



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

4 December 2017

Ms Jacqueline Moore
Curriculum Manager, English
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
2 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne, 3000

Dear Jacqueline,

I am writing to you on behalf of the VATE Council to express the concerns raised through the VATE Literature Network vis-à-vis the recent Literature examination.

VATE and Literature teachers would like to acknowledge the work of the VCAA and of the Literature examiners and exam writers. The feedback on the Literature exam, below, is related to Section A and to the specific elements of the exam teachers would like clarified, reviewed and possibly revised. There were two major issues many Literature teachers agreed on: problems with language used in many of the set prompts and the need for a dictionary for students, and the explicit reference to a particular theory or theoretical perspectives in some of the prompts. This feedback is, of course, for the benefit of the hardworking students who take this challenging and deeply rewarding subject. We would like to imagine that every Literature student, with application, could approach the exam with confidence, and would meet an exam that enables them to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the texts they have studied.

Section A: Language

Many Literature teachers are concerned that some of the language used in the topics in Section A was inaccessible, and resulted in distress and confusion for the students. The language most often mentioned by Literature teachers was 'indictment' (*Heart of Darkness*), 'archetypal' (*Buried Child*) 'inadmissible' (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Teachers acknowledge that students of Literature should have broad vocabularies, and those with wide and sophisticated vocabularies should be rewarded, but disadvantaging students because they are unfamiliar with a word, which renders them unable to answer the question and demonstrate what they do know, seems wrong. It seems that the ban on dictionaries comes from an older style exam, and now formal essay topics are integral to the Literature exam, students should have access to a dictionary to clarify any terms that they are either unsure of, or unfamiliar with. This problem is further exacerbated by having only one topic per text. Without choice, students are forced to work with the one topic offered. Students should be given the chance to engage as deeply with the topic as they are able. Providing them with the simple tool of a dictionary seems to be a reasonable and equitable solution.

Section A: Literary Perspectives

Many Literature teachers were both confused and upset by a number of the topics set for Section A of the exam. In the examination specifications released by the VCAA, teachers were advised '[t]he topic will present a particular view of the text'. Further, 'responses must refer to one literary perspective of the student's choosing'. This advice, coupled with the course implementation advice that topics would be specific to the text and not to a theory, meant that teachers prepared their students to expect a view of the text that could be shaped through their own reading and a theoretical position or perspective. *Heart of Darkness*, most specifically, but also *Twelfth Night*, offered topics that left little room for students to explore the text other than through the embedded theoretical positions. That is, it appeared very difficult to approach *Heart of Darkness* from any other position than post colonialist, and *Twelfth Night*, feminist or queer theory.

Some examples of Literature teachers' response to the exam include:

'A number of my students were all geared up to present a psychoanalytical perspective but were disconcerted by the question's bias towards a post-colonial lens.'

'... the perspectives HoD topic ... didn't follow the advice we were given. After the exam students were distressed by the closed topic.'

'... the HOD prompt was decidedly one sided.'



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'I also had more than one student who felt pressured to write from a post-colonial perspective when they'd planned and prepared to write a feminist interpretation of the text. It's a real shame because they had such strong and unique ideas for their feminist reading, but felt the wording of the prompt forced them into what is likely a subpar post-colonial essay.'

'Considering HoD is about colonialism I wonder where they will go next? Will the next perspective be feminist? And/or Marxist? This type of predicting I fear will lead to a very reductive view of our texts.'

'I feel sorry for students that hadn't thoroughly prepared for that perspective in 'Heart of Darkness', especially when other text prompts were more open to interpretation.'

'... now that the expectation that they are required to respond to prompts which are not open-ended seems clearer, I think we need to convey to VCAA that this is a monumental ask for students – they are now expected not only to understand and have an interpretation of the text, but to understand and be able to argue numerous different readings of the text too.'

Literature teachers are, in effect, asking for clarification on what students will face for Section A. If a theory can be suggested (or even required) by a topic, teachers' preparation for this task seems very difficult. Rather than allowing students to engage with perspectives and develop interpretations based on perspectives, teachers will have to anticipate the kinds of theory examiners might consider 'best' for a text, and teach a series of them to all students. For many teachers, this appears to be a reductive approach to the task. Many of us came to this outcome in the spirit that it had an interesting ambition; to offer students the task of deep – and even quite abstract – engagement with the ideas of literary critics and theorists. This engagement could enrich their interpretations of the set texts. But the topics need to be fair and open enough to offer all students entry points into the text for exploration. If a teacher opened students to three or four perspectives only to have a fifth required by the topic, students would be unfairly disadvantaged. VCAA writes that 'teachers are advised to discuss alternative viewpoints when they are studying a text with their students'. But the real question here is: how many? Teachers would imagine their task to be to extend their students into ideas and perspectives, but not to have them disadvantaged by prescriptive topics that restrict their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Many teachers have suggested that each text have two topics to give students a greater chance to show their knowledge and understanding. We understand one topic is mandated in the exam specification endorsed by the VCAA board, but ask that, in the event of a review, this suggestion of an increase to two topics be considered.

Section A: The task

There is, too, some confusion about the actual task of Section A. Some Literature teachers felt strongly that Section A asks students to 'answer the question from a perspective'. VCAA's examination specifications advise: '[r]esponses must refer to one literary perspective' but that students must also 'form their own view of the text aided by thorough analysis and knowledge of it'. There is a very real concern that Literature teachers find this part of the exam specification unclear. It would be useful if this task were clarified. What, in the end, is the intent of this task? Is it a response in which a perspective entirely frames the discussion? Or is the student interpretation at the heart of the response, and a perspective is referred to within the interpretation?

VATE Council would welcome further clarification and consideration of the aforementioned concerns.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Annelise Balsamo
VATE Council member