s own writings in terms of his dependency upon those rhetorical methods (metaphor, dialogue, simile, symbol) which are the common currency of imaginative literature.
**Question 12**

This is a question which is interested in complexity of response. It has often been observed that the Wife of Bath, with her sexual voracity, the manipulation of her husbands, her vulgarity and her lack of deference for traditional authority, confirms all the worst fears of medieval misogynists. Yet the reader is aware that behind the self-paraded caricature is a determinedly independent woman who ironically will out-gloss all the male glossers of Scripture and, in confirming their prejudices, will expose the patriarchal instinct for oppression. Chaucer orchestrates our response to the Merchant in a similar fashion. The man who surely must offend most readers with his ageing lust and his desire to possess youth in the person of another, ends as a sad, blind, betrayed fool. He has received no more than he deserves and his wife, by most standards, has just cause, yet as the wool is finally pulled over his now open eyes, it is difficult not to feel some sympathy for what could have been a simple fabliau grotesque.

**Question 13**

Candidates submitted some astute essays which explored the determination of both Barabas and Faustus to take control over their own destinies. The point was rightly made that Barabas’ wealth and, equally importantly, his mercantile skills, were prized more as a symbol of power than for the underlying monetary value. As a Jew, he was a member of a marginalised community and vulnerable to persecution. In this context, his goods became a bulwark against exploitation, and yet ironically their existence made him more susceptible to oppression by the ruling Christians. In a similar manner, Faustus’ lowly origins drove him to invest in the wealth that was his mind, and eventually to transgress in his search for a power that would, he hoped, take him beyond the mundane limits of a sublunary life. Like Mortimer, both were blind to that emblematic truth that once at the top of Fortune’s wheel, there is only one direction in which to travel.

**Question 14**

The term ‘religion’ proved to be fairly elastic and commentaries sometimes embraced broader issues under the general heading ‘the spiritual’. If the case was well made, this was acceptable, but there was plenty of material to supply a discussion of a more specific nature. The revenge tradition which lies behind Hamlet was part of a continuing debate about the legitimacy of private vengeance in the face of orthodox religious prohibitions. Hamlet’s problem is further complicated by a theology that initially makes him doubt the provenance of the ghost, and by religious caveats against the killing of kings, no matter how steeped in sin they may be. In The Tempest, the issue of revenge is again to the fore, and the god-like power of Prospero’s magic raises some awkward questions. Forgiveness and mercy, even in contexts which may appear ambiguous, are an interesting extension of the discussion about a search for justice.

**Section C**

**Question 15**

One discussion of ‘family conflict’ made a perceptive reference to Aristotle’s Poetics where the critic describes the most pittable sufferings, in terms of tragic catharsis, as those inflicted between characters who are ‘near and dear’; fathers, daughters, mothers, brothers, uncles, nephews, nieces. In view of this catalogue of relationships, it would not be difficult to find examples of familial conflict among the prescribed texts: you need range no further than Oedipus, Antigone, Hamlet and The Tempest to encompass all on the list. The issue of ‘sexual mores’ was popular, but in a rather descriptive fashion. Much was made of the gusto with which the Wife of Bath recounted her sexual escapades, but only token gestures were made towards some vague notion of a medieval sexual norm. Again, the erotic temptations presented to Sir Gawain were considered with relish, but the complex tensions between courtly, sexual and Christian expectations were often ignored.
Question 16
The point has been made on a number of past occasions, but is worth repeating. To describe a work as an allegory involves a fairly precise definition. On this unit, only Dante’s *Inferno*, with its complex structure of interlocking planes of parallel meaning, really deserves to be identified as a formal allegory. When it comes to deciding what might be deemed ‘allegorical’ the candidate has more flexibility. A poem like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains elements that are undoubtedly of an allegorical nature, but the work is a romance, not an allegory. We would caution against allowing the term to become so elastic that the Examiners suspect that it is being massaged to fit inappropriate circumstances.

Question 17
Instances of ‘alienation’ seemed to be fairly widespread, and were treated with varying degrees of success. Probably the most popular figure of alienated youth was that of Hamlet who, predictably, was seen to have psycho-sexual problems about his mother but, more interestingly, was seen to be torn between a desire to emulate his father (Hyperion) and a fear that in a course of revenge he might become the Satyr who was his stepfather/uncle. Discussions of ‘relationships between mortals and immortals’ mainly concentrated upon the Homeric Pantheon, and the ways in which divine interventions provided extended metaphors for the hopes and anxieties of the pan-Hellenic community. There were also a few very well-researched commentaries on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which made for pleasurable reading. One or two candidates elected to discuss ‘violence’, but the general tendency to offer a descriptive gazetteer of violent moments prompts a reassertion of the importance of the rubric which invites comment upon ‘the nature and treatment’.