In this exercise of practical criticism, you are asked to write an appreciation of the passage below. You may wish to keep in mind some of the following considerations in your answer, and may also comment on any other aspect of the passage that you consider to be worthy of discussion:

- theme and motifs;
- pattern and form;
- character and personality;
- drama and crisis;
- imagery and rhetoric;
- style and tone;
- place, time and mood;
- idiom and register.

Outside the harbour the sun was sinking, gorgeous gold and red the sky, and vast, beyond the darkening islands of the Egades group. Coming as we did from the east side of the island, where dawn beyond the Ionian sea is the day's great and familiar event: so decisive an event, that as the light appears along the sea's rim, so do my eyes invariably open and look at it, and know it is dawn, and as the night-purple is fused back, and a little scarlet thrills towards the zenith, invariably, day by day, I feel I must get up: coming from the east, shut off hermetically from the west by the steep spikes of the mountains at our back, we felt this sunset in the African sea terrible and dramatic. It seemed much more magnificent and tragic than our Ionian dawn, which has always a suggestion of a flower opening. But this great red, trumpet-flaring sunset had something African, half-sinister, upon the sea: and it seemed so far
off, in an unknown land. Whereas our Ionian dawn always seems near and familiar and happy.

A different goddess the Eryx Astarte, the woman Ashtaroth, *Erycina ridens* must have been, in her pre-historic dark smiling, watching the fearful sunsets beyond the Egades, from our gold-lighted Apollo of the Ionian east. She is a strange goddess to me, this Erycina Venus, and the west is strange and unfamiliar and a little fearful, be it Africa or be it America.

Slowly at sunset we moved out of the harbour. And almost as we passed the bar, away in front we saw, among the islands, the pricking of a quick, pointed light. Looking back, we saw the light at the harbour entrance twitching: and the remote, lost town beginning to glimmer. And night was settling down upon the sea, through the crimsoned purple of the last afterglow.

The islands loomed big as we drew nearer, dark in the thickening darkness. Overhead a magnificent evening-star blazed above the open sea, giving me a pang at the heart, for I was so used to see her hang just above the spikes of the mountains, that I felt she might fall, having the space beneath.

Levanzo and the other large island were quite dark: absolutely dark, save for one beam of a lighthouse low down in the distance. The wind was again strong and cold: the ship had commenced her old slither and heave, slither and heave, which mercifully we had forgotten. Overhead were innumerable great stars active as if they were alive in the sky. I saw Orion high behind us, and the dog-star glaring. And *swish!* went the sea as we took the waves, then after a long trough, *swish!* This curious rhythmic swishing and hollow drumming of a steamer at sea has a narcotic, almost maddening effect on the spirit, a long, hissing burst of waters, then the hollow roll, and again the upheaval to a sudden hiss-ss-ss!

A bell had clanged and we knew the crew were once more feeding. At every moment of the day and presumably of the night, feeding was going on - or coffee-drinking.

(D. H. Lawrence *Sea and Sardinia*)
THE HANDMAID’S TALE (M. Atwood)

Either

(a) Buttered, I lie on my single bed, flat, like a piece of toast. I can't sleep. In the semi-dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can't see. There's no breeze, my white curtains are like gauze bandages, hanging limp, glimmering in the aura cast by the searchlight that illuminates this house at night, or is there a moon?

I fold back the sheet, get carefully up, on silent bare feet, in my nightgown, go to the window, like a child, I want to see. The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow. The sky is clear but hard to make out, because of the searchlight; but yes, in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is a stone and the sky is full of deadly hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway.

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.

I want to steal something.

(b) ‘Humanity is so adaptable […] Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.’ Discuss with reference to Offred’s survival strategies in The Handmaid’s Tale.

EMMA (J. Austen)

Either

(a) At first it was downright dullness to Emma. She had never seen Frank Churchill so silent and stupid. He said nothing worth hearing looked without seeing – admired without intelligence – listened without knowing what she said. While he was so dull, it was no wonder that Harriet should be dull likewise, and they were both insufferable.

When they all sat down it was better; to her taste a great deal better, for Frank Churchill grew talkative and gay, making her his first object. Every distinguishing attention that could be paid, was paid to her. To amuse her, and be agreeable in her eyes, seemed all that he cared for – and Emma, glad to be enlivened, not sorry to be flattered, was gay and easy too, and gave him all the friendly encouragement, the admission to be
gallant, which she had ever given in the first and most animating period of their acquaintance; but which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." They were laying themselves open to that very phrase -- and to having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. Not that Emma was gay and thoughtless from any real felicity; it was rather because she felt less happy than she had expected. She laughed because she was disappointed; and though she liked him for his attentions, and thought them all, whether in friendship, admiration, or playfulness, extremely judicious, they were not winning back her heart. She still intended him for her friend.

Or

(b) Emma Woodhouse is introduced as ‘handsome, clever and rich’. What other characteristics does the novel reveal about her which are not necessarily captured in this definition?

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (C. Dickens)

Either

(a) "Is he changed?" Miss Havisham asked her.
    "Very much," said Estella, looking at me.
    "Less coarse and common?" said Miss Havisham, playing with Estella’s hair.
    Estella laughed, and looked at the shoe in her hand, and laughed again, and looked at me, and put the shoe down. She treated me as a boy still, but she lured me on.

    We sat in the dreamy room among the old strange influences which had so wrought upon me, and I learnt that she had but just come home from France, and that she was going to London. Proud and wilful as of old, she had brought those qualities into such subjection to her beauty that it was impossible and out of nature – or so I thought – to separate them from her beauty. Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood – from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe – from all those visions that had raised her face in the glowing fire, struck it out of the iron on the anvil, extracted it from the darkness of night to look in at the wooden window of the forge and flit away. In a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life.

Or

(b) Discuss Dickens’ handling of narrative voice in *Great Expectations* and the extent to which this enhances the reader’s understanding of the novel

THE END OF THE AFFAIR (G. Greene)

Either

(a) We sat at a table and fingered our glasses: I had never had much to say to Henry. I doubt whether I should ever have troubled to know Henry or Sarah well if I had not begun
in 1939 to write a story with a senior civil servant as the main character. Henry James once, in a discussion with Walter Besant, said that a young woman with sufficient talent need only pass the mess-room windows of a Guards’ barracks and look inside in order to write a novel the Brigade, but I think at some stage of her book she would have found it necessary to go to bed with a Guardsman if only to check on the details. I didn’t exactly go to bed with Henry, but I did the next best thing, and the first night I took Sarah out to dinner I had the cold-blooded intention of picking the brain of a civil servant’s wife. She didn’t know what I was at; she thought, I am sure, I was genuinely interested in her family life, and perhaps that first awakened her liking for me. What time did Henry have breakfast? I asked her. Did he go to the office by tube, bus or taxi? Did he bring his work home at night? Did he have a briefcase with the royal arms on it? Our friendship blossomed under my interest: she was so pleased that anybody should take Henry seriously.

Or

(b) Discuss Greene’s concern with serious emotional and moral challenges in The End of the Affair.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER (G. Greene)

Either

(a) The words of the mass were like an indictment. ‘I will go in unto the altar of God: to God who giveth joy to my youth.’ But there was no joy anywhere. He looked up from between his hands and the plaster images of the Virgin and the saints seemed to be holding out hands to everyone, on either side, beyond him. He was the unknown guest at a party who is introduced to no one. The gentle painted smiles were unbearably directed elsewhere. When the Kyrie Eleison was reached he again tried to pray. ‘Lord have mercy…Christ have mercy…Lord have mercy,’ but the fear and the shame of the act he was going to commit chilled his brain. Those ruined priests who presided at a Black Mass, consecrating the Host over the naked body of a woman, consuming God in an absurd and horrifying ritual, were at least performing the act of damnation with an emotion larger than human love: they were doing it from hate of God or some odd perverse devotion to God’s enemy. But he had no love of evil or hate of God. How was he to hate this God who of his own accord was surrendering Himself into his power? He was desecrating God because he loved a woman – was it even love, or was it just a feeling of pity and responsibility.

Or

(b) Typical of Greene’s literature, The Heart of the Matter is concerned with conflict. Discuss.

ATONEMENT (I. McEwan)

Either

(a) She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed,
unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way - towards their owner - as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table - cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice - suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders.

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rain-making spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf.

Or

(b) Briony ‘uses fiction in an attempt to accommodate and transform the past’. Discuss.

A HANDFUL OF DUST (E. Waugh)

Either

(a) But with the exception of her sister's, opinion was greatly in favour of Brenda's adventure. The morning telephone buzzed with news of her; even people with whom she had the barest acquaintance were delighted to relate that they had seen her and Beaver the evening before at restaurant or cinema. It had been an autumn of very sparse and meagre romance; only the most obvious people had parted or come together, and Brenda was filling a want long felt by those whose simple, vicarious pleasure it was to discuss the subject in bed over the telephone. For them her circumstances shed peculiar glamour; for five years she had been a legendary, almost ghostly name, the imprisoned princess of fairy story, and now that she had emerged there was more enchantment in the occurrence, than in the mere change of habit of any other circumspect wife. Her very choice of partner gave the affair an appropriate touch of fantasy; Beaver, the joke figure they had all known and despised, suddenly caught up to her among the luminous clouds of deity. If, after seven years looking neither to right nor left, she had at last broken away with Jock Grant-Menzies or Robin Beaseley or any other young buck with whom nearly everyone had had a crack one time or another, it would have been thrilling no doubt, but straightforward, drawing-room comedy. The choice of Beaver raised the whole escapade into a realm of poetry for Polly and Daisy and Angela and all the gang of gossips.

Or

(b) ‘A Handful of Dust is about the cost of idealism and the futility of nostalgia.’ Discuss.