**Comparative Independent Coursework – A2 Literature**

Advisory word count: 2500-3000 words

(Assumption that at least one text will be *A Handful of Dust* by Evelyn Waugh with *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as a possible comparative text.)

1. The catholic convert Waugh said of *A Handful of Dust* that “it dealt entirely in behaviour. It was humanist and said all I had to say about humanism”. Compare the presentation of human behaviour in Waugh’s novel with another modernist novel.
2. Compare the ways in which two modernist novels present types of disintegration.
3. Compare your two novels from the point of view that, in modernism, language is less a means of communication, more a means of evasion or pretence.
4. Compare the ways in which your modernist texts use structural patterns like repetition, echoes, contrasts and cycles.
5. Compare the ways that women are presented in two modernist novels.
6. Compare the ways that journeys are presented in two modernist novels.
7. Compare the ways that the city is presented in two modernist novels.

Some brief notes on modernism

Modernism as a movement has its main period of influence in art, literature and other cultural forms at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. Both *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) are influenced by modernism without being part of its initial, highly experimental phase. Waugh, in particular, would go on to mock much modernist experimentation. Aspects of modernism that both novels reflect, however, are:

- that a world of objective, moral certainty and shared values has been shattered, especially in the aftermath of World War 1. Things tend towards fragmentation and in modernist novels this contrasts with the nicely rounded off plots of the nineteenth-century novels with their romantic dénouements and sense of moral justice. The title *A Handful of Dust* is a direct quotation from the most famous modernist poem, *The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot.

- that we can no longer trust in a shared, objective truth and that subjective truth becomes more important. Thus, Waugh presents a range of characters who are presented as overwhelmingly selfish and committed to self-gratification, unable or unwilling to communicate honestly communicate with each other or to show real empathy; Fitzgerald reflects this turn to subjectivity by employing a single, highly manipulative and unreliable first-person narrator through whom the whole action of the novel is conveyed.

- that in modernist novels the form and structure of the work is as important as the subject matter in conveying a sense of fragmentation and disintegration. Both Waugh and Fitzgerald deploy a technique of ‘cutting’ from one scene to another, borrowing from cinema. Both will often present dialogue without any narrative intervention at all, as if to suggest that the characters are cast adrift in their own self-absorbed worlds without any communal anchoring. Instead of bringing together a plot in a satisfying, unifying way like in the nineteenth-century novel (eg. The good, decent Elizabeth Bennett ends up marrying rich Mr Darcy at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*), modernist writers often impose other structural devices such as different types of repetition or other types of deep patterning as if to suggest that characters are subject to forces outside of their own control.