

AS LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H072

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Version 1

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates. The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report. A full copy of the question paper can be downloaded from OCR.

Paper H072/02 series overview

The Drama and prose post-1900 component invites candidates to explore a set drama text as well as comparing and contrasting a set prose text to an unseen passage. Candidates have the opportunity to demonstrate the full breadth of their developing skills base across all of the English Literature Assessment Objectives.

Successful work in this component is characterised by fluent and frequent use of textual detail which ranges across the whole set text and/or extract. Terminology is employed judiciously, written expression rarely detracts from the coherence of the writing and ideas are interesting, if not sophisticated (AO1). In Section 1, high ability candidates demonstrate a convincing sense of dramatic presentation (AO2), offering and exploring a wide range of interpretations (AO5) which may cite production and/or film adaptations (where relevant), or critical viewpoints. In Section 2, a range of interesting and developed connections to an unseen extract should be made with the set prose text (AO4). The extract may be employed to 'unlock' or reveal interesting views on the set text itself. The analysis offered in both Sections 1 and 2 should be underpinned by sound contextual understanding (AO3).

It is clear from patterns emerging in candidate responses for this component that further guidance on the crediting of Assessment Objectives would be useful:

- AO1: coherent, well-argued and well-developed discussion is of the utmost importance. Candidates should pay attention to the specific wording of the question and answer the question set. Some candidates choose to construct their own framework for textual discussion, 'downloading' their knowledge without shaping their response to the task and this approach will limit AO1 achievement. Addressing all of the key prompts in a question will allow a candidate to construct a well-nuanced discussion. There is an increasing tendency to overuse linguistic terminology with candidates frequently labelling linguistic features such as word classes, irrespective of the value of that label to the discussion. Labelling and feature spotting within close textual analysis is largely unhelpful whereas judicious identification of pertinent literary and dramatic features, where this contributes to the discussion of meaning making, will always be valuable.
- AO2: the vast majority of candidates understand the importance of textual detail and quote widely and frequently to support their arguments. Close textual analysis is rewarded in both Section 1 and Section 2. Candidates are less comfortable exploring the dramatic nature of the set drama texts for Section 1 and this will ultimately limit AO2 achievement. Candidates and centres are reminded that dramatic devices are equally valuable evidence to support exploration of a dramatic text. In Section 2, AO2 credit can be achieved through close analysis of both set text and extract. Analysis should always show awareness of the constructed nature of texts and of writer's craft.
- AO3: analysis may be supported by a wide range of *relevant* contexts but only *where these contexts contribute to the argument that the candidate is making*. Candidates can receive credit for contextualising discussion of a moment in a set text to a wider perspective of the novel or writer's works as a whole or for considerations of genre and form. Candidates who rely on 'bolted-on' social and historical context where this is not woven into the argument being constructed rarely gain strong AO3 credit. Overuse of the biographical details of writers' lives is unlikely to be illuminating and is usually unhelpful.

- AO4: connections, links and comparisons are credited in Section 2 only and are credited for developed links between the set text and the extract. Links and connections between the set text and other texts studied as part of the wider generic study conducted by the candidate would be credited as AO3 achievement.
- AO5: interpretations are very often the candidate's own, valid responses to the writer's work in relation to the task set in Section 1. Candidates and centres are reminded that careful consideration of the view presented to the candidate in the question will receive AO5 credit. Many candidates are helpfully referencing productions they have seen of their drama text either in the theatre or on film but candidates are not penalised for not having been offered this experience. Critical interpretations tend to be most successful where they relate to specific views rather than schools of thought. Many candidates are able to cite responses of specific critical theorists to their text. Where these references are engaged with and explored and where they are apposite to the discussion in hand, they are very useful.

Candidates were, once again, well prepared by centres for Sections 1 and 2 and candidates across the ability range seem to have found the paper accessible. At the higher ability level there was evidence of lucid, original and mature consideration of the texts and many candidates showed genuine interest and excitement in the ideas that texts invite them to explore. Lower ability responses tend towards simplistic interpretations with surface level links in Section 2 and stock readings of context.

Section 1 overview

Whilst some candidates were alive to the dramatic potential of the text studied for Section 1, an increasing number of candidates did not see their text as a performance script at all. It is worth reminding candidates that consideration of the drama genre is often fruitful in responses.

Many candidates had been given the opportunity to experience their text in performance, either in the theatre or on screen. Opportunities to enrich textual study in this way are clearly not always possible but do invariably yield thoughtful engagement. The dramatic nature of a text can be readily explored within a classroom context and offers the chance to consider the nuances of staging, performance and audience impact. Such work offers a way of thinking about a text, which opens up a range of AO5 possibilities for discussion. Close textual analysis which engages with dramatic devices, as well as language, achieves credit for AO2.



The Victoria and Albert Museum contains The National Video Archive of Performance and currently offers group viewings of *Private Lives*, *The Homecoming* and *Jerusalem*. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/nvap/>

The structure of the questions set in Section 1 offer candidates a view or idea about their text with which to engage. These views are often challenging or provoking and are designed to prompt lively discussion. The candidate is then given a specific task, which directs them to consider the roles of characters or the construction of the text as a whole *in relation to that view*.

Whilst some candidates had clearly thought carefully about all of the question prompts before starting to write, many seemed to have given the question only a cursory reading, which impacted on their ability to address the Assessment Objectives at the higher levels. Candidates are encouraged to spend some of their examination time planning their responses by thinking carefully about the implications of the question prompts set. Those candidates who unpicked the nuances and implications of all of the words in the prompts were able to offer richer interpretations (AO5) with a tighter line of argument (AO1). For example, the 'goes too far' prompt for Question 6a or the 'challenging answers' prompt in Question 6b invited much richer analysis of the play *Jerusalem* than some candidates considered. Similarly, the prompt to consider whether the play makes failure 'as interesting a subject as success' was not always considered in relation to *The History Boys* where candidates often focused exclusively on the concept of failure. For the most popular question on the paper, candidates who considered whether Williams 'makes it tough' to take sides between the protagonists of *A Streetcar Named Desire* produced more thoughtful analysis than those who merely wrote what they knew about Stanley and Blanche. These examples make clear the relationship between AO1 and Section 1 achievement.

Many candidates were able to offer impressive contextual knowledge in relation to their text, which informed and illuminated the discussion of the set question. Judiciously and selectively employed, this knowledge yielded interesting insights into the influences impacting on the text and its reception (AO3).

Historical and biographical detail was not always useful and was sometimes inaccurately cited. Claims for the influence of Williams' sexuality and family background in relation to *A Streetcar Named Desire* sometimes overpowered thoughtful consideration of the text itself and knowledge of his sister Rose's lobotomy rarely illuminated the argument being made. It can be difficult for candidates to understand some of the complexities of the historical layering underneath their texts and it may be more helpful to encourage candidates simply to see the texts in their time. Inaccuracies generated by incomplete understanding of the significance of the American Civil War to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, can cause unhelpful diversions. Candidates would do well to focus on the play's post-World War II setting and the rich layers of meaning this might generate.

Contextual background is often taught as a way into a text and this can be a valuable approach. However, where context becomes a series of learned facts that candidates import unmediated into their discussions, (Rose's lobotomy, the Dale Farm convictions), it can often detract from the focus of responses. Context would be best viewed as the colourwash underneath the painting rather than the highlights and accent colours overlaid on top.

Question 1 (a)

1 Noel Coward: *Private Lives*

Either

- (a) 'Amanda can't live without Elyot; she can't live with him, either.'

Consider this view of the role of Amanda in *Private Lives*.

[30]

Question 1 (b)

- (b) 'Elyot and Amanda turn Victor and Sibyl into perfect little copies of themselves.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *Private Lives*?

[30]

Very few responses were seen to this text option. Candidates responding to both question options were readily able to offer lively responses to characterisation and the play as a whole.

Question 2 (a)

2 Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Either

- (a) 'The strong emotions of the characters match the play's colourful setting.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of the setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire*?

[30]

A Streetcar Named Desire is the most popular text option on this paper but relatively few candidates chose to engage with this question option. Those that responded to this task often produced strong responses with candidates using their awareness of the text as drama - and indeed as a work of art - to great advantage. These responses often also engaged with all of the prompts embedded within the question.

Broad readings of setting encompassed anything from lighting to cultural depictions of 'space' and invited a wealth of AO3 considerations. New Orleans was almost always characterised as a 'melting pot' and Blanche was a 'Southern Belle' who didn't fit into the aggressively mercantile 'New America' symbolised by New Orleans.

Lower ability candidates that did attempt this question often interpreted 'colourful setting' very literally, and thus limited the breadth of ideas that they could discuss. Commentary on the symbolism of clothing and colour was particularly popular with consideration given to 'white' for Blanche (dress, moth metaphor), 'red' for Stanley (still hurling the meat) and the lurid 'coloured lights'. Some candidates used the question to force a Stanley and Blanche comparison, which was an unhelpful approach.

Question 2 (b)

(b) 'Williams makes it tough to take sides between Stanley and Blanche.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the roles of Stanley and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. [30]

This was the most popular question on the paper by far.

High ability candidates used AO5 to oscillate skilfully between different readings and give the examiner a sense that dramatic sympathy is fluid and shifts as the play proceeds. One particularly engaging response argued that the pull for Stella's sympathy was the heart of Blanche and Stanley's relationship and 'created Stella as a proxy for the audience on stage'. Indeed many candidates chose to use Stella's response to her family as a measure of their own sympathy. One candidate convincingly argued that 'we are invited to take Blanche's side [...] – her coquettish seduction and dishonesty are a mere mask for a weak, mentally and physically fragile individual. Stanley ultimately ends up with the better deal.' Another excellent response contended that 'Stanley's pragmatism is perhaps best-suited for the roughness of reality, while Blanche's deterioration makes the modern audience sympathetic to her plight.' By contrast, one argued that although one's sympathies lie with Blanche, in the end we must side with Stanley because he is the future.

Many able candidates made context their driving force, arguing that Stanley and Blanche represent the respective cultures of Old and New South. In some cases, the nuances of America's history were not fully understood with some responses placing Stanley in the North and conflating Civil and World wars. Some candidates forced autobiographical context on the characters arguing variously that Williams is Blanche, Stanley is Williams' father, Blanche is Rose. These interpretations often led to erroneous assumptions and diverted the candidate away from the kernel of the question into set and narrow views: 'we are more likely to take the side of Blanche because Williams is Blanche and he wrote the play.'

Lower ability candidates adopted an either/or approach which discussed Blanche and Stanley in turn before reaching an AO5 response which didn't commit the writer either way. Candidates who did not engage with the prompt remained at the level of exploring the roles of Stanley and Blanche and these responses rarely reached far into the mark scheme.

Question 3 (a)

3 Harold Pinter: *The Homecoming*

Either

- (a) 'The characters often mean something quite different from what they say.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *The Homecoming*? [30]

Question 3 (b)

- (b) 'At the end of the play, Ruth's decision to settle down with Max and the boys makes perfect sense.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the role of Ruth in *The Homecoming*. [30]

Few responses were seen to this text but there was evidence of particularly strong engagement with option 3b and the challenging complexities of Ruth's characterisation and role.

Question 4 (a)

4 Alan Bennett: *The History Boys*

Either

- (a) '*The History Boys* makes failure as interesting a subject as success.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *The History Boys*? [30]

A number of candidates studied *The History Boys* but very few opted for Question 4a. Posner and the failure his life becomes was a focus for some and one candidate attempted to frame Rudge through academic failure with his successes largely ignored. Those who did tackle Question 4a usually focused the discussion through Hector's various perceived failings.

Question 4 (b)

- (b) 'The play suggests that Hector is the ideal teacher.'

In the light of this view, discuss the role of Hector in *The History Boys*. [30]

Question 4b was significantly more popular for this text with few candidates attempting to argue that Hector is indeed the 'ideal' teacher. Some candidates drew Lintott and Irwin into their discussions to frame their responses to Hector.

Candidates studying this play, given their personal implication within the examination system, quite often favour Irwin over Hector and this preference shaped responses to the characterisation of Hector. Such observations, the outcomes for the 'history boys' beyond Oxford and the distaste for Question 4a offer interesting food for reflection on the generation sitting examinations and the relevance of a text such as this to their experience.

AO3 was generally very delicately handled and AO5 views often drew on interviews with Alan Bennett and Richard Griffiths to support conclusions about the character of Hector.

Question 5 (a)

5 Polly Stenham: *That Face*

Either

- (a) 'A world in which children are always being let down by their parents.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *That Face*? [30]

- (b) 'The female characters in *That Face* are more brutal than the male.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the roles of the female characters in *That Face*. [30]

Question 5 (b)

As in previous series, very few responses were seen on this text. Those candidates who had studied *That Face* had found it paid dividends. It does speak to a 16-19 age group with acid charm without any kind of condescension.

Question 6 (a)

6 Jez Butterworth: *Jerusalem*

Either

- (a) 'The play goes too far in its celebration of disorderly and dishonest characters.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *Jerusalem*? [30]

Jerusalem continues to be a popular text choice for many centres and remains popular with candidates. Question 6a was the favoured option here with plenty wishing to explore and moralise on the disorderly behaviour of the characters.

Many candidates focused their discussion on Byron, as there is much to say: his drug-taking/peddling and rebellious nature and his slippery relationship with the truth offered rich material for discussion. Higher ability candidates took a less narrow frame and brought in a wider range of characters with some interesting reflections on characters such as Wesley and how honest he is with himself, given the parallels with Byron that some saw.

Candidates engaged with the 'celebration' prompt, often through the mythical and supernatural life that Byron seems to lead in the forest. His apparent connection to a heritage or life-force beyond mere profanity and dropout status is what many argued is the evidence for Butterworth's celebration of the character, lifting him above mundane disorderliness. Few candidates picked up on the 'too far' prompt but those who did usually framed tight, well-argued responses.

Question 6 (b)

(b) 'The play asks what an English forest is for, and gives some challenging answers.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of the setting of *Jerusalem*? [30]

Although less popular, Question 6b generated very rich responses, frequently from particularly able candidates.

Textual discussion often centred on Blake's 'Jerusalem' and the characters as recognisable cultural archetypes (e.g. Johnny Byron as wild man of the woods; Phaedra as a Faerie). Some explored the forest as an enclave against the relentless march of globalisation. Like Question 6a, this task also allowed candidates to fruitfully engage with the supernatural elements of Johnny Byron, such as his strange blood and his deep tie to the giants, with one response arguing that 'Johnny was as impossible to separate from the forest as creatures from English myth such as fawns.'

The idea of the 'forest' allowed candidates to explore the rich AO3 opportunities here, ranging from green belts and rural life to the Green Man, Robin Hood and ancient folklore. The breadth on display was inventive and genuinely impressive.

Section 2 overview

Section 2 presents candidates with the opportunity to compare and contrast their set text with unseen passages, which offer rich opportunities for connections. Links are often thematic in nature, generated by material from similar periods or genres or which present comparative ideas and concerns but examiners are alert to original and thoughtful contrasts. The best work often uses the unseen passage as a way of generating new ideas and seeing the set text through fresh perspectives. Strong responses will invariably offer close readings of the unseen passage (AO2) which is a rewarding route to use as a springboard into contrasts with the set text (AO4). As stated in last year's report, those candidates who really mine the unseen material to shape a response to the question tend to do significantly better than those who lead the argument through pre-conceived notions of the set text.

Examiners did find, however, that there are a large number of candidates who are significantly disadvantaging themselves by not foregrounding comparison in their responses. Last year's report stated:

- If little consideration is offered of the passage and connections are cursory and not fully exploited, then candidates are seriously reducing their focus on both AO1, concerning relevancy, and AO4, establishing links. Candidates, therefore, who only pay lip-service to the passage or who try to squeeze rather too much out of one or two quotations from the passage without presenting a solid understanding of the whole of the extract are disadvantaging themselves by trying to write a discursive essay rather than conducting a comparison/contrast exercise. This became a real discriminator in marking: candidates who take time to think carefully about the passage and who read it carefully in advance of putting pen to paper, make the passage integral to the structure of the answer and do better as a result.*

Examiners this series noted that many candidates had spent little time reading the unseen passage in order to frame their response. Often, obvious links were identified and inserted into the discussion on the set text but without a full exploration of the contrasts generated. Sometimes set text and unseen passage were put side by side but without securely being linked and contrasted. At times, candidates used the unseen passage to illustrate a point being made in relation to the set text without developing the point of comparison. All these approaches seriously limit a candidate's achievement in Section 2.

It is clear that centres entering students for this examination are preparing candidates for their genre study and many candidates were therefore able to offer readings of the unseen extract informed by an awareness of genre, which is rewarded as AO3 context. Candidates should be careful not to slip into comparison between texts set for genre study at A Level as the AO4 comparison and AO1 task focus invite contrasts to be drawn between set text and unseen extract only.

Question 7

7 F Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

Discuss ways in which Fitzgerald presents the power of dreams in *The Great Gatsby*.

In your answer you should make connections with the following extract from an American short story. A young man who has been dreaming about his ideal woman for six or seven years thinks he has found her at Lost Lake. [30]

The majority of responses demonstrated sound knowledge of the set text but a number of examiners commented that the extract was not always handled as well and often got lost in these discussions. Some candidates were able to link Nick to the 'Nick-like' narrator of the extract and explored the symbolism of 'Lost Lake' and the rings. Many candidates offered basic comparisons, such as the existence of a dream, while many got a little too wrapped up in the set text, sometimes ignoring the extract completely. Many decided to focus solely on the dream of *Gatsby*, and more often than not offered readings of this as entirely illusory, without reference to Fitzgerald's framing of the final image in the novel.

There were, however a number of strong discussions. One candidate argued that the power of one man's dream 'causes others to become engulfed... as Nick becomes consumed in helping Daisy and *Gatsby* pursue their dream, as shown when Nick says, "I have just remembered today is my birthday".' Another candidate maintained that the two texts warn 'of the danger of dwelling inside the illusion/dream for too long – both authors portray the initial uplifting [effect] of ambition, but the lack of a rational mindset causes [irreparable consequences in the long term].'

Question 8

8 Angela Carter: *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

Discuss ways in which Carter presents violence in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

In your answer you should select material from the whole text and make connections with the following extract from a short story which describes an unfortunate encounter with a troll. [30]

Violence was most frequently defined in relation to misogyny, sexual violence and the violence of self-preservation in a hostile world. Simple responses merely cited its existence. The large majority of candidates were able to deal with a range of stories from the short story collection with 'The Bloody Chamber' and 'The Snow Child' predominating but 'The Erl-King' was also a popular story for discussion.

Candidates often avoided the extract and almost none saw the humorous undertones. Those tackling comparisons to it usually decided that the Troll had a very sexual interest in the girl, most frequently comparing this interest to the Marquis of the title story. Some stronger responses saw connections between the 'keyhole' and the various secret observers which recur throughout Carter's work and some offered interesting explorations of the apparent tranquillity of the girl in relation to the image of the 'classical painting'.

In terms of context, most responses situated Carter in 'second wave feminism'. Candidates can lose sight of the nuances of AO3 context with gender, seeing all women as oppressed, all men as oppressors and 'patriarchy' as something that happened in a distant period of history.

Question 9

9 George Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Discuss ways in which Orwell presents relationships in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In your answer you should make connections with the following passage, an extract from a science fiction novel set in a totalitarian future, where people are given alphabetical codes (THX, LUH) instead of names. [30]

The question on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was accessible for all levels and the large majority of candidates were able to draw material from set text and the extract and go beyond simple responses to alphabetical codes. The idea of 'relationships' was usefully viewed by candidates in broad terms and a multitude of plausible 'relationships' were addressed – sexual, familial, (most particularly through the Parsons family), and political in relation to the remote central authority at the heart of a dictatorship.

In terms of AO4 achievement, most candidates compared the rebellious nature of the love between the protagonists of each text and the illicit nature of their love. More interesting contrasts explored the function of the crowd and anonymity and the push for personal identity against its growing anonymisation. One strong response argued that 'Orwell's implementation of detached and collective relationships is symbolic of his "final warning" of the dangers of a totalitarian state.... Perhaps both Bova and Orwell are suggesting that relationships elicit mutual love and care, but are suppressed by a totalitarian government, as is evident through the formulaic prose of "please move briskly... please do not linger."'

AO3 context was good with some cogent insights into totalitarian politics and dystopian literary codes, although there were a large number of references to more general ideas such as Hitler Youth.

Question 10

10 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

Discuss ways in which Woolf explores romantic love in *Mrs Dalloway*.

In your answer you should make connections with the following extract, which describes the romantic encounter of an English couple early in the twentieth century. [30]

Few responses were seen to this question.

Question 11

11 Mohsin Hamid: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Discuss ways in which Mohsin Hamid explores the impact of terrorism in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

In your answer you should make connections with the following passage, in which a young Pakistani immigrant's husband is killed on 9/11. [30]

Few responses were seen to this text. Most candidates framed discussions around changing attitudes - to America; to race - and many noted the contrast between Changez exulting in America being brought to its knees in comparison to the 'sickened' response in the extract.

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