2023 VCE Literature external assessment report

General comments

Approximately 4000 students sat the 2023 VCE Literature examination, an increase from 2022. Overall, the skills and knowledge exhibited in the majority of responses were of high quality, reflecting engagement, familiarity and confidence in their approach to the examination tasks.

In 2023, the examination was, as in other years, in two sections, each with equal weighting. Students were asked to complete two responses, on two different texts from two different genres. In 2023, a new examination format was introduced, with Section A structured into two extended responses and Section B remaining essentially the same.

* The total marks for the examination were 40.
* Answers to both Section A and Section B were recorded in separate answer books.

Each section of the examination is assessed according to expected qualities that reflect the criteria published for each task. These criteria and expected qualities are applied holistically by assessors, rewarding each student according to their achievement. Thus, there is no ‘right’ answer or approach, and students receiving similar scores might have written very different responses, which fulfil the requirements of the tasks in different ways. Responses are rewarded for what they achieve and are never penalised for mistakes. It was notable that the responses were relevant, detailed and perceptive. Students were familiar with the tasks and demonstrated a very close knowledge and understanding of their texts, suggesting that consistent practice, discussion with both peers and teachers, and writing had taken place throughout the year.

There is no word limit or length suggested for either Section A or Section B, but practice and common sense should be applied so that students learn to write both fully and succinctly. Some students wrote at length and in depth, developing their ideas in impressive, sophisticated detail; however, some students were able to fulfil the requirements for a very high score by writing less expansively in a shorter essay. We encourage teachers to work closely with their students as they develop a deep understanding of the expected qualities, and how to respond to them. Although there were students who wrote at great length, all too often their work was repetitive, and off topic. We encourage students to pay attention to the details of their own writing, as they tease out the details of their texts.

Spelling is not a criterion, but a precise attention to detail will help students create expressive, subtle and finely discerning pieces of writing.

It is understandable that students are writing under some pressure, but regular timed practices throughout the year can increase speed and efficiency, as can attention to the legibility of their handwriting. Assessors endeavour to decipher some scripts, but students should remember that handwriting is part of the process of communication and try to give themselves time to express themselves clearly on every level.

In 2023, students were provided with separate answer booklets for Sections A and B. Assessors commented that good use was made of the booklets, making the process more efficient. Most students were guided by the amount of space available for their responses, but those who needed more space were able to ask for extra booklets. Overall, students seemed comfortable with the two booklets, suggesting that in their practices, they had made good use of the sample booklets provided on the VCAA website.

General comments and areas for improvement include the following:

* Students need to know both text and task in depth and detail. Thus, to describe Dickinson as living and writing in the 16th century is not helpful in terms of context and accuracy. Similarly, claims that images in Dickinson’s poetry ‘might be a reference to her Christian beliefs’ revealed that students were not sufficiently familiar with the writer’s background and the cultural presuppositions of the poetry. At times, guesswork seemed to be applied to how the language of poetry made meaning, suggesting that students had not worked out their interpretation before the exam. Also, on context, some students had a poor understanding of ‘class’; while Uncle Vanya worked, he could not accurately be described as ‘working class’.
* Similarly, some students mistook which character in Picnic at Hanging Rock was ‘dancing barefoot’, thus making it difficult for them to make optimum use of the passage provided in Section A. It is not unreasonable to expect that readers of Picnic would know the reference to Covent Garden (not Covenant Garden!) and that it is not a mere garden, but representative of the European, colonial culture embedded in Irma, and indeed imposed on the Australian landscape, as demonstrated in this passage.
* There were some pre-prepared answers that seemed to reveal insight, but not into the actual task, having very limited success in using the passages. A few responses had an ‘all-purpose’, pre-written introduction that had little connection of relevance to the actual essay following. Most responses began the task immediately, grappling with how these passages can be the basis of a discussion of the text. Weaker responses, with limited ideas and knowledge tended to avoid commitment, resorting to unjustified generalities. Some responses made assertions about the text as a whole that they could not sustain, only being familiar with a small number of poems. In contrast, a few unprepared students, especially when it came to poetry or short stories, failed to consider the text as a whole.
* It is important to develop a broad, appropriate vocabulary, to avoid repetition and develop a coherent, focused interpretation. Although the word ‘juxtaposition’ is a useful one, it was often used inaccurately. Also, students do not need to attempt to express their ideas in unnatural sophisticated, technical jargon that they find difficult to control. Terms such as ‘heteroglossic’, ’aposiopesis’, ‘polyptotan’ are not always necessary, and can disguise rather than reveal meaning. We encourage students to extend their vocabulary, but to retain their own voices when they write.
* We remind students that terms such as ‘enjambment’ (not enjabment!) should not be used as mere pointers, but as a means of analysing how a poet has created meaning through the movement of the verse. To only describe a poet’s use of iambic pentameter is inadequate without a discussion and analysis of how this verse functions or is subverted.
* We also remind students of the importance of genre and form***;*** too few noted stage directions, the presence or absence of particular characters on stage, or the role of sound. Those who gave a sense of the drama unfolding on stage, of what the audience would experience, of the action of the play wrote compellingly about the plays.

Specific information

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

Section A − Developing interpretations

This two-part task asked students to complete two extended-answer questions based on one set passage from one text from the 2023 VCE Literature Text List.

Question 1 required students to address the significance of the set passage within the context of the whole text. This question was worth 6 marks.

Question 2 required students to address a key concept from the text, taking into consideration both the set passage and the whole text. This question was worth 14 marks.

Section A was worth a total of 20 marks.

In 2023, assessors found some of the new Section A responses to be engaging and less likely to be able to be pre-prepared, demonstrating skill rather than pre-learned answers.

Question 1

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Marks** | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **Average** |
| % | 0.6 | 3 | 17 | 35 | 30 | 13 | 2 | 3.4 |

Some students found this task more complicated than it was intended to be, attempting to cover material more relevant for Part 2. For 6 marks, they were asked to explore the significance of the provided passage in the context of the whole text. Of course, students make their own choices as to how they approach tasks, but the importance of the word ‘significance’ and ‘context’ should be noted. Those students who had teased out the meanings of these words as part of their examination preparation wrote relevant and detailed explorations of the functions/role/context of this passage in their text. Occasionally, students limited themselves to merely summarising the passage, making their answer difficult to reward. As with the rest of the examination paper, the expected qualities and the criteria provide guidance for students.

The number of marks available, and the focused emphasis of the question, combined with the number of pages reserved in the answer booklet, encouraged students to write pertinent responses. It was important not to spend an excessive amount of time on Part 1 at the expense of the more demanding Part 2, which was worth more than twice the marks. It is possible that there would be some overlap in ideas between Parts 1 and 2, but it is important that students can differentiate between the two tasks. There was some repetition across the answers rather than an understanding that the six marks was about context in the text as a whole and the 14 marks invited much closer language analysis as well as a perspective on the text.

Responses that took a straightforward approach to Part 1 and contextualised the passage and explored

 its significance (for example, explaining why it is important, what it does in the wider text, and its chronological and thematic setting) were relevant and informative. By demonstrating the place of the passage in the text and engaging with its function in terms of the whole text’s concerns, these responses constructed perceptive, focused essays that demonstrated knowledge and understanding. The student samples provided in this report are examples of how to write such responses.

Assessors noted that the rubric worked reasonably well, with some responses demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of what ‘significance’ can entail. It is important to be mindful of the position of the passage in the text as a whole, to support discussion of a text’s structure, and thus of how authors express ideas.

This was particularly the case for short stories, and some of the poetry collections – some responses indicated students may not be sure how to treat the passage as an example from which to make comments about the whole text.

By contrast, some responses did not fulfil all the criteria, and didn’t have the required textual evidence detail to support their ideas. Some responses were mere summaries of the passage.

The higher-scoring responses used the whole passage, and didn’t ignore a character or reference, as occurred sometimes in the case of *Uncle Vanya*, where Astrov was rarely discussed. In another example, although Othello is not on stage in the passage provided, he is the subject of the conversation, and thus the racial epithets create insight into the mores of the world of the play, as well as introducing the audience to Iago and his manipulative bile. Iago’s emotions are demonstrated in the movement of the verse; the imagery evokes a diseased society, suggesting to audiences that Othello is vulnerable to Iago, who is ‘not what I am’. Students could have discussed the effect of this passage opening the play.

Student samples

*Picnic at Hanging Rock,* Joan Lindsay

This expositionary passage of Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock immediately preceding Miranda, Marion, and Irma’s disappearance within the Antipodean landscape serves to establish the narrative of mystery and ambiguity which facilitates the novel’s greater narrative arc. As suggested by the assertion of Lindsay’s Gothically ambivalent narrative style that “whether the events” of the novel “are fact or fiction is left for readers to decide”, the readership’s interpretation of the girls’ disappearance from the “rigid” and immaculate colonial settlement to the “infinitely vague and distant” natural unknown is allowed to develop in this passage, foreshadowing both the impending disappearance and the dramatic “darken[ing] and spread[ing]” of the “pattern of the picnic” on the disturbed psyches of those left behind. Additionally furthered in the passage is the characterization of Miranda, whose descriptions here facilitate her wider symbolism as a metaphysical conduit between the domestic and the unsanitised Australian unknown. Lindsay’s crafting of “Miranda… a little ahead” and “the first to see the monolith” asserts her characterization as an alluring axis mundi both immediately as “the four girls push on” to their unresolved vanishing and for Mike, whose romanticised endeavours to “rescue” his “lost, lovely darling” and consequently damaged psyche drive the narrative action. Miranda’s status as the metaphysical being is connoted by Lindsay’s arguably paranormal diction as her “her straight yellow hair… cleave wave after wave of dusty green”, with her impending and unresolved disappearance upon the Hanging Rock catalysing the narrative arc. Through this expositionary passage Lindsay both foreshadows the tragedy of the girls’ vanishing and constructs Miranda’s thematic significance extended through the broader text; as per Lindsay’s ambiguous narrative style, those seeking answers and rationalization for the Hanging Rock disappearance are left with flimsy recollections of “Miranda forever coming and going in the dazzling light.”

*Dracula,* Bram Stoker

This passage signifies the advent of the transgressive threat the ‘New Woman’ poses to British Society by the fin de Siècle. Indeed, prior to the passage, Harker’s prosaic narration, redolent of the popular Travel Novels in Victorian England, seeks to observe the foreign “strangeness” of Dracula’s Land, refusing participation. Yet, as Harker’s time in the castle progresses he is forced to transition to a more personal narration style as he is face by increasingly strange threats. In turn, this passage acts to transgress Harker’s views of women, who were expected to be passive and submissive in Victorian society, evident in the connotation of purity that are evoked in Lucy Westenra’s characterization as a “sweet maid”. Herein, such a notion is ironically inverted by Stoker through his allusions to Coventry’s ‘Angel in the House; through the Devil’s in Dracula’s castle, whose subversion of traditional Victorian womanhood is apparent in their inversion of traditional gender roles. In exemplification of this is Jonothan’s “closed…eyes” and assertion that he “waited – waited”, with the caesural em-dash typifying his enduring passivity. In contrast, Stoker imbues the female vampire with the sexual agency to “advance” and “ben[d] over [Jonothan]”, implying the active verb to accentuate her perverse domination of the man, drawing on Victorian ideas of the New Woman who took a more candid and active approach to sexuality that was deeply feared by Victorian Society. Thus, Stoker build on the passage as he presents Lucy as the apparently archetypal Victorian woman, until Dracula’s infection leaves her to bed Arthur “come to me… come… come”, as Stoker employes the anaphoric repetition of the command to convey her corrupted femininity. As a result, this passage sets up the critical fear of the ‘New Woman’ in Stoker’s text, which is then transported to his readerships home of England, suggesting that such transgressions of the natural paradigm of sexual relationships is under threat by the Fin de Siècle

*The Yield,* Tara June Winch

Through the polyphonic project of ‘The Yield’, Winch depicts a world in which sovereignty is sought to be reinstated not purely through the dismantling of colonial paradigms, but also through the beauty found in the sustenance of familial relationships. Throughout the threat that encapsulates Albert’s story, Winch seeks to espouse the significance of repatriation and return to Aboriginal ontology, as magnified in his entries for “bilirr” and “yandu”. Albert’s life is mared by his state sanctioned separation for the Gondiwindi clan, as he is a victim of the Stolen Generations. The roots from which he comes erased, the only heritage he is accustomed to is that which is European in nature – he must “Think white. Act white. Be white.”, this tricolon of imperatives echoing the rigidity of this enforced colonial ideology. However, it is his connection to the ancestors and the epistemological agency they instil in him that fosters the reclamation of his Aboriginal Australian identity. Although his living family may be physically and geographically scattered, harmed by the colonial structures that cause their separation, it is indeed the amorphous voice of his ancestors who remain with him. They teach him the words in his dictionary knowledge which he in turn provides August with the ability to reclaim the Native Title and the Gondiwindi family home, and impart on him with the comfort only engendered by one’s kin. As him and the ancestral spirits are “telling stories” and cracking “jokes”, amidst this laughter he is also met with a woman who “looked like [his] mummy.” Didactically reminding him that he may be “lost, but not lost always”, it propels Albert to not merely being reduced to being a man “raised on white flour and Christianity”. He undergoes a journey to infuse these ancestors anecdotes, these memories, within the confines of his dictionary, allowing August too to forge an Aboriginal identity unified and secured by multiple generations. The bilirr presented in the passage makes its return along with Jedda in later passages. Hence, Winch emphasizes the significance of love and connection between family members, both deceased and still living, in order to herald a return to Aboriginal sovereignty.

*Uncle Vanya,* Anton Chekhov

The passage, in which Vanya confronts Astrov about his “embracing [Yelena]”, and then breaks down in front of him, occurs right after the play’s anticlimax. Vanya begins by speaking nonchalantly about his “attempted murder” of Serebryakov, and then accuses Astrov of helping in “deceiving [Serebryakov] under the eyes of everyone.” This bizarre segue, which exposes his burning jealousy also implies a strong disconnect with the events that just occurred. Vanya says it himself: after trying to shoot Serevryakov twice, he breaks down and laments how his own poor aim betrays his uselessness. He furthers his self-pity by pointing out that “no one is arresting me or going to prosecute me. So they must think I’m mad”; this paints a picture of a man who feels completely isolated from the world, especially with his “[sour laugh]” at the thought of other on the estate thinking him mad. He even slips further int self-disgust, joking that “well, I’m mad, I have no responsibility for my actions…”. After this, Serebryakov, Yelena and Astrov depart, and at this time Vanya and Serebryakov make up, which frees Vanya from some of his alienation. The passage also reveals a depth to Astrov and Vanya’s relationship which before was only as deep as drinking together and admiring the beauty of Yelena; this conversation shows their different ways of looking at life, as Vanya has to be convinced by Astrov (though he is the younger man) that their only hope lies further afield, and that there is no use in trying to “begin a new life”. This ties in generally with their outlooks on the world, which in Astrov’s case is more future oriented: for example, his caring for woods displays a “broad sweep” as Yelena names it, and in the passage he refers to “people who live after us in a hundred or two hundred years’ time” showing he’s very conscious about the future. Vanya, however, as displayed in the passage, is obsessed with the idea of starting life “some how afresh” and constantly brings up his regretful past. it is hinted that his method for ‘starting afresh” means killing himself, as show in the very next scene with the morphine. Astrov being able to pull him back from the dark precipice he hangs over shows the increased depth of their bond since Vanya’s breakdown over his realization he’s been wasting his life. The passage represents the beginning of Vanya’s journey back to the contentment he had before the arrival of Serebryakov.

*The* *Winter’s Tale,* William Shakespeare

Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale is labelled a problem play for its defiance of standard generic conventions consisting of a tragic halve following the misdemeanors of strong Leontes of Sicilia, and a comedic half occurring largely in bucolic bohemia. Taken from the tragic half of the play, this passage is significant as it reveals the culmination of Leontes’ delusions, and catalyses the final tragedy. Though Hermione is widely regarded as “chaste” and “true”, as a paradigm of virtue, Leontes is absolutely certain that she is concealing an affair, despite the urgings of those around him to reconsider, as goes so far as to castigate his closes advisor Camillo as a “liar”, for attempting to get him to see sense. Due to this Camillo “left {Leontes’] court, and this isolation further encourages Leontes to believe in the conspiracy against him, becoming further entrenched in his own delusions. In placing Hermione on trial, Leontes seemingly forgets that she is “The mother to a hopeful prince”, Mamillius, Sicilia’s only heir. Consumed by his own jealous rage, Leontes fails to consider the effect his actions will have on his son, whose very name connotes the degree to which he relies upon maternal reassurance. Therefore, in severing his maternal bond, Leontes causes Mamillius to “droop” and “decline”, but maintaining his diatribe against Hermione, is apathetic to his son’s suffering, resulting in Mamillius’ death immediately preceding this scene. Thus Shakespeare presented Leontes’ lack of rational judgement as the cause of the play’s tragedy. This is further evidenced by his characterisation of Hermione as a “mistress”, criticising her friendship with Polixenes for its “paddling palms and pinching fingers”, seemingly forgetting that this relationship was formed as he “[him]self commanded”, and as such Leontes is further isolated and characterised as a tragic hero, having lost Polixenes “love” as well. Ultimately, Hermione, having endured the humiliation of Leontes’ delusions is unable to subsist having lost her son, friend and husband, and following Mamillius, also dies. Thus in this passage Shakespeare presents the catastrophic effects of Leontes delusion fuelled tyranny, causing tragedy for all.

Question 2

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Marks** | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **Average** |
| % | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.7 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 11 | 15 | 13 | 15 | 11 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 8.8 |

Though most students were able to develop appropriate answers, some approached the task by methodically working through the three verbs in the question, which could have made their job more difficult. The wording of ‘endorsed, challenged **and/or** marginalised’ allows students to use their focus on the given passage to discuss the given concept. Not all three verbs will need equal discussing. As was clear from some responses, discussing the extent to which all three verbs might be applicable will not necessarily lead to a rich and relevant discussion; students should be familiar enough with the views and values conveyed in their texts to be able to address which verbs most apply when exploring the concept.

The provision of one passage from each text to focus on for this section gives students material to work with, and probably students have discussed key passages for analyses throughout the Literature year. However, for instance in *Northanger Abbey*, some answers suffered as a result of limitations in students’ memory of the narrative leading up to the passage, some writing as if this was the first time Catherine had reason to doubt Isabella. Additionally, there seemed some confusion as to what the concept of ‘appearances’ entailed, with some students only discussing characters’ physical appearances, such as their clothes.

Overall, most responses for Section A Part 2 were confident. The focus on ideas, views and values, on a given concept, on the familiar relationship between key passages and the wider text, plus the scaffolding already completed in Part 1, resulted in many complex and sophisticated responses that fulfilled the highest expected qualities for this task.

The most popular text choices for Section A were *Picnic at Hanging Rock, Dracula, Othello, Uncle Vanya* and *The Remains of the Day*, followed by *The Fire Next Time, Northanger Abbey* and *Berlin*.

The following high-scoring responses reflect a range of approaches. They should not be seen as models to be copied, but as examples of how different students wrote.

Student samples

*Picnic at Hanging Rock,* Joan Lindsay

Joan Lindsay’s criticism of European constructs as regressive works to champion immersion with the natural world. Character’s disappearances upon the Hanging Rock are presented as a retribution for an excessive desire to control or resist the natural world; just as the “rigidly upright” arthmatics mistress Miss McCraw is sardonically demeaned as she forfeits logic and reason and climbs the Rock “without les pantelons”, Irma’s mental assertion of European grandeur upon the Antipodean landscape, imagining “the Royal Box…halfway up a gum tree”, satirically foreshadowing her disappearance. Lindsay’s authorial marginalisation of Edith’s perspective challenges a refusal to forfeit colonial constructs symbolized by restrictive clothing, with the girl demanding through satirical free-indirect discourse narration to have “early in life take[n] to woolen bedsocks and galoshes” implicated to “insulate… against natural contacts with earth and air.” Lindsay’s ridiculing of Edith serves to uplift by contrast an immersion with the natural world described as an “abandoned folly”; it is indeed the “abandon[ment]” of the girls’ “stockings and shoes”, “pencils and notebooks”, and “pretty diamond wristwatch” respectively symbolizing repressive Victorian propriety, fixations with human knowledge, and the desire for ordered control, which enables true immersion through disappearance in nature. Through the criticism of restrictive colonial constructs and uplifting of their forfeit to achieve connection with nature, Lindsay endorses the natural world as an entity vindictive against and liberating from European social construction.

The orchestration of a marginalised yet repeatedly implicated Indigenous presence supports Lindsay’s advocation of the power and permanence of the natural world. The characters of Picnic’s 1900 context actively repress Indigenous voices; the dominant view of Australia as a “new” landscape “where [nothing] had been done before” is supported by the singular and dehumanising mention of “a black tracker” brought to search for the missing girls, uttered repressively in the same tone as “the sniffer dog”. Despite Lindsay’s characters’ marginalisation, the texts’ narrative voice works to undermine this validity through repeated allusion of Indigenous preservation within the natural world. Implications of Indigenous inhabitation feature in moments of European incongruity with nature to demean their failure to immersion; Irma’s perception of “a rather curious sound… like the beating of far-off drums” and Mike’s confused “who could be laughing down here?” works to undermine colonial control of the landscape and uplifts its power by highlighting the permanence of a native presence with a setting dominant for “a million summer evenings.”

Through engagement with tropes of the Australian Gothic genre Lindsay endorses the unwavering power of the natural world. Ominous and paranormal diction choices – with the Hanging Rock “jutted and slabbed like a fortress” and described as “monstrous” – works to infuse the Gothic macabre within a personified entity. Lindsay’s Gothic equivocation of the natural world’s power is furthered by the metaphysical predation of it’s eliciting “an overpowering lassitude” which “suddenly overpowers” and dominates “all four girls” – this exhibition of the Australian landscapes’ superior power over colonially minded intruders is maintained in the conclusion An ultimate supercedence of nature upon the colonial settlement which attempts to domesticate it formulates Lindsay’s ultimate endorsement of the natural world; the epitome of European control, Mrs Appleyard, is brutally dismembered by the landscape with her “head impaled upon a jutting crag”, whilst the sanitised landscape of Appleyard College is “completely destroyed in a bushfire the following year.”

Lindsay’s advocation of the natural world’s irrepressible power and condemnation by contrast of futile colonial fixations with control link to her authorial 1967 context, demeaning Victorian ideological conservativeness in favour of political progression.

*Dracula*, Bram Stoker

As a society whose hegemony was waning by the Victorian period, much of England’s anxiety was evoked from threats to its power. Indeed, the threat of the ‘New Woman’ is critical to much of this fear as this passage depicts Jonothan as a metaphorical representation of England’s men, noting that he is “young” and “strong” connoting their power. Yet, Stoker’s emasculation of the emblematic character acts to accentuate the vulnerability induced by Britain’s hegemony, as it may effect a parasitic relationship that has the propensity to cripple England. In epitomisation of this is the female vampires declaration that “there are kisses for us all”, connoting England’s abundance of power that may be plundered by Eastern power, allegorically represented by the female vampires. Thus, Stoker centralises Britain’s fears of such predation through Lucy and Mina whose bodies act as a symbolic battleground for this conflict of power. In turn, Stoker mirrors the lexicon he uses to describe the Count’s eyes that “blazed” like “hell-fire”, identical to Lucy’s eyes which shift from “gentle orbs”, connoting purity, to “full of hell-fire”, mimicking the satanic overtones of the Count’s description. In doing so, he highlights the Count’s capacity to appropriate his Eastern characteristics onto the Western woman. Moreover, the Count’s domination of the female vampires – who have already dominated Jonothan – is epitomised in his vehement command “Back, I tell you all!” as it employs the indicative mood to convey the Count’s power over his wives. Through this, Stoker ensures the hierarchical stratification of power in his novel that laments Britain apparent capability to be dominated by all Eastern threats. Through this, Stoker underscores the East’s capacity to parasitically gain power in Britain, undermining the West’s power to uphold the enduring institutions of femininity, monogamy and courtship.

Building upon the threat the ‘New Woman’ poses to Britain’s hegemony is the Victorian society’s deep fear of the East’s primitiveness usurping the West. Viewing themselves as the epitomisation society, Victorian England sought to obtain reason and rationality in every pursuit, reflected by Harker’s initial prosaic narration and intentions to remain an observer. Thus, through Stoker’s simile that describes the female vampire “like an animal” results in the dehumanisation of the temptress, evoking connotations of the primitive that the West feared would corrupt their environment. Herein, the canonical writer amplifies such ideas through the Count whose “deathly pale” complexion accentuates his position as ‘the outsider’ with the grave connotations underscoring his corruption of the binaries of life and death which he has transcended. Through the alienation in the characterisation of the Count, the nobleman’s subsequent venture to London in which he disguises himself in its “teeming millions”, incepts a new fear that sees the East integrate itself with the west in a metaphorical miscegenation of values and ideas. In doing this, Stoker seeks to warn of ‘the outsiders’ capacity to infiltrate and corrupt the very locus of Western society in an attempt to amplify fears of migration in Victorian England for its capacity to undermine the power and control of the West within its own domain.

*The Yield,* Tara June Winch

Concerned with he attempted genocide of Aboriginal languages like the Wiradjuri language, Winch propounds through Albert’s dictionary that “The Yield” is a novel whereby language facilitates Aboriginal ontology. Albert’s dictionary forms a third of “The Yield”’s narration and stands apart from the other threads in form and in purpose. Infused with anecdotes and a tapestry of human emotions, Winch dissolves this Eurocentric notion that dictionaries must be purely denotative through Albert’s poignant writing. He not only teaches August the vocabulary of the language, but also instructs the reader how they must be pronounced, without “flat tongues”, what their contextual usages are, and their relevance to his own life, which he exemplifies through his entry for “bilirr” – it definition proclaiming that the “r” must be rolled and that the bilirr was present when his mother “birthed him”. This entry is redolent of his very first entry for ‘Mgurambug’, the world for Australia, in which he introduces his origins and exclaims that when the reader rolls its ‘r’, that they can feel “blood” at the back of their mouth. Indeed, language is medium that is not ossified, but reflects the state of the speaker. It contains traces of colonial violence and the “blood” shed by the Aboriginal community, which cannot be denied. However, Winch through Albert’s unconventional dictionary contends that under the surface sheen of this imperial trauma, lies great knowledge that can and must be disseminated. Whereas tangible remnants of the grand expanse that comprises Aboriginal history may be expelled through state-sanctioned massacres and theft of belongings, language immortalizes this history through animated words; words that animate Albert post partum , words that enable the ancestral spirits to enact change upon the present world. Unable to defend her land from the Rhinepalm [mining company] alone, August retrieves the dictionary from Eddie and is able to eschew this notion that Massacre Plains belongs to the government and is void of Aboriginal history. In the end it is not only the discovery of the items consisting of the spear and various assorted memorabilia imprisoned within the museum, but the living, breathing memory sustained by the language sharing of Albert’s dictionary.

“The Yield”’s denouement though wholly satisfactory for its characters, does allow Winch to call into question why a return to Aboriginal ontology is catalysed by the acceptance of history by colonial institutions. The prologue stating that “Justice in the absence of sovereignty is organised theft.”, she dispels the notion of hegemonical tolerance being sufficient for reconciliation, and instead endorses the idea that language is indeed the key. Didactically espoused by Mandy during the protest, “we are all migrants here”, and the only way to show “respect” to the original custodians of our lands is to learn the language whether one belongs to the Aboriginal community or not. Albert’s dictionary through its bilingual nature allows for his translation to occur, but ultimately, Winch declares that it is up to the reader to allow the endurance of the Wiradjuri language to survive. Not only must sovereignty be reinstated by the government through dissolution of imperial paradigms, but of every Australian too.

*Uncle Vanya,* Anton Chekhov

The passage give a window into the intense despair Vanya feels, both as a result of the past and through the notion of the future. He laments “this sharp feeling of shame,” which “can’t be compared with any other pain”, and can be interpreted as referring to one of the two things. It could be referring to his attempted killing of Serebryakov, which he believes everyone “thinks [he’s] mad” for, but it could also be in reference to the years he spent “reading magazines and books which I now deeply despise” for the benefit of Serebryakov. These two things tie into the powerful feeling of regret, and as Vanya is very often looking into the past for reasons for his misery, this is compounded by other events like remembering how he “could’ve made [Yelena] my wife” over ten years ago. However, the feeling of despair arises when he realises his life must change, as he feels he cannot go on doing the same thing after being intensely disillusioned as to the quality of Serebryakov’s work, and he struggles to imagine “how [he] will get through those [next] thirteen years” of his life. Astrov challenges this concept of despair, however, and advises that there is no point looking for “new life out there”, as “[their] situation… is hopeless.” The way Astrov lives is by looking towards the future, and hoping “that when we lie in our coffins we’ll be visited by visions, perhaps even agreeable ones.” The advice he gives is harsh and pessimistic, but it is much different to Vanya’s wistful wish to “live the rest of [his] life somehow afresh.” Astrov’s sentiment challenges Vanya’s whole reason for his despair, which is that he cannot change the past, and instead encourages him to keep his mind turned towards the future. On this note, Marina is similar; though she’s the oldest resident of the estate, instead of complaining about her old age every chance she gets as Vanya and Serebryakov do, she endeavours to make the most of her final years, reading pamphlets and doing other things she enjoys. She dispels despair by again having a future-oriented outlook; however bleak Astrov’s outlook is, it too is future-oriented, and as such though in his adored woods forests are being cut down and animals are disappearing, he endures with out falling into despair, and keeps trying to improve the future through his own practical methods. Indeed, Vanya, since Serebryakov arrived, has had no outlet through which he could accomplish anything that might affect the future (“all I do is eat, drink, and sleep”) and thus, especially as a result of the drinking, he becomes obsessively fixated on the past, choosing to blame his misfortune on the past he squandered working for the Professor. As a direct result he feels an intense despair, as one always does when frustrated by something immutable; this manifests itself physically as “a burning feeling [in his heart]”. Astrov, whose name is derived from the Latin for “star”, astrum, and who is described by Yelena as “a moon rising in the darkness” is exactly this to Vanya; a way of freeing himself from the shackles of the past’s despair, and to instead focus on what can be affected, his future. In the end, Astrov oversees Vanya’s return to work, something he feels gives him control over his life, and notes how the sounds of “the pens scratching…” is “warm, cosy”, as if he can feel Vanya’s healing from despair in the sound of his work. No longer must Vanya feel “dragged down”: work, and focusing on the future, has given him a way to escape despair, rather than becoming trapped not knowing “what to do” with his remaining years.

Thus the notion of despair is challenged, in showing that it lies within the bounds of human agency whether it is felt: a conscious choice that only requires a shift of paradigm that is, looking into the future rather than the past.

*The* *Winter’s Tale,* William Shakespeare

The concept of justice, if defined as doing that which is right for one’s country, may be seen to be endorsed in this passage by a contemporary audience. At the start of Polixenes’ appearance in the play, it is revealed that he has been residing in Sicilia for “nine changes of the watery star”, an amount of time that, when paired with Hermione’s obviously pregnant figure, would immediately arouse suspicions for a contemporary audience that something is amiss making Leontes’ mounting jealousy justified. Through attempting to defend herself as “chaste” and “true”, Hermione’s arguments are somewhat indescent after Leontes has witnessed her “Too hot! Too hot!” interactions with Polixenes, suggesting that there are sexual undertones to their discourse. These suspicions would be particularly pertinent to a contemporary audience for whom Hermione’s position as a “fellow of the royal bed” yields significant power in the maintenance of patriarchal lineage required to ensure the stability of the nation. Moreover, Hermione’s characterisation as an adultress calls into the question the paternity of Sicilia’s heir, prince Mamillius, as Leonte’s repeatedly asks in consternation “Art though my boy?”, “Art though my cat?” Thus, due to contemporary concerns and the stability of countries being dependent upon the maintenance of patriarchal lineage, a Jacobean audience would perceive Leontes’ trial of Hermione to be in the best interests of Sicilia, and thus a fair decision. This is only compounded with Hermione’s admission – “I do confess I loved him” – which only serves to further indicate that Hermione may well have given birth to Polixenes’ child, which would have devastating effects on Leontes’ power as a monarch, and thus Sicilia’s security as a country, making his actions necessary in order to adequately address Hermione’s transgressions. Thus, although Leontes’ actions in this passage may be heroic, they are in Sicilia’s best interests and therefore may be considered just by a contemporary audience.

If however, just is defined as the maintenance of equality, feminist critics may consider the concept to be marginalised by patriarchal social structures. Hermione is forced to defend herself against Leontes’ accusations of adultery, despite the fact that she is the epitome of chastity. It is evident that prior to this passage, Leontes will not be convinced otherwise however, as in his salacious soliloquy he objectifies her, reducing her body to a source of control, a territory he must protect from “the enemy, letting in and out bag and baggage”, thus proving she exists not as a person to him but rather an asset he must claim over other men. By being positioned as Leontes’ property, the only social capital Hermione possesses is her perceived purity, allowing for Leontes’ miscarriage of justice against her to occur. Moreover, despite Leontes’ evidently damaging interventions, Hermione is forced to “appeal to [his] own conscience” reminding him that she “was in [his] grace.” The use of possessive pronouns reveals that as a woman in an androcentric society, Hermione cannot simply base her defense on the truth, but rather must attempt to appeal to Leontes’ masculine desire for control, submitting herself to him in the hopes of tempering his rage, preventing a truly just trial from occurring. Though Hermione attempts to remind Leontes that her friendship with Polixenes is as Leontes “[himself] commanded”, indirectly Leontes’ authoritarian wielding of Hermione as an asset to build homosocial bonds, this does little to reduce is delusions, suggesting perhaps that this trial is a result of Leontes’ damaged masculinity, that was encroached upon as Hermione was able to achieve what he could not, convincing Polixenes to extend his visit. If this is indeed the case then this trial never occurred in the pursuit of justice, but rather as a punishment for Hermione’s capability in spite of her gender. Thus due to patriarchal social structures, Leontes is able to evade providing Hermione with justice, due to her inferior societal position as a woman.

Section B – Close analysis

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Marks** | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **15** | **16** | **17** | **18** | **19** | **20** | **Average** |
| % | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.7 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 10 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 0.8 | 12.4 |

This section required a sustained interpretation of one text from the 2023 VCE Literature Text List, drawing on a detailed analysis of two or more of three set passages.

The set passages were of sufficient length for students to engage with them and to allow students to fulfil the assessment criteria.

The set passages were presented in the order in which they appear in the original text, but their original page numbers were not given. For collections of short stories, the title of the story from which each set passage is selected was provided. This also applies to other text types, such as collections of essays and poetry.

Section B was worth a total of 20 marks.

* The total marks for the examination were 40.
* Answers to both Section A and Section B were recorded in separate answer books.

The mean score for Section B was slightly higher than that for Section A, perhaps reflecting greater familiarity with this task. 'In general, responses made excellent use of the passages presented and demonstrated the ability to analyse how writers create meaning, showing awareness how to integrate key moments in texts to build a developed interpretation. The majority of responses for this section were detailed and thorough, embedding quotations from the passages, and using them to open out into a complex and plausible interpretation.

As in Section A, there was not a wide range of texts chosen, with poetry the dominant choice of text type for this section. Over 25% of students wrote on Dickinson, with responses that ranged from perceptive, complex and sophisticated to limited. Some did not seem actually attuned to Dickinson’s subtleties. Biography often got in the way of insight. A sole focus on different death scenarios and limited consideration of Dickinson's subversiveness, passion and elation resulted in responses lacking in deep analysis of Poem 228 ‘Blazing in Gold’.

Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* was a very popular new text, accounting for 16% of responses, and students produced some vivid and lively writing about these poems. At times, they concentrated more on feminist views and values, at the expense of a discussion of image and tone in these witty and imaginative satirical poems. This text worked well in many responses because students appreciated the humour and the values, and seemed reasonably confident in their interpretations, not surprisingly finding *The World’s Wife* one of the more accessible texts. Other popular texts were, in order, *WB Yeats: Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney*, *Othello*, *Selected Poems* (Kenneth Slessor), *Throat, A Hunger* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, demonstrating the reliance on poetry in Section B.

*Othello* engendered some thoughtful and relevant writing, though there were some quite pedestrian responses. There was also some confusion as to whom the ‘circumcised dog’ in Passage 3 referred. Some students inadvertently, made rather racist comments, as they struggled to explore the concept of prejudice in *Othello*. As always, we encourage students to write as many practice tasks as possible, making effective use of feedback, discussion and advice, so that they come into the examination room feeling comfortable, knowledgeable and confident.

There were some excellent responses on Ellen van Neerven’s poems (*Throat*) that articulated the contemporary voice and style of the poetry as well as the traditions of the form and wove in an appreciation for the identity and culture of the author very deftly, generating a sense of engagement and immediacy.

As indicated for Section A, the sample scripts below are not intended to be exemplary, but rather to be seen as examples of how students have chosen to fulfil the requirements of the task.

Student samples

*The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro

As Stevens resolutely declares that serving “within these very walls” of Darlington Hall was the greatest “privilege” – connoting a sense of pride, the butler articulates his blind loyalty to a system that does not even has is best interests at heart. The physical location of Stevens “on a ladder” immediately places him in his “profession” – dedicated to his mandate to perform services for the grand villa-house, and the house’s owner – now Mr Farraday. Indeed, this sense of subservience seeps into Stevens’ very cerebral makeup as well; the fear of “embarking upon what might have seemed a presumptuous speech” – the conditional “might” indicative of the low possibility, is enough to force him to “sa[y] simply” – the language here emphasising a linguistic reduction, but also an anachronistic conscience of the rigid British social hierarchy which Stevens has subscribed to for his whole career. Yet, Mr Farraday’s simple remark that it would be “wrong” – almost an axiom, that “a man can’t get to see around his own country” uncovers the constructedness of Stevens’ beliefs. Indeed, by authenticating the dignity in his work through service the “greatest ladies and gentlemen” – the superlative language concretising the supposed vital importance Stevens find in his vocation, Ishiguro subtly depicts the butler as a medieval serf, whose mythological conception of his rulers is not too far from fantastical tales. In so doing, Ishiguro encourages his readers to pity the butler who acts like an individual in the medieval ages, but is in reality living in a post-Second World War II British society that has longed moved away from the social and class propriety that Stevens still holds himself to. Yet, as Stevens supposedly identifies a “series of small errors”, Ishiguro lexicon here gestures towards an image of exhaustion and breaking down – emphasized further by the butler’s solitary state among a previously bustling “staff plan.” In doing so, Ishiguro subtly equates the British aristocracy’s dependance on the ruling class as parasitic – drawing parallels to British colonialism, where the mother country would exploit and extract resources from the host nation for selfish gains. What appears even more regrettable is that even with the arrival of an “American gentlema[n]” – one that symbolizes the disruption of the British ruling class, Stevens nevertheless prides himself in “what was and what was not commonly done in England,” not too dissimilar to British working class members of the Thatcher Era who would support the politician out of national dogma, even if government policies clearly did not benefit them. Thus, in portraying Stevens as an ancient relic to a system that never had his interests at heart, Ishiguro warns of the ease for humans to be blindly infatuated with dogma.

Such dependence on a vocation to provide an identity only creates deception – for others, and especially for the self. Through Stevens’ convoluted syntax displayed in “I suppose I should,” “which this”, “true enough” and “might,” the butler’s claims to read a “love story” for the professional purpose of an “extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the English language” is immediately undermined. Thus, Ishiguro suggests that the need to work acts as an obfuscating shield to hide Stevens’ true emotional sensibilities. Indeed, the very fact that the “arrival of Miss Kenton’s letter,” alongside his language of specificity with “her first in almost seven years” is enough to inpire him to take up Farraday’s offer articulates his true emotional yearning towards his former-coworker – one Ishiguro makes clear to his reader, only further exacerbating the degree of self-denial involved for Stevens to cloak his libidinal desires in “professional matters.” Miss Kenton’s expression as she confronts Stevens – … Stevens as “she seemed almost frightened” – an image of visceral emotion not expected for the serving class of interwar Britain, thereby speaks to the constructed emotional distance that the two butler’s commitment to service engenders. In showing this, Ishiguro suggests that an unrequitting ardour towards one’s occupation can fracture the basic building blocks of human connection.

Yet, as Ishiguro’s novel approaches its tragic conclusion, the Japanese author warns that the comfort of tradition can sometimes prevent one from breaking free from social constraints and achieving true “dignity.” The doctor’s assertion that a “quiet life” for most is more important that “changes” and “upheaval” that “might benefit them” uncovers the universal difficulty associated with actual societal transformation. Even as Stevens drives around in Farraday’s Ford – a symbol of his new master’s investment in him, paralleling the American Marshall plan after World War II, where war-ravaged European nations were given great amounts of resources to rebuild and modernise, Stevens’ journey of truth-finding is likewise shown to be cynically flawed. The butler’s answer that dignity “comes down to not removing one’s clothing in public” acts as a metaphor for the performative nature of butlering to which Stevens subscribes to, where acting in the rigid British social hierarchy determined by birth is more important than the individual. In recalling this analogy from earlier in the novel, Ishiguro displays how even Farraday’s investment into the butler has not been enough to fundamentally change him. Thus, as Dr Carlisle notes “this road should be familiar to you,” the “familiar[ity]” here also possesses a double meaning. Even claiming eye-opening experience of change, Ishiguro suggests that reverting to the known is the most comfortable, and thus most natural.

*Smart Ovens for Lonely Peopl*e**,** Elizabeth Tan

Emphasising the “dissonant” relationships between “customers” and the octet within Passage One, Elizabeth Tan argues the incompatibility between personal desire and commercialised norm formed under late-stage capitalism. Tan’s postmodern collection Smart Ovens for Lonely People mythologises the modern life into a series of tableaux, unveiling a critique on the permeance of commercialisation in 21st century life and the lack of delineation between person and consumer spheres. Instead, Tan advocates for a celebration of the seemingly mundane, elevating the normal to extraordinary heights.

Yielding narration to the mermaids in Passage One, Tan creates “dissocan[ce]” between their positions as commercialised object and conscious subject, suggesting the capitalistic relationship between them and the “customer” as illegitimate. Tan represents through the mermaids’ position as product the permeance of capitalistic valuation into all, suggesting its omnipresence as unavoidable. Through the “enjoy[ment]” of the mermaids becoming “unnerving” for customers, Tan reflects upon valuation only through relation, the consumerist idea of “delight[ing]” customers becoming “inconsequential.” Tan depicts the late-stage capitalist milieu as acting in opposition to person desire, incompatible with “enjoy[ment]” existing outside “proprietors’” yearn for profit. In the tone of certainty provided within Passage 2 through “need”, Tan unveils policing by capitalist institution as overreaching acceptable control, constructing an exhibition of power imbalance between corporation and the diminished “girls in the office”. Explicit visual imagery permeates the issue, salience given to feminine “leggings”, “blouse”, and “dresses”, Tan reconnects the power imbalance to patriarchal power, exhibiting the “girls in the office” through a condescending tone in reflecting their disenfranchisement under capitalist systems. Tan condemns capitalist norms of the 21st century as unaligned with person desire and suppressive, suggesting the weakness of the system in achieving harmony and equality, forever divided between consumer and product.

Tan interestingly prophesises disastrous apocalypse arising from capitalist systems in Passage Three, polysyndeton of “balloon upon balloon upon balloon” constructing an insurmountable symbol of capitalist consumerism epitomized by the rubber artificial construction. Tan contrasts the balloons with capitalist society, emphasising a lack of hierarchy with “no leader… no ranks.” As the balloons “become the sky” and “explo[de]”, Tan connects apocalyptic situation with capitalist permeance, naturalising the absurd uprising of balloons in constructing a hyperbole of the shortcomings of consumerism within the modern world. Tan offers a rebuttal of consumerism, depicting it as directly in opposition with society in elucidating the anxieties of the modern world.

First person plural narration within Passage Two personifies the non-human company, Tan satirising the lack of separation between commerciality and humanity. Tan juxtaposes corporate jargon such as “ontological indeterminacy” with the informal “extremely distracting” in positioning the company within “uncomfortable liminality” between human and company. Through the “pigeon[‘s]…aphorisms” being “wonkily derived”, Tan reflects the corporation’s position as an uncanny facsimile, the pigeon’s mimicry of “popular songs” reflecting the corporate interpretation of humanity. Interestingly, within Passage One, Tan offers a condemnation of the inverted position, humanity corrupted by consumerism. The “aquarium[‘s]” positioning within the “restaurant” overlooked by “customers” commercialises mermaid existence, however within their visual “metamorphic conclusion”, shedding previously beautiful “hair” and “scales”, Tan depicts a consumerist construct of life as unviable. Tan advocates for complete delineation between the personal and commercial, condemning both the personification of companies and commercialisation of life.

In Passage Three, the eponymous characters do not acknowledge the balloons that “block out the sun”, Tan contrasting the apocalyptic action with the normalcy of a “picnic” in proposing and alternative valuation of life, existing separate to the capitalistic balloons. Lola and Calliope provide a stichomythic construction of life, giving thought to both the extraordinary and mundane. Paralleling both “whistle” and “the French ‘r’ sound” and “Harry Potter” and “Chopin”, Tan positions both high and low culture and analogous, the characters’ conversation not bounded by conceptual supremacy as created by perceived capitalist value. Repetition of “I never” emphasises regret within the setting of “the End of Civilisation”, Tan offering a distillation of human desire separate from the seemingly insurmountable “kaleidoscopic rainbow swarm” of capitalism. Within Passage Two, Tan unveils a desire for the mundane in capitalist society, however suggests it as corrupted. Through the prefixed “New” to “High Park”, Tan reflects the perceived necessity of progress and change in hyperconsumerist society, epitomised by the “artificial duck pond.” The reduction of duck’s lives to “five behaviour modes” which are “randomly cycled” portrays the desire for the entropy of life, however in its emulation and valuation as “favourite” of the corporate narrator advocating the existence only in appeasal of capitalist system. Tan satirizes the “artificial…random[ness]” of consumerist society, spurred from a need for permanent exponential growth driven by hyperconsumerism, suggesting the importance of the banal in life, building valuation and regret as a system of humanity outside capitalist notion.

Tan offers within Smart Ovens for Lonely People a polyptych of modern life, providing adroit reflection on unique anxieties of the 21st century. Particularly, Tan rebukes capitalist ideals, enlightening a dissonance between consumerist notion and personal desire, capitalist ideals incompatible with the innate yearns of humanity. Instead, she uplifts normalcy within life as extraordinary, advocating for valuation disjoint from permeating consumerism.

*The World’s Wife,* Carol Ann Duffy

Carol Anne Duffy’s subversive poetry collection The World’s Wife features a chorus of defiant female voices that continuously fight for emancipation from patriarchal institutions. From ‘Mrs Aesop’s’ reclamation of the masculine sphere of language, to ‘Mrs Lazarus’s’ attempted escape from the institution of marriage, ‘Pope Joan’s’ cathartic release from the patriarchal confines of the church ties off this gradual journey to regain agency.

Mrs Aesop’s entrapment is in the masculine preaching and “tedious” idioms of her husband. The continuous use of expletive and monoword comments – “shat on his sleeve”, “asshole”, “tedious” – reveals Mrs Aesop’s exasperation and defiant rejection of the formal, poetic speech that her husband employs. The patriarchal world Mrs Aesop is trapped in is marked by its monotony – the witty accusation of “bor[ing] for purgatory”, compounding with the enjambed and emphasized “slow” and the rolling, long assonance of “appalling….stroll”, coalesce to maintain a sense of stagnancy and lack of progression. This is literally visualised in Aesop’s inclinations to “stop and [make] a note”; the action flanked by em-dashes to represent its brusque interruption of Mrs Aesop’s desperation to “go out” without the threat of her husband’s redundant preaching. Her frustration mounting in the speaker’s anaphoric “what race? What sour grapes?”, Duffy through the aggravated Mrs Midas directly interrogates the ineffectual and pretentious sphere of male literary convention, exposing men’s hypocrisy as they disguise their inability to “prepossess” with “impress[ive] verbal rhetoric yet claim that “actions…speak louder than words.” Yet Mrs Aesop bitingly reclaims this masculine weapon of speech and uses it against her husband. In the triumphant final stanza, the speaker’s “fable” of the “little cock that wouldn’t crow” completely emasculates her husband, as she harnesses power through his weapon of dominance. The subversion of the idiom, “I’ll cut off your tail…to save my face”, is a bold reclamation and remix of the conventional male language. Her final lilting alliteration “I laughed last, longest”, is smug yet playful; Duffy highlights the capacity for women to harness and take advantage of the male institution of language.

The confinement of patriarchy diverges from a nagging husband to the unspoken restrictions of marriage in ‘Mrs Lazarus.’ Her inevitable shackling to her husband is echoed in the poem’s title that identifies the woman with her husband’s name – like so many other poems in the collection, the wives are inextricably tied to their men. Compassionately, Duffy reveals the pain of grief in the violent voiceless plosive of the asyndeton “howled, shrieked, clawed” and “bled, retched”, ending in the incredulous disbelief of the epizeuxic “dead, dead.” The aggression of Mrs Lazarus’s grief continues in the guttural alliteration “gone home, gutted the place.”, the truncated caesuras emanating a grieving wife’s dissociation. Yet a gradual reprieve from this debilitating melancholy gently arises in the third and fourth stanzas – the allusion “Stations of Bereavement” carries a sense of progression and movement as the “frames” pass by, compounding with the lingering anadiplosis “going, going” that culminates in the cathartic “and then he was gone.” The underlying sense of repression behind Mrs Lazarus’s obligation to be “faithful for as long as it took” creates a moment of release as she finally regains love and peace. The completion of the perfect rhymes “field’ and “healed”, as well as the metaphor of “a shawl of fine air”, saturate the sixth stanza with a rare and cathartic peace and stability. It is a peace that is interrupted by the poetic cacophony of the “sly light” and “shrill eyes” of a crowd that heralded Lazarus’s return and by extension, Mrs Lazarus’s re-entrapment into the role of wife. Duffy imbues the last stanza with a semantic field of horror and the grotesque; the “rotting shroud” of Lazarus mimics a perverse version of a wedding veil, heightening the disturbed morbidity of their reunion. It is a direct condemnation of the restriction of marriage as Mrs Lazarus is inevitably and eternally bound to her husband; as the poem starts immediately on Lazarus’s death and ends abruptly on his resurrection, Duffy posits that wives are ultimately silenced by the presence of their husbands, made a shadow to the man her name is attached to. Thus unlike ‘Mrs Aesop’, Mrs Lazarus’s emancipation is tragically ephemeral, a testament to the ever-permeating oppression of patriarchy.

In ‘Pope Joan’, the symbol of patriarchal oppression once again diverges, set in the confines of a catholic church and laden with religious jargon, Pope Joan lives under the control of, and within the empty promises of, the androcentric church. The metaphor of “transubstantiate[ing] unleavened bread into the sacred host” is a subtle representation of Pope Joan’s own transformation from a woman – the “unlearned”, low echelon of medieval society – to the “sacred” man she disguises herself as to gain power in the male-dominated church. The sibilant “snakes of smoke” allude to Eden, where Eve’s original sin resulted in the Christian scapegoating of women as mother of all wrongdoing – and the forced subservience of women due to this misogynistic belief surfaces in their role as “daughters or brides of the Lord”, juxtaposing the grandeur of the asyndeton “cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests.” Yet this grandeur is saturated with hollow superficiality – the shallow, diacopic action of “blessing and blessing the air” in the materialistic symbol of status, the “robe” and “papal chair”, compound to highlight the emptiness of patriarchal catholicism. Indeed the speaker subverts and denounces these manmade emblems of piety, claiming “the closest [she] felt to the power of God” is in childbirth – the exclusively female propensity to create life. The anadiplosis “lifting me, flinging me down” echoing like a holy mantra, Pope Joan’s “miracle” of childbirth is a direct defiance of the patriarchal church as it defies her fake male disguise, “not a man or a pope at all.” Ironically, her lowly position “in the road” exudes more holiness and spirituality than her place “high up in a papal chair” – thus Duffy elevates the often-degraded beauty of childbirth. In a world of strict androcentric convention, Pope Joan’s decision to embrace femininity and maternity is a rebellious and powerful proclaimation of women’s power.

In essence, Duffy’s powerful collection advocates for the release of women from patriarchal institutions. Depicting a hopeful capacity for emancipation to occur, the poet compassionately generates hope towards a free female future.

*Throat*, Ellen van Neerven

Ellen Van Neerven’s Throat, as a collection of poems divulging their experiences as a black, queer, Indigenous Australian person, holds a particular focus on the harrowing impacts of Western colonialism on Aboriginal culture and the environment as a whole. Three such poems include ‘Chermy’ in the first section of the collection ‘they haunt – walk in’, as well as ‘All that is loved (can be saved)’ at the end of ‘speaking outside’ and ‘Terra Nova’ in ‘take me to the back of my throat’, which collectively condemn the individual and environmental impacts of industrialism while endorsing a connection to nature above all.

Being only the third poem in the entire collection, ‘Chermy’ sees its speaker reminisce over their childhood experiences in a rapidly industrialised town. The inherently mocking statement that “Westfield Chermy is one of our sacred sites” simultaneously reveals a sense of appreciation the speaker feels for the “shopping centre” and, on a more metacontextual level, calls into question the legitimacy of the speaker’s words and evokes a tenor that one could forego their connection to culture so entirely that something so industrialised as a “shopping centre” is praised as “sacred”. Furthermore, the notion that “Mum remembers” or that “Aunty will know” holds a double meeting – as does much of Van Neerven’s work – for initially, although it may suggest a warmness for such a clearly nostalgic memory, it also implies that the speaker – for all that evident love of their childhood – does not recall “their names” that these others do. Throughout the poem, slashes are used as punctuation, and almost elicits a sense that each of these little segments – separated by slashes – are like flashes of a memory. The retrospective tune of the entire piece, encapsulated by this use of slashes, climaxes at a stanza later in the poem, when the speaker softly realises that they “they don’t know where to go/now”. Inherently, this idolisation of industrial accepts as “sacred”, and the resultant disconnect from culture and desire to “fit in”, has led the speaker to a stage in their life where they feel lost in their own identity, for despite their plea that “Chermy is always home”, they were so enamoured by the glamour of industrialism that they did not realise the “tree” which “covers the house I now”. Thus, through this poem, Van Neerven challenges this industrialist ideal brought about by colonialism for its harrowing impacts on individuals.

Following this, and coming far later in the collection, ‘Terra Nova’ details the terrors colonialism can reap upon the environment, and in turn, upon those who value it. The very title itself – ‘Terra Nova’ – while sharing its name with the scifi show, remains eerily reminiscent of the term British colonisers dubbed Australia upon discovery; terra nullius. This haunting recollection is then accompanied by the notion that “the rainforest is ulterior motive”, confronting this facade of environmentalism much of the white world flaunts to give the impression of progressivism when, in reality, “the air is no good”. This haunting imagery – separated over two lines in the same stanza – emphasizes the extent to which industrialism and faux-progressivism has led to “the home of cockatoos” has become a wasteland wherein “the only birds are mascots of the [Commonwealth] Games”, all because “themfellas named this Terra Nova”. This hauntingly disturbing notion – that “the only birds” left are being used to advertise something so industrial as the Commonwealth Games – almost consumes the poem, and reveals Van Neerven’s proclamation that industrialism – which was brought about through “themfellas” who “named this Terra [nullius]” – has had horrifying impacts on the environment, and thus the climate that has left “the home of cockatoos” bereft of some birds at all.

However, shattering through these cynical overtones, ‘Terra Nova’ alongside ‘All that is loved (can be saved)’ suggest that a hope for a better future can be found through connecting with nature. Both poems are almost bookended with an inherently optimistic idea that emphasises the true hope that can be achieved through embracing one’s culture and ideals of nature. In ‘Terra Nova’, the “long butterfly/pacy sky” recalls the “butterflies” that here mentioned prior in ‘the cities that ate Australia’ and later in ‘I grieve in sleep’, and throughout these poems, this butterfly is emblematic of a hope that Van Neerven promulgates. Here, specifically, the “long butterfly/pacy sky” would bookend the poem, were it not for the speakers final discussions of “she” who “spoke about hope” and “would come back/with answers” – representatives of Mother Nature and the necessity to have faith in her return despite the “cockatoos” that “have gone”. In a similar vein, ‘All that is love (can be saved)’ – which comes earlier in the collection at the denouement of ‘speaking outside’ and is named after the Alice Walker essay of a similar title – is almost bookended by the stanza “you might find/language is inside you”. Given the poem revolves around the importance of nature and culture in finding joy amidst the industrialism that plagues contemporary Australia, this “language” is symbolic of the human capacity to connect with nature, and in this sense, the “shiny and speckled” rock that follows the stanza both times, which initially “wants someone to sit on it”, is emblematic of the nature itself waiting to be embraced. For this reason, the second repetition does not mention that the rock “wants someone to sit on it” – for now, it is the duty of the reader to “sit on it” and truly connect with nature as the “language” inside of them allows for. Thus, through both of these poems, Van Neerven ultimately endorses a love for nature above all else as a means of escaping the industrial hellscape with surrounds individuals.

Ultimately, Van Neerven promulgates a connection to nature amidst the harrowing impacts of colonialism that plague modern society. Just as the dedication of “all that is loved (can be saved)’ being “for Norman” juxtaposes previous poems like ‘Queens’ which are dedication to well-known figures like “Candy Royalle” – a Lebanese-Palestinian queer activist who died at 37 – we too must juxtapose the industrialism we find ourselves in, and embrace nature through the verse to discover that, in fact, if it is “loved”, the environment “can be saved”.

*Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney,* WB Yeats

From the horrifying future portended in "The Second Coming," to the degeneration of artistic cultivation in "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's fullness and of the Coming emptiness," Yeats explores the deterioration of humanity and beauty engendered by the suffocating forces of the gyres. While Yeats' metaphysical work tracks these lofty concerns about reality itself, Yeats' oeuvre also charts the way in which his political contemporary context affected these notions of beauty, art and humanity.

Yeats in "The Second Coming" prophesies the birth of a nightmarish anti-civilisation, signalling the fall of humanity from the ordered structures of Christian society. The speaker's cyclical repetition and internal rhyme in "turning and turning in the widening gyre" perturbingly sees Christian society fall apart as the gyres unravel the coils of civilisation. With this, the speaker's paradoxical "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" symbolises the withering away of order as this pagan beast ushers an anti-Christian civilisation. This horrifying reality will become "loosed," repeated twice in the first stanza, suggesting that under humanity's pretences of peace have always laid the brooding shadows of war and violence. This terror shall burst open with the "blood-dimmed tide," symbolic of man's repressed urges as it insistently struggles to unleash itself upon society. Indeed, the speaker's enjambment in "while the worst are full of passionate intensity" cultivates the unbridled thrill of the morally corrupt. With this, the speaker invites the reader to see into this disconcerting vision, wherein society shall become corrupted. Horrified at this vision, the speaker's invocating repetition "Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand" fervently heightens the speaker's desperation as they plea for Christ's judgement. Yet the "Spiritus Mundi," a concept borne out of Yeats' mysticism, offers up "a shape with lion body and the head of a man." In doing so Yeats portrays the beast as both a literal horror and a manifestation of humanity's perverted atrocities. It is through this anti-Christian saviour that the speaker finds an assortment of biblically perverted images and symbols, from the " revelation," "the Second Coming" and the beast that “slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" Through the parallel of Christ's birth and his expected arrival on judgement day, Yeats craft this beast as humanity' new God. It alone will usurp two millennia of Christian civilisation and bestow its nightmarish judgement upon all. Moreover, the indignant desert birds that circle high above this beast – "all about it reel shadows" harks back at the contracting gyres. Here, the speaker's prophetic capacity to see into this distorted vision of reality parallels the way in which Leda takes on ~eus' knowledge in "Leda and the Swan." Notably, both “The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" sit as Yeats' annunciation poems, as Yeats theory of history intersects with Leda's violent rape, and Helen's conception, and this beast soon to be born. Indeed, the speaker's circular imagery of "its hour come round at last" returns to the gyre motif as the poem itself becomes cyclical. Ultimately, as proclaimed by the necessary forces of the gyres, Yeats hauntingly charts the collapse of humanity's moral structures amid the extinction of divine Christian command.

So too does the speaker in "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's fullness and of the Coming emptiness" envisage the destruction of civilisation as morality and the very notion of humanity withers away. The speaker's lexicon of aging in "broken stone," "blown snow" and "fragments of the wist" envelops the reader in the speaker's surrounding environment as it becomes imbued with an inescapable sense of sterility. With this, the speaker's simile "a glittering sword out of the east" pushes the unchanging beauty of Sato's sword, once materially held in "My Table," beyond this decaying mortal realm. Perturbed by this reality, and echoing the underlying motif of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," the speaker flees into a vision of hatred. Here, the speaker's insistent repetition " rage-driven," " rage- tormented" and " rage hungry" distorts the troopers into fervent creatures. Adding to this loss of morality, the speaker's rough imagery of the "biting at arms or at face" effaces any notion of civility within these men, akin to the bestial Irish public Yeats explores in "To a Shade." Yet the speaker's vague double meaning in "their legs long, delicate and slender, aquamarine their eyes" also implies humanity's degradation into something inhuman, as the women and unicorns features become indistinguishable. These visions are weaved together in the speaker's amalgamating chiasmus "the cloud-pale unicorns, the eyes of aquamarine: the quivering half-closed eyelids, the rags of cloud or of lace." By merging together the troopers', unicorns' and the women's features together, Yeats finds little distinction between violence and beauty, man and woman, and human and creature. Moreover, employing avian imagery as Yeats' often does to represent a looming and lumbering threat, the symbolic "give place to brazen hawks” represents the birth of a bestial reality. Its destruction that it alone will engender is encapsulated in the line "the innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon" which disrupts the regular meter of the poem. Here, the speaker also alludes to the full moon in both the vision of the unicorns - " hearts are full" – and Sato's sword. With this, Yeats suggests that all that is beautiful and eternal shall wither away in this reality. Horrifying, the speaker "turn[s] away." Yet the circular imagery here carries with it a perturbing suggestion; the gyres are not just a nebulous vision but a certainty, already here within the speaker's reality. Ultimately, Yeats tracks the deterioration of all that is beautiful in "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming emptiness."

Interweaving his characteristic concerns of morality with his political work, Yeats in "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" memorialises the two girl's youth as it becomes ravaged by time and aging. Harking back to what the two girls once were, the speaker's metaphor "one a gazelle" heightens their natural beauty. Hence the trochaic "raving autumn shears blossom from the summer's wreath" which disrupts the easy iambic pentameter is evocative of the insistent forces of aging that have ravaged the two girl's youth. Now withered old, the speaker's metaphor that likens them to an "image of such politics" interweaves Yeats' political context with the two girls' decay. Indeed, the speaker's enjambment "drags out lonely years conspiring among the ignorant" welds the depressing act of aging together with Con and Eva's conspiracies as they participate in the Easter Uprising. With this, Yeats charts the way in which individuals can become transformed due to their political actions, akin to the rioters in "Easter 1916." Yet the speaker repeats "two girls in silk kimonos, both beautiful, one a gazelle." In doing so, Yeats suggests that the truly beautiful can provide solace away from a turbulent political context. Here, the "silk kimonos," like Sato's sword in "My Table," captures the way in which Yeats' was enchanted by foreign acts of creation. Indeed, these magnificent pieces of art represent a world far away from Yeats' contemporary context. Yet it is not just the girls' political actions that the speaker explores; the implicating "we" and " us" in "we the great gazebo guilt, they convicted us of guilt" represents the speaker's, and hence Yeats', guilt in relation to the aristocracy. Yet like the cleansing fire in "Byzantium" that cleanses the contaminating stains of the mortal realm, the purifying "conflagration" shall purge the speaker and the girl's shame. With this, Yeats explores notions of artistic cultivation tied with the political events occurring during his time.

Ultimately, Yeats' work charts the way in which mortality underlies his fundamental concerns and his internal turmoil. This angst engendered his fraught struggle to find beauty in all that exists. Hence, despite the insistent forces around him that threaten the extinction of all that is beautiful, Yeats' desire as the poetic contemplative man is to appreciate the world around him, in all its violence and beauty.