Friday 25 May 2018

HSC Seminar Day
Singleton High School

English Standard
Module B: Close Study of Text

Presenter: David Welsh
HSC Marker (2001-2008)
Senior Marker (2009-2017)
Sample 1: Researching the context and key concepts

Text: Marele Day’s, The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender

In a genre based text like The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender it is crucial that you appreciate how Day has massaged the codes and conventions of the crime fiction genre to produce this distinctive text. The key concepts that I would focus on in Harry Lavender are: character, codes and conventions, context and narrative. There are more, but in 40 minutes you will be flat out addressing these four effectively.

Know the codes and conventions of ‘hard-boiled’ fiction.

Balancing one’s desire to subvert the genre and pandering to reader/viewer expectations is very much the challenge for crime writers. Day challenges the conventions and expectations of the ‘hard-boiled’ style of detective fiction. The traditional male rough diamond (think Philip Marlowe in ‘The Big Sleep’, Sam Spade in ‘The Maltese Falcon’) is displaced in our expectations with a female protagonist Claudia Valentine. This subverts the classic hard-boiled text where women are portrayed as victims, often cast as the vulnerable but potentially deadly femme fatale.

Consider how Day’s characterisation of her female protagonist causes us to reconsider gender roles in our own world in terms of contemporary notions about feminism and femininity.

Traditionally setting plays a significant role in crime fiction, effectively assuming the role of a ‘character’. Day subverts the typical hard-boiled setting from the 1930s-1940s Mafia haunts of Chicago, NY and LA to 1980s Sydney. That change is significant for Day’s Australian readers because the problems of her fictional world are those of the world we know. Day’s work reflects our own fears for ‘our town’. In classic noir the urban location is a cauldron of corruption – gambling, racketeering and murder. It’s populated by pimps and prostitutes, standover merchants and fedora wearing villains. Typical settings are dingy offices, deserted warehouses in the docklands, slick-damp night streets with solitary street lamps casting smoky haloes and dimly lit alleyways issuing dire warnings to the foolhardy not to tread. This is the world of the overworked cliché, but that is part of the charm and challenge of all who indulge in neo-noir, like Day. Rescripting those conventions and toying with those reader expectations brings the message home to a new Australian audience.

Now examine setting in Harry Lavender. Has Day simply transferred ‘Mafia World’ to Oz? Has Sydney lost its Australian character, become Americanised?

In classic noir the exclusively male protagonist is inevitably flawed, but effectively the last bastion against this seething morass of corruption. He is the tough talker, the dry witted charmer who is wholly irresistible to women. His rough, manly exterior hides a heart determined to uphold justice/seek revenge. Almost always alone, he fights corrupt city officials and equally corrupt or incompetent policemen. He gets kicked and punched by swarthy villains, shot at, tied up and dumped from fast speeding cars. All in a day’s work. And the next day he’s back at it, saving his client - invariably a vivacious young woman with an hour glass figure and come-hither eyes. Only he can save the dame, the day and the city.

So, your challenge: compare Claudia Valentine with the likes of Philip Marlowe. What are Claudia’s tools of the trade? Bare knuckles and a quick quip? Does her gender affect her credibility? How does her devotion to a life of crime-fighting affect her desire for revenge? What cost to her personal relationships? But most importantly, what advantage is there in creating such a female hero in an Australian context?

Consider how Day’s subversion of setting crafts a message about corruption and justice in a distinctly(?). Australian setting. Appreciate the socio-political context of corruption in Sydney in the 1970s-1980s. Evaluate how Day uses figurative language to give voice to that setting. Why does Harry Lavender personify Sydney as if it has a character and mind of its own? Does that lessen his culpability for his crimes?
Day’s use of the traditional first person voice allows the reader to gain insights into the thoughts and motivations of Claudia Valentine. It also enables Day to subvert the genre. The crusty, dry-witted narrative voice is immediately recognisable at the beginning of the novel as that of a die-hard private eye, toying with the reader’s expectations and amusing us when it is revealed that our crusty narrator is female. That subversion is nothing compared to Day’s use of different first person narrators to produce different perspectives, even from the antagonist Harry Lavender. This is a significant, although not unique, diversion from the conventions of crime fiction. When Patricia Cornwell allowed her mass murdering criminal mastermind the luxury of a first person narrative voice, it appeared to give credence to an insanely criminal mind.

Does Day go this far? How does that unconventional use of the first person voice reveal and impact on Day’s message?

Crime fiction is nothing without mystery and Day does something quite interesting with the text’s structure.

How does the unusual structure of the novel develop the essential element of mystery?

The debilitating social and personal impacts of crime and corruption, the desire for revenge and restitution, the desire to see justice done are some of the reasons why crime fiction is the most popular of genres and why Day’s work of fiction is so important. Because it plays on our fear that this can happen in our own urban landscapes. Technology and organised crime can still destroy the lives of those we love. Can fiction become reality?

When writing a conclusion, focus on the relevance or significance of the text to its responders usually does the job. In a genre like crime fiction that focuses so much on justice and social morality, it pays to reflect on the success of the composer in raising these issues. What makes a text particularly memorable is the capacity of the composer to weave a tale that inextricably links ideas, form and language to deliver those distinctive ideas.

Finally, a note of caution:

When it comes time to begin drafting a response, most of this background material must be omitted. You need to focus on the text. However, if you don’t appreciate Day’s intent and how far she is subverting the codes and conventions of crime writing, you will not appreciate her success.

Sample 2: Writing that introduction

Text: Mark Haddon, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time

For many students the hardest paragraph to write is the introduction. Don’t despair. You’re not alone there. Most writers find the right words difficult to manufacture.

While it is important to start with a good impression, many HSC candidates write themselves into the response.

Aim to answer the question in your first paragraph. Weaker responses tend to do that by simply paraphrasing the question, but until the candidate starts to supply evidence to support that basic answer not many marks are being accrued. It is not unusual to find candidates who don’t start addressing the question until halfway down page 2 when the light-switch is finally turned on. Don’t worry too much about this. Remember what I said about marker expectations: we know this is a first draft. We know you’ve had only 40 minutes to write this piece and no time to go back and revise the introduction.
See if the structure of this sample introductory paragraph works for you. I’ve emboldened the text of the paragraph and interspersed that with italicised notes. Note how important it is to address the key idea expressed in the question.

This is a response to the 2015 HSC question:

How does Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time portray interesting ideas about difference?

In order to understand difference, one must first appreciate both the nature and impact of that difference.

This first sentence sets up my basic thesis and answer to the question. I deliberately keep it simple, memorable. Nothing clever. Simple.

Often ignorance of an issue results in misrepresentation or worse - misunderstanding, isolation and rejection.

Note how this expansion statement sounds more impressive when I use a string of nominalized words. The cumulative effect is indicated by my deliberate word selection and order. I focus next on Haddon’s purpose.

For most people contact with someone with a severe mental disorder is fleeting and confronting, often causing the subject to be rejected and isolated because of their differences. Mark Haddon’s experience as a social worker provides the crucial insights necessary to unlock the very different world perspective of his protagonist Chris Boone.

This extends the thesis further, providing a simple explanation as to how perspectives vary. I also acknowledge the author’s credibility to tell this story because of his background. I now need to catalogue how the composer sells us this key idea of difference. This will form the structure of the body of this response,

Haddon’s distinctive use of Chris’ first person narrative voice is crucial to eliciting the reader’s sympathy, engaging us with Chris’ unique perspectives, even though at times he proves to be an unreliable narrator. The reader quickly develops an impression of Chris’ strength of character, his motivations and fears of a very alienating world. Through that developing characterisation, Haddon helps us to appreciate and value difference. Haddon’s use of humour, a unique narrative structure, intriguing visual representations and concrete writing style combine to elicit our empathy. He demonstrates that having an intellectual disability does not deny one a personality, dreams and fears. That in the end we are not so very different after all.

Before you go into the exam, make sure that you have a clear idea of what the composer’s purpose is. Identify what you think are the key messages as I have here. The HSC marker really does want to know what you have learnt about difference from this text. If you can convey that sense of purpose and a simple framework of how the composer conveys his/her message, then you have laid the groundwork for what should be a sound to effective response, depending of course on how extensively you support your argument with relevant textual references and close textual analysis. And language appropriate to audience, purpose and form.
Sample 3: Close analysis of text: ‘Wilfred OWEN, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

“Anthem for Doomed Youth” by Wilfred Owen demonstrates how **ideas, forms and language of a text** interact within a text and **affect how the audience responds to it.** The title reveals Owen’s key message in this poem. Anthems are songs meant to stir nationalistic pride, to be sung raucously on ceremonial occasions with an eye to future glory. However, this “anthem” is filled not with beautiful harmonies but the unearthly sounds of an entire generation being slaughtered on the battlefield. This is a dirge for the death of youth, of future hope. It pointedly confronts the reader with how those who live will remember the dead who died like animals. The assonance evident in the oxymoron “Doomed Youth” sets an ominous tone for the poem that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The choice of form has a profound impact on the poem’s message</th>
<th>“Anthem for Doomed Youth” by Wilfred Owen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The octave repeatedly emphasises the noise of the battlefield, the inhumane means of death. Immediately we are confronted by a rhetorical question that demands to know how the loss of life will be commemorated. That familiar civilian practice of ringing local church bells as a mark of respect, designed to respect the passing of loved ones, is incongruous in the context of modern warfare. The repetition of ‘only’ (lines 2-3) emphasizes the pathos of the situation. The dead are denied humanity in death.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,— The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; And bugles calling for them from sad shires.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle Can patter out their hasty orisons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What candles may be held to speed them all? Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes. The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall; Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds, And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In comparison to the unearthly sounds of battle, the sestet is mute, mimicking the world of the dead. A series of incongruous images of mourning, such as the demented choirs of wailing shells, suggests how disconnected the mourners are from the dead. Owen ensures that pathos is paramount here. We pity these poor souls whose untended bodies now litter the battlefield. By the opening to the poem, the reader is again challenged with a rhetorical question. But now, the poet’s tone is muted, intimating that the dead are voiceless and beyond humane care. Candles, palls, flowers, the drawing down of blinds are all symbolic gestures designed to respect the passing of life, but realistically here on the battlefield, where such humane practices are impossible, only the death of day covers their dead bodies and perhaps symbolically covers the shame of those who sent them to their untimely deaths. Insubstantial images of ‘glimmers of goodbyes’ and ‘the pallor of girls’ brows’ purposefully point to the remoteness of those who would mourn them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The assonance evident in the oxymoron “Doomed Youth” sets an ominous tone for the poem that follows.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? — Only the monstrous anger of the guns. Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle Can patter out their hasty orisons.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices of a bygone, civilised era now displaced by the grotesque. Owen employs onomatopoeic sound in the word ‘wailing’ to force us again to witness those terrifying heaven-sent sounds before oblivion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And finally the octave closes with the eerie reference to bugles calling the new dead to euphemistic ‘sad shires’– the abode of those who have fallen in past wars.</td>
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Owen’s use of epithet poignantly represents the transfer of the soldiers’ anger to the guns personified. The ‘monstrous anger of the guns’ adds to the disturbing image that the soldiers have cast their humanity aside in order to kill by mass mechanical means. The onomatopoeia in ‘stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle’ and ‘patter’ grotesquely mimics the prayers uttered – emphasising that this abnegation of humanity has created this hell on earth.

In the second quatrain, the word ‘mockeries’ almost mutely suggests that grand ceremonies would mock the manner of their self-sacrifice. Prayers, bells, any voice of mourning, are practices of a bygone, civilised era now displaced by the grotesque. Owen employs onomatopoeic sound in the word ‘wailing’ to force us again to witness those terrifying heaven-sent sounds before oblivion. |

And finally the octave closes with the eerie reference to bugles calling the new dead to euphemistic ‘sad shires’– the abode of those who have fallen in past wars. |

Owen’s use of form and language, exposes his audience to the horrors of the battlefield and impels us to realise that youth once lost to war cannot be recovered.

Owen’s message is universal: it transcends time and conflict, a lesson for us all in the brutality of our species. (708)
Sample 4: The finished product - Ron Howard (dir.), *A Beautiful Mind*

**Response by:** Mel Dixon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Question</th>
<th>Explore how Howard’s use of contrast highlights the experiences of outsiders.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Based on 2014 HSC question for <em>Witness</em>)</td>
<td>In your response make detailed reference to <em>A Beautiful Mind</em>.</td>
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**Prescribed Text:** *A Beautiful Mind* 2001 (Ron Howard)

**Opening**

A Beautiful Mind, directed by Ron Howard, is based on the life of John Nash, Nobel Prize winner for Economic Sciences, 1994, but rather than focusing on the man’s greatness the film seeks to portray a man isolated from society, trying to connect, but never fully, to the lives of others. This isolation emerging from Nash’s mental illness is captured through the interactions of the characters, from Nash’s point of view, supported by film techniques. Howard reveals a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions with a sensitive but flawed individual recognising and struggling against his own weaknesses but, unlike the classic tragic hero, he emerges triumphant.

**The topic sentence**

From the beginning we see the contrast between the intellectual Nash and the social Nash. The film begins in the setting of Princeton, one of the most prestigious universities in the United States, in 1947, with the footage tinged by a golden glow contrasting the distant past with the more recent past. In a room full of young male mathematicians one man stands isolated. Howard immediately establishes difference with a slow zoom to Nash alone as the speaker says ‘Who among you will be the next Einstein?’ He has offered a challenge to the men before him, all sitting together in a wide shot showing the group, except for Nash at the back.

**Discussion of character, focusing on words spoken**

Nash’s fascination with patterns is revealed as he talks to other men outside. His eyes catch the patterns on a tie, the refractions on crystal. Everything stimulates Nash intellectually but he has difficulty with social relationships as he always says the wrong thing – especially to women. His words confirm that he is very different, socially inept and even arrogant as he accuses his fellow scholarship winner, Hansen, of ‘miscalculation’ and states that all he wants to do is ‘find a truly original idea. That’s the only way I’ll truly distinguish myself.’ The camera captures Nash’s point of view, so that we can empathise with Nash and we also start to understand the experience of being an outsider from his perspective.

**Point of view shots shown to be effective for empathy**

This empathetic point of view is cleverly manipulated by Howard in his representation of Nash’s delusions. Nash’s roommate, Charles, becomes a true friend, totally different in personality but always supporting Nash in his beliefs. His mentor, Parcher, from the Department of Defence, is always there at the oddest of times, requiring Nash to find the patterns of spy networks by reading all the magazines he can find. Here we see Nash
Elements of plot are discussed. Synonyms are used for outsider: different, isolation, separateness. Techniques of foregrounding, editing, transitions, point of view are discussed in relation to outsider.

The word contrast from the question is considered over the whole film.

Important scene described through mise-en-scene, camera shots, music and editing.

Contrast in the film, however, not only demonstrates alienation but it also works to show acceptance. Nash reinstates himself at Princeton but suffers the scorn of young students and even the librarian. He continues to write his equations on the leadlight windows but is drawn away by a young student who seeks his guidance. From there we see a gradual process of reintegration into the community of scholars. Earlier in the film, Nash witnesses the expression of admiration for a professor in the scene showing the giving of the pens. He stands outside the room and observes the homage made. Near the end when he is approached by the Nobel Prize committee representative, he enters the staff common room for the first time since that earlier event and, as he sits, he too experiences the acceptance of the community. The camera moves from a wide shot to establishing the mise-en-scene of the common room, to a mid shot as he is approached by a colleague, to close-up shots of the pen that is the first of the many to follow. This moving scene stirs our emotions as the music rises in crescendo before an edit to the Nobel Prize ceremony.

Final summing up refers to title and brings together all the film techniques that show the outsider. The film is a celebration of difference but also of the strength of the human mind; the ‘beautiful mind’ that can solve a puzzle that has great impact in the world of economics, and overcome the terrors of acute mental illness. It is through the camera angles, film shots, music and the editing process that we are able to share the world of John Nash and to understand first hand the feelings of separateness of an outsider.

Now time for a Pop Quiz – look at slide 23.
Past HSC Questions Module B 2012-2017

Marele Day, The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender

2017
It is not only the subject matter but also the narrative point of view that makes Day’s novel unsettling. Discuss this statement making detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2016
Explain how The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender invites us into a different world and broadens our understanding of human experience. In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2015
How does Marele Day’s The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender portray interesting ideas about corruption? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2012-2014 – Not offered

Mark Haddon, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

2017
It is not only the subject matter but also the narrative point of view that makes Haddon’s novel unsettling. Discuss this statement making detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2016
Explain how The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time invites us into a different world and broadens our understanding of human experience. In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2015
How does Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time portray interesting ideas about difference? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2014 – Not offered

2013
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time presents the reader with a powerful exploration of the impact of personal choices on relationships. How does Haddon achieve this in his novel? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2012
How does Haddon’s portrayal of the relationship between Christopher and his world move us to a deeper understanding of acceptance? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.
It is not only the subject matter but also the play’s use of conflict that makes *The Merchant of Venice* thought-provoking. Discuss this statement making detailed reference to your prescribed text.

Explain how *The Merchant of Venice* invites us into a different world and broadens our understanding of human experience. In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

How does William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* portray interesting ideas about acceptance? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

Explore how Shakespeare’s use of conflict highlights ideas about justice and the law.

In your response, make detailed reference to the extract from *The Merchant of Venice* and the play as a whole.

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**PORTIA**

Tarry a little, there is something else.  
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.  
The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’.  
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,  
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed  
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods  
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate  
Unto the state of Venice.

**GRATIANO**

O upright judge!

**SHYLOCK**

Is that the law?

**PORTIA**

Thyself shall see the Act.  
For as thou urgest justice, be assured  
Thou shalt have justice more than thou desiriest.

**GRATIANO**

O learned judge! Mark, Jew: a learned judge.  
I take this offer then. Pay the bond thrice  
And let the Christian go.

**BASSIANO**

Here is the money.

**PORTIA**

Soft.  
The Jew shall have all the justice; soft, no haste;  
He shall have nothing but the penalty.

**GRATIANO**

O Jew, an upright judge, a learned judge!  
Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.  
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more  
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak’st more  
Or less than just a pound, be it but so much  
As makes it light or heavy in the substance.
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple – nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

2013
The Merchant of Venice presents the audience with a powerful exploration of the impact of personal choices on relationships. How does Shakespeare achieve this in his play? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2012
How does Shakespeare’s portrayal of the relationship between Shylock and his world move us to a deeper understanding of suffering? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others
2017
It is not only the subject matter but also the use of sensory imagery that makes Wilfred Owen’s poetry unsettling. Discuss this statement making detailed reference to at least TWO of the poems set for study.

2016
Explain how Wilfred Owen’s poetry invites us into a different world and broadens our understanding of human experience. In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO of the poems set for study.

2015
How does Wilfred Owen’s poetry portray interesting ideas about loss? In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO poems set for study.

2014
Wilfred Owen

Explore how Owen’s use of dramatic imagery highlights the carnage and destruction of war.

In your response, make detailed reference to the extract from ‘Mental Cases’ and ONE other poem set for study.

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked?

5
Stroke on stroke of pain, — but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hands’ palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?
These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.

Owen’s poems present the reader with a powerful exploration of the impact of human cruelty on individuals. How does Owen achieve this in his poetry? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

How does Owen’s portrayal of the relationship between youth and war move us to a deeper understanding of suffering? In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO poems set for study.

Ron Howard, A Beautiful Mind

It is not only the subject matter but also the film’s different perspectives that make A Beautiful Mind unsettling. Discuss this statement making detailed reference to your prescribed text.

Explain how A Beautiful Mind invites us into a different world and broadens our understanding of human experience. In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

How does Ron Howard’s A Beautiful Mind portray interesting ideas about individuality? In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

2012 - 2014 – Not offered
Summing up – How can you improve your marks?

Before the exam

• Know your text, intimately, so that you can adapt to the specifics of the exam question.
• Know the composer’s purpose, context and message
• Know why this text is significant
• Develop a personalised thesis about the messages conveyed by this text
• Practice writing introductions to unseen HSC style questions so that you get in the habit of adapting what you have to suit the given question
• Practise past papers focusing on a range of questions. Remember that your goal is not to tell a story, not to write down everything that you know about the composer and the text. Aim to produce sustained, well developed responses that address the question.

In the exam

• Read the question carefully. Highlight each key word. Make a list of synonyms for the key word in the question.
• Write a short, structured plan that addresses each aspect of the given question. Prioritise your ideas. Best first.
• Answer each aspect of the question, not just part of it.
• Do not regurgitate the essay you wrote for an assessment task/Trial/last year’s HSC that you used as practice. Adapt what you have to suit THIS question.
• In your introduction address the significance of the key word(s) in the question to your prescribed text. Refer to the composer’s context and indicate how it shaped the message. Identify the key methods used to convey the message(s). If your prescribed text is poetry, then list the two poems you will address. Indicate that you will demonstrate how the form, language and ideas of the text combine to deliver a powerful message about the (given key word).
• Structure the body of your response using an organising structure like TEEEC to give your response cohesion.
• Only use relevant, specific textual references and examples.
• Do not recount.
• Make reference to the text as a whole, not just a couple of scenes. Integrate examples if possible into a discussion of the concept. Avoid blocking ‘text slabs’ - poem A > poem B or scene A > scene B.
• Don’t sit there at the end. Or worse: leave! Proof your work. Then do it again.

Our best wishes go with you for your HSC and beyond
from the staff and students of Singleton High School.