



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Dr David Howes
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Dear David,

Through the Literature Network, hosted by VATE, Literature teachers offered feedback on the 2018 Literature exam, and it appeared that the exam was generally well received. In particular, teachers felt Part A essay questions were essentially much more open and accessible to students.

However, there was a perceived matter of concern with respect to the Part A question set for WEH Stanner (*The Dreaming & Other Essays*). Indeed, this issue was raised with the VCAA on Monday 12 November 2018 via email. The email was acknowledged, and passed on to the Literature examiners but no further response was received.

It is important the matter relating to the Stanner question is resolved because it appears to sit outside the exam specifications – as published by VCAA – and, as such, means that students who had studied that text, and planned to write about it in Part A, were clearly disadvantaged.

The question read:

Consider the proposition that, in *The Dreaming & Other Essays*, Stanner argues powerfully against ‘the great Australian silence’.

This question offers a quotation from Stanner’s work: ‘the great Australian silence’. It is a concept he developed and articulated, and the concept – through his eyes – has a very specific context and meaning. Arguably, ‘the great Australian silence’ is Stanner’s most famous quote. But it is also a quote that comes from his 1968 Boyer lectures (and specifically, the second Boyer lecture) and these lectures are NOT set by VCAA for study in the Literature course.

The exam specifications clearly state that:

‘The following publications should be referred to in relation to the VCE Literature examination:

- *VCE Literature Study Design 2017–2020* (Units 3 and 4)
- *VCE Literature – Advice for teachers 2017–2020* (includes assessment advice)
- VCE Literature Text List (published annually)
- *VCAA Bulletin*’

Nowhere, in any of these publications are the Boyer Lectures specified for a study of Stanner. In addition, the exam specifications state:

‘The text is at the centre of the task in this section and students must demonstrate an



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active engagement with both the text and the topic. The topic will present a particular view of the text. In their response to the topic, students should develop an interpretation of the text that is supported by analysis and takes other viewpoints into consideration.'

In this case, the 'text at the centre of the task' were the six essays specified from Stanner's *The Dreaming & Other Essays*. But the quote at the heart of the question ('the Great Australian Silence'), which the students were required to have an 'active engagement' with, was from an essay not set and therefore not part of 'the text' which sits at the 'centre of the task'.

It therefore appears that the question set for Stanner in Part A of the Literature exam was neither consistent with the VCAA exam specifications, nor with the spirit and intent of the Study Design.

Additionally, while there was no official response from VCAA regarding the query over the Stanner question, there were some informal discussions with the Literature assessors during the Meet the Assessors presentation on February 4 2019. The unofficial response from the assessors was the phrase 'great Australian silence' was in the Robert Manne introduction to the Stanner collection so teachers and students should have been aware of the concept and the context. As this introduction is not set by VCAA for study according to the Text list, and the exam specifications indicate that the response to Section A 'must refer to one literary perspective of the student's choosing', the response that students and teachers should be familiar with a reading or perspective not set for study seems contrary to the spirit and the language of the specifications.

In light of the problems with the Stanner question, we would like to know:

- how the responses to this Stanner topic were assessed to ensure that no student was disadvantaged,
- what appropriate checks and balances are now in place to ensure no future inconsistencies, and
- if an introduction is considered required reading and part of any text set for the Literature course.

We look forward to your response to this letter in due course.

Thanking you.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Annelise Balsamo, on behalf of VATE Council