Back to the Future and Forward again: the new GCSE English Literature

Keith Geary

Who would have thought that the outcome of the previous Minister of Education's reactionary zeal might be to liberate the teaching of literature in secondary examination classrooms? For that, I think, is what he has—albeit inadvertently—given English teachers the opportunity to achieve.

In his February 2013 letter to Ofqual’s Chief Executive, Michael Gove stated:

I remain persuaded that there is an urgent need for reform, to ensure that young people have access to qualifications that set expectations that match and exceed those in the highest performing jurisdictions... [with] an increase in demand ...[which] should be achieved through a balance of more challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment structures.

The way this perceived need has been embodied in the new arrangements affecting English has two important implications for the study of literature by fourteen to sixteen year olds.

First, the planned reform of GCSEs from 2015 quietly re-defines the role of GCSE English Literature in the post-14 assessment and accountability regime, and in so doing potentially secures its place in the examined curriculum rather than weakening it as some had feared.
The assessment and accountability changes have the effect of giving GCSE English Literature a new and strengthened influence within the public measures of school performance because of the double-weighting mechanism which means that where students enter both GCSE English Language and English Literature the qualification with the higher points score will score double (and the other result counts, too).

The Department for Education’s ‘Progress 8 measure in 2016 and 2017: Guide for maintained secondary schools, academies and free schools’, published in March, states that the Progress 8 score for each student will always be determined by dividing the student’s points total by ten (the eight qualifications with English and mathematics double-weighted), regardless of how many qualifications the student sits. The Department for Education sees this as supporting the policy aim ‘to encourage schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum with an academic core’. Whether this is actually so or not, it does mean that if students are not entered for GCSE English Literature as well as English Language, their school loses the advantage of English double-weighting as each student’s eligible points total will still be divided by ten.

This is a significant and welcome disincentive to any school that might consider dropping GCSE English Literature—say, for less able students—as the impact not only on individual students’ Attainment 8 score but also on the school’s publicly reported cohort Progress 8 measure could be adverse and, for some, substantial. This is evident from a quick scrutiny of the two worked examples the Department for Education gives for these measures, Gillian and Hardip. Re-casting their entries—take out English Literature for Gillian, add it in for Hardip—shows that the impact on their scores of taking or not taking English Literature alongside English Language can be as much as the equivalent of a grade up or down for these two students (one able, one less so) and therefore cumulatively substantial for their school as a whole.

In curriculum terms, then, in schools where all students take both Language and Literature English is the largest contributor to both Attainment 8 and Progress 8—three tenths of both measures. And for a student like Gillian, her two English GCSEs provide twenty-two out of her sixty-five points—over a third! I am sure that this will enable Heads of English to persuade any wavering Headteachers of the importance of
offering GCSE English Literature to all students. And possibly, indeed, of the need to increase English’s share of curriculum time...

The second, ultimately more important implication of the Department for Education’s arrangements lies in the changes to content and assessment within the new English Literature GCSE and their potential impact for teaching and so for students’ learning.

‘What images return’: back to the future...

The Department for Education has prescribed that, from this coming September, students preparing for GCSE English Literature must study:

- at least one play by Shakespeare
- at least one nineteenth-century novel—short stories are not acceptable in this category
- a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry—no fewer than fifteen poems by at least five different poets, and a minimum of 300 lines of poetry to be precise
- fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards.

Superficially these criteria seem to take us back to the 1950s. O Level English Literature in 1959 required candidates to produce answers on three texts—a Shakespeare play, a nineteenth-century novel and an anthology of pre-twentieth century poetry—in a single two and a half hour examination.

By summer 1974, the year I sat O Level English Literature, liberalisation had set in: the requirement had become a Shakespeare play together with a more loosely prescribed further two texts, which could be pre- or post-1900 fiction, drama or poetry, so allowing candidates to satisfy the syllabus requirements by studying Hewett’s A Choice of Poets and Miller’s The Crucible in addition to their Shakespeare play. There was no requirement to study any pre-twentieth century literature at all other than the Shakespeare play, nor indeed to study poetry at all; so candidates in 1974 could study, say, Modern Short Stories and Lord of the Flies and be equipped to answer the paper. This is sometimes forgotten
by those who remember (to say nothing of those too young to remember) the days before GCSE as a golden age in which only the 'classics' were studied in secondary schools or—more exactly—grammar schools.

When I started teaching O Level in the 1980s, nothing had changed in the traditional syllabus, though there were now established alternatives: for example, UCLES offered a Plain Texts syllabus from 1971–1986 (a minimum of three texts including a Shakespeare play); and a syllabus offering a Shakespeare examination combined with School Assessment ‘which may be made up in a variety of ways according to the wishes of the individual schools concerned’—a formula of words I think we can safely say we will never see again, whatever the political complexion of the Minister for Education and whatever curriculum freedoms may (allegedly) have been given to secondary schools. In the context of the Department for Education’s present prescription of literature produced from the British Isles—farewell 1974’s The Crucible; farewell 2015’s Of Mice and Men—it is interesting to note that of the six non-Shakespeare texts prescribed on the Plain Texts syllabus for 1984, three are by non-British writers (Erich Remarque, Tennessee Williams and Henry James) and one is a short-story anthology—Twenty-one Great Stories—from which the stories chosen for study are by a Scot, an Irishman, eight Americans, a German, an Italian and a Frenchman (though he is pre-twentieth century, it has to be admitted).

To return to the future, the new GCSE examination will have an unseen element and requires study of a minimum of one text more than for O Level. It also has greater, bureaucratic prescription from the Department for Education as to quantity—no short stories and 300 lines of poetry: that’s twenty-one sonnets (and a sestet). With all this emphasis on measuring, dates, categories, I assume Hard Times will eventually become the nineteenth-century novel of ministerial preference—though it is a bit short, and perhaps a minimum length to qualify as a novel may not be far off. The Department for Education is unarguably right that in choosing texts ‘the emphasis should be on deepening students’ understanding’. Sadly, this very statement seems to imply that without tight prescription teachers will choose texts which prevent this, when many of us would take the view that it is the nature of national educational policy of recent years which has itself generated what Education Ministers like to call ‘a race to the bottom’ in choice of texts as in some other things.
Between the 1980s and the present we have travelled from all examination assessment to 100% coursework to examination-with-controlled-assessments and...back to all examination assessment, little different from 1959. In terms of the amount of assessment, we have not quite returned to the old O Level days. In 1959, 1974 and 1984, a single two and a half hour exam was sufficient to assess a student’s understanding of literature—fifteen minutes longer if you were taking Plain Texts. 1988 saw the introduction of 100% coursework GCSE in English and English Literature with a requirement to produce folderfuls of coursework assignments and therefore for students to spend countless hours on completing assessment tasks. Teachers happily embraced this as better than what had preceded it. Subsequently coursework was reduced in tandem with the re-introduction of terminal examinations and then more recently replaced by controlled assessments, so that this year’s candidates may sit four hours of exams and spend three to four more on a Literature controlled assessment. From 2017 all will be terminally assessed in four hours at an examination desk.

Bearing in mind that we have travelled back fifty years in the form of assessment for our national qualification in English Literature, are we also asking students to answer the same questions they were asked by O Level Literature papers thirty, forty, fifty years ago? Although in general terms, there has not yet been a return to the old style of question—the what-has-just-happened? or what-happens-next? approach has not re-emerged—a cursory analysis of the style of questioning on Shakespeare and nineteenth-century fiction apparent in the specimen papers so far provided by the examination boards for 2017’s first sitting shows examiners perpetuating the over-emphasis on character and relationship to be found in the Shakespeare and novel questions in the old O Level papers. O Level questions were always about knowledge rather than ideas—what does the text say? rather than what does the text mean? In addition, the more recent habit of questions—often arising from a requirement to start with a specific passage—that focus narrowly on language (so that ‘subject terminology’ can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of AO2) or simplistically on context (AO3) rather than ideas, is apparent. However, we have mercifully moved on a long way from 1959’s Give an account of any two incidents in Great Expectations which strike you as being particularly exciting and dramatic. Write each account in such a way as to bring out the dramatic quality.
So, for Year 10 students and their teachers beginning GCSE English Literature in September 2015, we have a reining in of content reflecting a narrowed, less inclusive conception of English Literature as an area of study and experience, one that in some ways is more limited (certainly geographically and all that implies!) than that of O Level in the 1950s. Moreover, anything other than assessment sitting at a desk in an examination hall without any access to texts has been removed, and the sense of literature as something to be known about rather than as an art that explores ideas and our experience of our world remains pervasive.

‘If way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst’: ...and forward again

How can this, then, be liberating? In a number of ways, if opportunities are taken and teachers have faith in themselves and their students.

Four texts in two years is not a lot to study—especially when coursework or controlled assessments don’t have to be completed along the way. Less is more. And preparation for the unseen element gives the opportunity for teachers to enrich students’ reading experience.

The leaden over-emphasis on amassing assessment evidence which has burdened students and teachers from the late 1980s onwards with its full-blown introduction of GCSE coursework has been removed. As we have seen, before the coming of GCSE a single examination lasting a couple of hours was evidence enough; afterwards the production of assignment after assignment was judged necessary. This arose from a political distrust of English teachers rather from any great belief in the learning benefits of such assessment. From September 2015 the previous focus on assessment, assessment, assessment will no longer interrupt and distract from teaching—unless, that is, English teachers perpetuate it through anxiety. In addition, last year’s introduction of the First Entry Counts rule—which removes the external pressure from the Performance Tables for early and repeated entry in English Language—releases time for teaching.

Again, less is more: less assessment, more teaching.

And, most importantly, more time for teaching reading and understanding rather than teaching to the coursework assignment or the controlled assessment. Combined with this removal of in-course assessment
demands, the new GCSE’s unseen component can be used to shift the emphasis to teaching skills which equip students to read and understand any literary text they encounter. This is a real step forward.

In addition, the new GCSE offers the benefits of re-visiting texts. The course may now be strictly linear in assessment, but teaching and learning have always formed a recursive spiral, and the removal of coursework or controlled assessment works with this. A text may be studied in depth in a way that was inhibited by the previous need to get through it quickly, focusing on a single aspect which can be the subject of a coursework assignment or controlled assessment. There is thus the chance to replace what was at best a focused glance—and at worst, a snapshot, an Instagram moment—by a deeper gaze. The length of a text need not of itself be a problem: a nineteenth-century novel can be studied in stages, part in Year 10, part in Year 11.

Of course, teaching literature for a specification which tests understanding only through terminal examinations brings challenges for teachers and, indeed, a brave new world for those young enough not to have experienced linear courses with fully terminal exams themselves either as students or teachers. (If you started teaching after 1988, you won’t have taught them; if you’re under forty, you almost certainly didn’t follow one.) This is both a challenge—it requires different practice—and a chance to re-think how we shape a valuable and developmental classroom experience of literature for teenagers in the twenty-first century world. Those of us who were there the first time are either horrified or excited. The default response is, perhaps, most often horror but as Michael Gove’s much loved *Middlemarch* has it: ‘It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view.’

‘All things are ready, if our mind be so’: re-thinking the future

There are major implications for choosing texts, planning and teaching.

When choosing texts be bold!

If you’re not excited by it, why will your students be? (For this reason, teachers should be lobbying the examination boards to be more adventurous in their set text lists, rather than adopting the largely *what*
Choose texts that will support students’ personal development.

GCSE students are going to live with the texts they study in a way they didn’t when they studied them only to write a coursework assignment or controlled assessment; when they come to revise them and write about them in the examination, they will be almost two years more mature than when they first encountered them. (For boys, that’s particularly significant.) So, in choosing a text ensure that it’s one that will re-pay revisiting, one that is rich enough to stimulate students to see more, think more. (How often do Year 11 students write better on An Inspector Calls than they did in Year 10? Rarely, I would suggest, so to study it for the new GCSE will be an opportunity missed for many students.)

Plan for the two years of the course from the beginning.

Both the students and you need more than one bite at each cherry. This is particularly true for the Shakespeare play and the nineteenth-century novel. For all of us, coming back to something in our thinking, in our learning, often starts us forward again. The pattern has changed, the penny has dropped, the picture has crystallised. In planning teaching, plan revision.

Choose at least one difficult text.

A difficult text is simply one with more to give—‘one that has never finished saying what it has to say’, as Italo Calvino puts it in The Uses of Literature. Elsewhere, in If on a winter’s night a traveller, his teasing meditation on reading and writing—how you read the writer, how you write the reader—Calvino wrote that ‘Writing always means hiding something in such a way that it is then discovered’. That’s why the whodunit is a good paradigm to use with students: Great Expectations is a whodunit—it’s just that there is more to be discovered than a plot twist alone. Where there is more to find, with sensitive guidance, students will find more. Interestingly, a 1980s UCLES Examiner’s Report comments that in marking answers it is noticeable that ‘the more challenging texts
seemed to attract the abler teachers and that the quality of the teaching was perhaps most noticeable in the answers to the poetry section’. I would see this differently: experience suggests that if the teacher takes the risk of a difficult text, then both s/he and the students tend to rise to the challenge. (It’s rather like scientists teaching GCSE off-specialism: the extra challenge involved gives additional edge to planning and teaching.) The examiner’s words are also a timely reminder that playing safe does not always pay off.

Ensure that all students experience the challenge of the difficult.

It’s a fallacy that only more able students can deal with ‘difficult’ texts and particularly with the ideas at play in them. In the classroom, GCSE Speaking and Listening activities focused on a text being studied vividly demonstrate that middle ability and less able students are often more secure on idea and meaning than on ‘language’ and ‘effect’. (What is Blake trying to show the reader in ‘London’? goes faster and further than How does Blake present London in ‘London’?) We fail our students if we simply assume that they cannot rise to the challenge of the difficult. The art of the English teacher is precisely in helping them access the difficult, partly by choosing a text whose difficulty is enticing, partly by angling it to the light. Sonnets are great for this—short, shaped, specific: ‘That time of year thou mayst in me behold’, ‘The Windhover’—as are poems with ‘adult’ themes. A metaphysical poem like Donne’s ‘The Flea’ draws teenagers in, once they grasp that it’s at bottom a particularly elaborate player’s chat-up line; and they do—very quickly. Sometimes it’s a short step to ‘To His Coy Mistress’. Or to ‘The Onion, Memory’.

Grasp the importance of the unseen—in both senses!

It’s a great way to teach reading, to engage students with the many ways that texts accumulate their meanings. As a teacher you have free choice of texts here—and the chance to help your students build up their experience of literature in memorable and developmental ways. It has always been better to study even one Hopkins sonnet or a page of Austen than whole texts by some other GCSE specification favourites. Now the new unseen component positively encourages this. Look at first pages of novels. Hard Times. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Middlemarch.
Riddley Walker. Contrast is a great teacher—yoke together the most heterogeneous ideas! There’s so much you can do in a single lesson. Just choose carefully and choose texts that stimulate. Again less is more.

Teach how to recognise and characterise poetic style.

This is always such a potentially difficult concept to grasp and write about. Have students sort and classify a clutch of short quotations. (Which of these are by Keats? Which by Heaney? How do you know?) In this way, they see it, they hear it. That grasped, you can move to looking at how they write about it, how they capture in their own words the distinctive voice of someone else’s words. Students need to be helped to develop a repertoire—‘subject terminology’, ‘critical style’ if you will—that goes beyond (often emptily used) technical terms and catches the flavour of style, tone and form. This is practised and developed through work for the unseen component.

Use the nineteenth-century novel to teach students not only how its prose works but how prose from very different times and places works.

Set Hemingway beside Dickens—everything taken out; everything put in: contrast again. Indeed, a Hemingway short story is a great way to show students of all abilities how simple words telling an apparently simple story create a complex impact in terms of emotion and idea. His language offers no barrier to reading, so the route to understanding is clear in a text so short and so often possessed of a rare emotional lucidity. (Why these particular words, these particular details? Give them six examples to think about in a four page story such as ‘Hills Like White Elephants’.) A brief Hemingway story can be the grain of sand in which to see a world, to see how the specific evokes the complexity of experience. ‘Cat in the Rain’ is wonderful for this with older students of all abilities. For poetry, a tiny poem such as Randall Jarrell’s ‘The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner’ can have the same effect, particularly if you set its dream-like yet gritty precision against the arm-waving, operatic swagger of some of the more familiar First World War poems. So much from so little. By such means students come to feel and judge the weight of words.
Don’t become fixated on the need for students to learn reams of quotations for the examination at the end.

Students can write well about any text they understand with only a dozen quotations at their mental fingertips. A dozen per text—and short ones. (Try it! On Macbeth, for example. You don’t need more.) Use of ‘detailed textual references’ does not mean weigh down an answer with long and frequent quotations. Nor is quotation the only way to demonstrate familiarity and understanding of a text—brief and apposite reference can be just as strong as can short, relevant paraphrase, and students should be encouraged to use these.

And, why not teach Hard Times?

It’s nineteenth-century, it’s short, it’s complex; it’s completely serious (as Leavis pointed out), but it’s also funny, soap-operatic; it’s about the individual, society, education, values; it’s a text that embodies the centrality of imagination, art, literature in education. Why not? Because it isn’t on any GCSE set text list at present (though it is on the CIE IGCSE specification list for 2018, as one of its two nineteenth-century novels along with Mansfield Park).

Finally, remember that ultimately the examination hall is secondary.

Yes, of course, we want students to do well in their examination, and both they and their schools need to secure the highest grades they can. Getting the teaching right is the surest way of achieving this. And getting the teaching right means not forgetting that at its best literature is the most intense and resonant form of thinking about life: that’s why we write it and why we read it. Encouraging young people to understand this—to appreciate it for themselves and to show this in their talk and writing—is the essence of all teaching of literature in schools. It is to this end that the teaching of the new GCSE can and must be shaped.
‘My heart leaps up’: Romantic Poetry and the new GCSEs

Matthew Edwards

In his Lectures On The English Poets (1818), William Hazlitt declared that ‘the Lake school of poetry’ had its origin in the French Revolution:

There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, king, people. According to the prevailing notions, all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. [...] The world was to be turned topsy-turvy; and poetry [...] was to share its fate and begin de novo. It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world and of letters...

And in June 2013, Michael Gove announced his GCSE reforms:

In line with our changes to the national curriculum, the new specifications are more challenging, more ambitious and more rigorous. [...] I asked Ofqual to judge how we might limit course work and controlled assessment [...] to explore how we might reform our grading structure [...] Young people in this country deserve an education system that can compete with the best in the world, a system which sets—and achieves—high expectations.

‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive...’ and in November 2013 the Department for Education published its English literature GCSE subject content and assessment objectives. The new GCSE ‘specifications in English literature should enable students to appreciate the depth and
power of the English literary heritage’; and so, the subject content should comprise a ‘detailed study [of] a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry.’

‘Run hence, proclaim…’ Liberté! The end of AQA/Edexcel/Poetry Live!’s clusters of Armitage, Clarke, Cope, Duffy and Zephaniah. ‘Cry it about the streets.’ Egalité! Before 2015 (Year 1), AQA offered a choice of four groups of poems, but only two offered little more than a whit of Romantic poetry: ‘Ozymandias’ in one; ‘London’, and an extract from ‘The Prelude’, in the other. Edexcel had a solitary John Clare; OCR, not a jot. Now all are in the same boat.

‘High expectations’; but this is how the examination boards have rendered ‘representative Romantic poetry’:

**AQA**

Either, Love and relationships
Byron: ‘When We Two Parted’
Shelley: ‘Love’s Philosophy’

Or, Conflict and power
Shelley: ‘Ozymandias’
Blake: ‘London’
Wordsworth: ‘The Prelude’: boat stealing

**OCR**

Either, Love and Relationships’
Helen Maria Williams: ‘A Song’
Byron: ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’

Or, Conflict
Blake: ‘A Poison Tree’
Keats: ‘Bright Star’
Wordsworth: ‘The Prelude’: boat stealing

Or, Youth and Age
Blake: ‘Holy Thursday’
Keats: ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’