

Examiners' report

GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1)
in English Literature**

J352

For first teaching in 2015

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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. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. 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 and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 2 series overview

The Poetry and Shakespeare paper assesses candidates' knowledge and understanding of the anthology poems in their chosen cluster and Shakespeare play. To do well on this paper, candidates need to know their texts and be confident in using textual references to support their ideas. They should be given regular opportunities to practise identifying the focus of each question, planning and writing responses under timed conditions. In Section A, Part A, candidates read unseen texts, swiftly identifying key ideas and techniques with which to make connections with the given anthology poem. In Part B of Section A, they require sufficient knowledge of their chosen anthology poem to incorporate AO2 analysis and support their ideas with relevant textual references. In Section B, Shakespeare, their knowledge of context must be relevant to the question, rather than being bolted on, and they need to refer to at least two moments in the play, one of which will be the extract where that option is chosen.

Examiners continue to report a number of scripts which are difficult to decipher, even when the scanned script is magnified or where the question number is incorrect. Where candidates are allowed to type their answer, these scripts need careful labelling, appropriate font size, spacing and margins for ease of marking. This year, there were more typed scripts which were extremely long, in some cases 15-17 sides, where the quality was compromised by quantity. Some of these responses were very repetitive, with a wide range of textual references and commentaries being used to make the same points.

The new poems in each of the clusters have been well received by centres, and candidates chose them for Section A, Part B and were confident in their analysis of them in Section A, Part A where this was relevant to the question. There were very few rubric errors, where candidates chose a poem no longer in the anthology or from a different specification.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- showed clear knowledge and understanding of the anthology poems and Shakespeare plays - engaged confidently with unseen poems, making relevant comparisons in a structured response - made analytical comments on language, form and structure, showing understanding of the genres of poetry and drama - wrote detailed personal responses, focussing on the wording of the task and using relevant textual references - made commentary on the context of Shakespeare's plays relevant to the question.	- reproduced imperfectly understood interpretations of the anthology poems and Shakespeare plays - made limited or no links with the unseen texts, often assuming the poets' ideas were the same - explained the meaning of selected references or made generalised comments about techniques - either repeated the wording of the task so that it became intrusive or ignored it entirely - explained some aspects of context without direct link to the question.

Section A overview

The questions overall posed the candidates an appropriate level of challenge, regardless of the cluster chosen. The unseen texts were of an appropriate length and complexity, and every candidate found something to say. Rubric infringements were very rare, with the occasional candidate choosing a poem from a different cluster to the one they had chosen to write about in the first part, or a few candidates who wrote about a poem that wasn't in the anthology but had clearly been studied. This year there were very few multiple answers. In general, candidates understand the need to spend equal time and care on both parts of the question. Areas where candidates' practice could improve would include: the tendency in less successful answers to make a point, followed by an assertion that this was relevant to the demands of the question, even when it clearly wasn't; lack of textual support, even in answers that show relevant understanding, particularly true in (b) and the use of connectives such as "similarly" or "likewise" where the following point bore no relation to the structural logic suggested by the candidate. Additionally, even some of the more successful candidates were unsure of their noun/verb/adjective naming, although this did not necessarily diminish the value of their AO2 analysis. Candidates are increasingly confident with approaching unseen poetry, often writing with more insight and perceptive understanding about it than the taught text. Part (b) responses this year showed an improvement in the use of supporting textual reference, which allowed candidates to do more AO2 analysis of language, form and structure.

Assessment for learning



Delivery guides for the new poems in each cluster can be found on the [Teach Cambridge site](#) [Teach Cambridge | Resources](#) to prepare candidates for assessment. The digital poetry resource with readings of the anthology texts can also be found on this site.

These teaching strategies will help a class develop comparative skills once they have done some work on their anthology texts.

- Students use highlighter pens with a copy of the poem, say 'Warming Her Pearls'.
- As individuals, they must choose and highlight what they believe to be the three to five key phrases from the poem; the phrases must be short and must make some sense standing alone. Each student must be ready to say why they have chosen each phrase; they must also rank them in order, with most important first and least important last.
- In groups of three, students establish 3 - 5 choices for their group, again in rank order.
- Each group reports their rank order to the class; teacher collates responses and facilitates discussion of why those choices were made. Why do these key phrases contain the essence of the poem? If the class has been unsure about the key ideas in the taught poem, then students and teacher use this time to examine the chosen phrases and marry them to the ideas.
- Teacher introduces a series of carefully selected short stanzas from other modern poems.
- Students highlight key phrases from these new poems using the highlighter pens. Keep this part of the activity on a short time limit. Further discussion elicits the key ideas here.
- With the selected phrases and key ideas from the taught poem in mind, groups marry these to the key phrases and ideas in the unseen texts. Groups must be ready to explain their ideas and comparisons. Teacher emphasises that differences are just as interesting as similarities.

Follow up with

- a written paragraph using the above ideas from the two poems where students **MUST** draw from a series of discourse markers such as 'While on the one hand, Duffy....on the other hand Clarke...'; 'Unlike Duffy who....., Armitage.....'; 'Like Duffy, Armitage also wants us to...however, he also suggests...'
- display work where the taught poem is 'surrounded' by snips from other modern poems and the students' annotations.
- a further lesson where the above process is accelerated and set against the clock. Prizes for the groups who come up with the largest number of links between the taught poem and one or more of the introduced unseen texts.

'Dramatising' poems as monologues (or duologues) really helps clarify tone, who the 'audience' is, and what the relationship is between poetic voice and 'audience'/reader.

Question 1 (a)

1 Love and Relationships

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

- (a) Compare how these poems present a relationship where one person feels more strongly than the other.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

This proved an accessible pairing of texts, with most candidates able to comment on how the poetic voice was more engaged in the relationship than the one being spoken about or being addressed. Similarly, most candidates were able to comment on how Duffy's speaker, despite the impossibility of the affection being returned, ends with a note of resignation rather than despair, while the Tea ends with an acknowledgement that the lack of balance in the feelings meant that the relationship was doomed to failure and was in the process of ending. Some responses were confused by the lady/maid class difference in the Duffy; but there were fewer answers this year that commented in inappropriate length about the same sex nature of the relationship. Some candidates suggested that the phrase "gone again" implied a recurring event and one that further implied that the speaker was clearly "choosing and pursuing someone who was emotionally unavailable rather than societally unavailable". One candidate wrote: "In 'Oh God', contrastingly, the poem is not about a hopeless unrequited unspoken love but rather about a strained relationship between two people coming to its natural end." In general, as usual, candidates were more comfortable in writing about language rather than structure or form. Despite this, there were examples of candidates engaging usefully with form: for example, "The strictly structured six quartets in Duffy reflect perhaps the rigidity of the societal boundaries that restrict the maid from telling her mistress about her feelings." In general, stronger answers confidently analysed themes such as obsession, power dynamics, and repressed desire, exploring connotations of imagery such as the "rope" and "leash", as well as the "fire" imagery in both poems. Candidates who are willing to consider different interpretations, for example that the fire imagery can reflect passion but also the destructive nature of obsessive/unrequited love, will be more likely to achieve Level 5 'thoughtful examination' and Level 6 'detailed and sensitive analysis' of the ways in which writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects.

Exemplar 1

Structurally, both poems use similar techniques to reflect their love. Both poems have regular stanza lengths, of 4 lines each in 'Warming her Pearls' and 6 lines each in 'Oh God', reflecting the persistent unwavering love in each poem. Similarly, both poems lack a rhyme scheme, suggesting unrestrained, natural, passionate love being expressed in both poems. However, this idea is even more prevalent in 'Oh God', where there is a lack of capital letters, and long sections of the poem ^{have} ~~with~~ lack of punctuation, creating a sense of free verse, and unstructured, love being expressed, which is ~~messy~~ ^{messy} and unpredictable.

In 'Warming her Pearls' enjambment is used to reflect the maid's all-encompassing love for her mistress, for example between, "All day I think of her" and "resting", emphasising, through use of the line break to create space, the strength and persistence of her love. Similarly, in 'Oh God' enjambment is used, particularly strongly in stanza 2, to reflect the idea of outpouring love, with no end, reflected by lack of punctuation, reflecting mimicking the poet's image of an 'eruption' of imputed emotion. ~~→ cut off~~ This continues until the enjambment is cut off at the start of stanza three, as the tone changes,

and a volta occurs, signified by the word 'but', and a full stop. Following this, punctuation is more frequent, showing her dissipating passion, and love becoming more restrained.

Finally, the final lines of each poem reflect the idea that the love in 'warming her Pearls' was more persistent, yet in 'Oh Geel' was more intense, yet more fleeting. Duffy uses juxtaposition, through heat imagery between cooling pearls, and the mermaid who says 'I burn.' This emphasises the pain of her love, and also the paradoxical effects of her love, as the word 'burn' could be interpreted through the lens of passion or love, or through suffering and pain, reflecting concisely the contradiction displayed throughout the whole poem, of intense positive emotions of love, causing intense negative emotions of suffering and pain. In 'Oh Geel' also reflects this pain in the final line, but in a more fleeting way. The final line, 'gone again.' interrupts the rhythm of the previous stanzas, as it is much shorter, even looking as though it has been cut off abruptly, signifying the

		quick harsh end to the poet's emotions,
		and the role of space on the rest of the
		line creates a pause, allowing time
		for reflection for a pausing, momentary
		love.

This response to Question 1 (a) demonstrates detailed and sensitive analysis of poetic form and structure, interwoven with commentary on language, all the time sustaining an interwoven comparative approach.

Question 1 (b)

(b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents an unequal relationship.

[20]

Most, if not all, of the responses to this question took advantage of the broad scope of the “unequal” nature of a relationship. This question allowed candidates to answer on a broad range of texts, with popular choices including established anthology poets such as Fenton, Kay, Plath and Williams as well as the recently introduced Asghar and Antrobus. More successful responses made clear and often insightful links between the writer’s art and effects: for example, a candidate writing on ‘A Song’, commented: “The use of the pronoun ‘his’ in ‘his scanty store’ (rather than a more inclusive pronoun capturing a shared relationship) suggests the growing distance between the pair. The use of the modal verb in ‘could impart’ further emphasises the discontent between the pair.” Dusting the Phone” equally allowed candidates to explore the idea of an unequal relationship, with most responses commenting on the way that the “silver service” provided for the phone suggests the worshipful attitude to the longed for call from the neglectful lover; and the way that the “assault” metaphor captures the force of the frustrated feelings in the absence of unreturned love. More successful responses used the many structural and linguistic features of the poem to comment on its power and effectiveness: how the insistent repetition of the first person pronoun hints at the obsessional nature of the relationship (one response commented on how “the infrequent use of the pronoun ‘you’ suggests that the other person in the relationship is almost an irrelevance, with the poetic voice in love rather with the idea of love”). ‘Perseverance’ proved a very suitable choice. Most candidates were able to comment on: how the child seemingly loves the father more than is returned; how the mother is excluded from the “laughter”; how it is “strangers” who give him the affection he longs for from his father with their “hugs”; and also how the title suggests that love is not easy and often involves persevering. More successful candidates were able to engage with the language and structure of the piece. For example, how the personified pub “spits” his father out, suggesting that it doesn’t have the love for him that his family has; how the use of the future tense in “I will eat...the yams will boil” gives a continuing sense of hope that good times will return; how the waiting outside the pub is symbolic of the son’s general and continuing relationship with his father.

Question 2 (a)

2 Conflict

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

(a) Compare how these poems present a world changed by conflict.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Most candidates were able to access the unseen and use their taught knowledge to construct an argument about how both poems were describing the world being changed as a result of conflict. Many candidates understood that the title of the Amichai poem implies that mankind's assumption that they are "right" lies behind most conflict, some reflecting on the ironic or satirical tone created by its repetition. Most candidates commented on the disastrous nature of the change for people as well as for the broader natural world: one candidate observed, however, that "Both poems have a stoical ending where nature's ability to withstand mankind's conflicts is seen as brave, and (in the Amichai) almost philosophical and accepting". In terms of a response to language, the ambiguity of phrases such as "like a mole" drew various interpretations, all of which could be accepted and rewarded: some candidates saw the reference as a suggestion that the mole was a destructive animal that undermined attempts to rebuild and solve conflicts; another wrote, "...as the Amichai poem progresses it does so in a more hopeful tone than the Clarke, where the digging mole is positive in terms of the future suggesting that animals are making the soil fertile again bringing new hope to the world." Others contrasted the natural digging of the mole with the man-made damage of the soil by the plow, seeing it as reflecting what happens when humans prioritise their own needs over the environment. Candidates are increasingly confident in not only comparing the language of the texts, and how this is used to express meaning, but also the structure and poetic form.

Exemplar 2

2	a	Both 'Lament' by Gillian Clarke and 'The Place Where We Are Right' by Yehuda Amichai present a world deeply and irreversibly damaged by conflict. Whilst 'Lament' explores in detail the consequences of conflict on the natural world, Amichai's poem chooses to focus more on our actions in a more brief message. Both poems consider things being displaced and a loss of language. Both the titles of the poems serve as a reminder for the reader of the damage being caused, and what needs to change. A 'Lament' is an expression of grief and a form of martial music for fallen soldiers; the title is repeated back to in each of the seven anaphoric stanzas, giving it an imperative quality. This cements the tone of angry mourning in the poem. 'The Place Where We Are Right' is also repeated at the beginning of the first two stanzas in Amichai's poem, ensuring that the reader does not forget the detrimentality of our conflicted world. This title differs from 'Lament' in that Clarke's title asks us to consider the effect of conflict on a variety of animals and people, whereas Amichai's title cements the problematic nature of humanity's actions. Amichai also uses the first person plural to emphasise to this; the reader is drawn in and reminded that
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they are part of the problem. The tone in Amichai's poem is also mournful, with more subtle tones of anger.

Both poems explore how conflict oppresses and destroys the natural world. 'Lament' opens with an image of a 'green turtle' searching for 'her eggs laid in their nest of sickness'. The idea of a distressed mother seeking her children is particularly affecting, and the 'turtle' is described as having 'a pulsing burden'. This juxtaposition of heaviness and vitality portrays the turtle as helplessly uncomfortable in the face of her poisoned home - the 'nest of sickness' is no longer a domestic shelter and safe environment. Instead, it has been unnaturally affected by disease, demonstrating the ^{devastating} ~~terrible~~ ~~and deep~~ effect of conflict. Amichai's poem also presents an unnatural change in nature: 'Flowers will never grow in the spring'. This ^{strong} negative explains how the usual seasonal ^{markers} ~~markers~~ ('flowers'), symbolic of joy, colour and hope, cannot bloom in our world. 'Spring' is usually a time of positivity and growth, but conflict has prevented even this. Furthermore, the world seems to be 'hard and trampled / like a yard'. The simile here suggests that we have oppressed and urbanised nature to create a negative, harsh environment. This matches 'the shadow on the sea' in 'Lament',

an unnatural image that suggests an oppression of the natural world too.

Both poems explore a displacement of materials and people. 'Lament' asks us to mourn 'Ahmed' at the closed border; ~~and~~ the synecdoche on 'Ahmed' shows how he represents refugees and displaced citizens. There is a sense of entrapment and restriction on 'Ahmed', who is seeking a safe home because of conflict. Amichai's poem, less specific, explains that 'doubts and loves / dig up the world / like a mole, a glow'. The positive alliteration on 'doubts' and 'dig' creates angry undertones at this action. The simile ~~highlights~~ highlights the uprooting actions* that have broadly displaced the lots of the Earth.
*of conflict.

Both poems end with a concern about the loss of language and speech. 'Lament's final stanza is irregular, ~~highlighting~~ ~~showing~~ showing the speaker's heightened emotions as they 'lament' 'vengeance, and the ashes of language'. This idea of disintegrated diplomatic relations amidst an apocalyptic, fiery final stanza shows Clarke's message that the world will be forever ~~maimed~~ ~~ruined~~ maimed ← by conflict if we do not act. Amichai's poem ends with a 'whisper' being all that is left of ~~civilisation~~ a 'ruined' civilisation. There is a

		similar sadness at the complete loss of sound,
		humanity and civilization that conflict will cause.
		inevitably

The response to Question 2 (a) shows high level comparative skills, effectively interweaving AO1 and AO2.

Question 2 (b)

- (b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents how conflict changes things.

[20]

Candidates used a wide range of poems for this question, moving beyond the more obvious choices of poets such as Douglas, Levertov and Agard to include Dickinson, Byron and Wordsworth. There was some tendency for candidates to spend precious time writing an extended context introduction which could only be rewarded where relevant as knowledge as AO3 is not assessed in Section A. Most candidates grasped the central idea of "Flag", but few were confident in analysing the language, form and structure in a complex enough way to achieve at the higher levels. More successful answers to all the poems provided AO2 analysis of structure and form as well as language. Using the Byron certainly gave candidates ready access to the possibilities of writing successfully about metrical form as well as structure, without simply identifying the metrical feature: for example, "*The anapaestic rhythm of the poem mimics the furious and relentless galloping of the horses, creating a mixture of excitement and fear.*" A similarly astute comment on the poetic form of Byron, suggested how "*the full rhyme of 'sword' and 'Lord' reinforces God's strength as it restores the order previously corrupted through the half-rhyme between 'Baal' and 'wail.'*" Similarly, higher-level responses on Dickinson engaged successfully with its ideas and methods to make their analysis relevant: for example, "*Dickinson highlights how emotional conflict can change one's self-confidence and mindset. The impactful and constricting connotations of 'oppresses' along with the massive weight of belief suggested by the capitalising of 'Heft Of Cathedral Tunes' capture the writer's change in emotional and spiritual perspective.'*"

Question 3 (a)

3 Youth and Age

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

(a) Compare how these poems present thoughts about life and death.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Although fewer centres use this anthology cluster, there were still excellent responses, showing that candidates had been well prepared on a poem which was first available for teaching in September 2022 and engaged appropriately with the unseen. Most candidates grasped the clear contrast in attitudes towards life and death: a more realistic, pragmatic, mathematical, pessimistic approach in the taught poem set against a more idealistic, emotional, optimistic, spiritual approach in the unseen. More successful answers often approached the poems chronologically, analysing changes in tone and emotional resonance and analysed symbolism such as the stopwatch and moonlight to reveal wider messages about mortality – often commenting on how the blunt language surrounding an “autopsy” contrasted with peaceful imagery such as “shedding of skin”. Less successful responses tended to miss the more positive attitude expressed in ‘Margaret’s Moon’ – regarding both poems as expressing fear and regret – regarding the images of shedding skin, etc. as being a sign of death and decay rather than release.

Question 3 (b)

(b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents sad thoughts.

[20]

Candidates took advantage of the large number of texts that were relevant to address the issue of sad thoughts. Popular choices, however, were Bronte, Hardy and Clarke. More successful candidates were able, for example, to see how Bronte’s bluebell is symbolic of the viewpoint of youth when the heart “is not so heavy”, where “I knew no care”, where “heart and soul were free” set against the sadness that is the result of a “thankless life” of later years full of “anxious toil and strife”; Likewise, with the Hardy, higher-level responses showed awareness of the vulnerability of the “journeying boy” and his sad thoughts felt as he moves towards the region of adulthood that he is “not of”, through the clumsy alliteration of “rude realms” – and with uncertainty of his progress from the world of childhood to the “region of sin” captured by the symbolism of the “roof lamp’s oily flame”. Candidates who chose , Antrobus’ poem Happy Birthday, Moon, struggled more with relevance, focussing on the boy’s hearing problems as the cause of ‘sad thoughts’ and therefore did not grasp the positive relationship with his father evident when he says that ‘we hear each other, really hear each other.’ Questions are intended to provide a wide choice in part (b); however, some poems will be more directly relevant than others. Candidates benefit from grouping their anthology texts according to the central idea and message so that they can make effective choices.

Section B overview

Candidates were well prepared for the requirements of the examination and demonstrated secure knowledge and understanding of the plays, often using an impressive range of textual references, including well-selected quotations. Discursive questions have gained in popularity, with the same percentage doing these as the extract questions on *Macbeth*, *Romeo, and Juliet*. Centres have been doing effective work on essay planning, so that most candidates make relevant points within an essay structure and sustain focus on the task. In the discursive responses, they create a line of argument and express personal opinions, supported by references to the text. The wording of the discursive questions on three of the four Shakespeare plays, 'To what extent' usually elicited a conclusion in the final paragraph. The most successful responses avoided simply repeating points already made and provided a holistic overview of their perspective. Candidates who linked their ideas about characters and themes back to Shakespeare's techniques and dramatic effects achieved Levels 4 and above. Those who relied on narrative retelling or made general statements without textual support were more likely to be given Levels 1-3.

Candidates take differing approaches to using the passages provided for the extract questions, some beginning with the passage and then branching out to the wider text and others interweaving the passage more than once in their response. It is a useful source of AO2 analysis of the language and structure for many candidates. While it is not chosen with the discursive question in mind, it can be relevant, and some candidates used Macbeth's realisation that the equivocation of the witches is leading to the end of his kingship in the passage for Question 8 to answer Question 9. Some of the very few responses to Question 11 on the lovers in *Much Ado About Nothing* referred to the Question 10 passage for the 'merry war' between Beatrice and Benedick. There is nothing in the rubric to prevent candidates using the passage in this way, however it is important that they check its relevance.

While providing a framework for candidates can be helpful for those working at the lower levels, there is some over-reliance on versions of the PEEEC (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Effect, Context) paragraph structure, which is limiting for those working at the higher levels. This formulaic approach often restricts analytical depth and inhibits more nuanced, personal engagement with texts. For these candidates, moving away from rigid models and fostering flexible, critical writing would allow for more insightful textual exploration that will help them to achieve Level 6.

Less successful responses at the lower levels were sometimes limited to explaining meaning by 'translating' Shakespeare instead of making analytical comments on language. Examiners noted a resurgence of No Fear Shakespeare quoted as the text itself, which had been on the decline until this year. Candidates achieving Level 4 and above appeared to be responding well to active teaching approaches, with a greater appreciation of the text as a play, and therefore the significance of why the characters say these lines. This led to much better focus on the writer's choices and clearer links to the actual tasks rather than mere narrative overviews or isolated feature spotting. They demonstrated a good working knowledge of scenes and could analyse exchanges between characters, rather than isolated lines, suggesting they had seen the text in performance. This was particularly true of *Merchant* with some very well quoted and analysed responses on Bassanio and Portia's repartee.

Candidates often draw from questions on previous papers to support them in this closed book assessment, in particular last year's extracts, however this was less evident in this exam session. Some *Macbeth* Question 9 responses used the 2024 extract relating to 'horror' to illustrate the nature of Macbeth's actions and therefore his lack of kingly qualities. Similarly, *Romeo and Juliet* Question 4 candidates used the extract from the prologue as their reference to the wider text, linking fate to foreshadowing and premonition for the purposes of this year's question.

Candidates are increasingly referring to Greek tragedy, citing terms such as hubris and hamartia. While hamartia can be either character defect or specific error in judgement, there is an increasing number of

candidates using the term, some with little understanding. Examples from responses this year include, "Another moment where Macbeth shows hamartia is..." "Macbeth's hamartia becomes evil..." "Lady Macbeth manipulates his hamartia..." While most prevalent in *Macbeth*, it was evident to a lesser extent in *Romeo and Juliet*. "Romeo and Juliet's hamartia is fate..." It is important that such terminology is properly understood by candidates and that they can use it in a relevant way to support and develop their response to the text.

Centres have responded to previous guidance on A03 context with candidates interweaving secure, well-informed contextual points. This year, some strayed into complex theological territory which candidates do not fully understand and which drift from the focus of both task and text, for example predestination in *Macbeth*, *Romeo*, and *Juliet*.

Question 4*

- 4* Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents dreams and visions of the future in *Romeo and Juliet*. Refer to this extract from Act 1 Scene 4 and elsewhere in the play. [40]

Most candidates used the information on the exam paper about the extract to connect Mercutio's Queen Mab speech to the dream that Romeo has had about attending the Capulet ball. Many used the references to violence and the dark turn Mercutio's language takes as a parallel to the play's dramatic progress, citing the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio and the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet's love. Others referred to the ways Mercutio sees dreams as "vain fantasy/Begot of nothing as vain fantasy" as reflecting the unrealistic, fantasy nature of Romeo and Juliet's love, and this was sometimes quoted also by candidates who answered the discursive Question 9.

Less successful responses struggled to engage with the Queen Mab speech, and some avoided it entirely or referred to it briefly. Candidates confused by the Queen Mab speech often explained what Mercutio meant rather than using the imagery as a launchpad for some analytical points. Others were confused about Mercutio's intent and, possibly because of the contextual information provided, interpreted his words as a direct warning against Romeo attending the Capulet party. The Queen Mab speech, central to the extract, was sometimes misunderstood or treated as a simple story rather than a layered speech full of irony and thematic weight.

Some responses overstated the extent to which Mercutio's Queen Mab speech "foreshadows" what happens next in the play, for example that Mercutio foreshadows his own death at Tybalt's hand when he says, "cutting foreign throats". Others were successfully able to argue that Romeo cutting off Mercutio ("peace, peace") foreshadowed his fatal intervention in the fight. Many candidates were able to analyse the rich language of the speech, often using their wider understanding of Mercutio's character as a way of navigating it. The most successful understood that Queen Mab personifies the fantasies that drive people to violence and misfortune.

Candidates used a wide range of moments from elsewhere in the play, for example some linking dreams and visions to the 2024 question about fate, using the extract from the prologue. The Friar's warning that 'These violent delights have violent ends', Juliet's recognition that 'my grave is like to be my wedding bed' and Romeo's reaction to his banishment, with his cry, 'O I am Fortune's Fool' were often cited.

Less successful responses were unsure how to link the extract to the question and their interpretation of dreams and visions of the future became ambiguous. Some candidates struggled to understand what was meant by "dreams and visions," and their responses were rather vague or largely narrative. There are many moments of presentiment in the play, however 'visions of the future' was taken very literally by some candidates to be any moment where a character presented a future notion, for example Juliet wanting to marry Romeo rather than Paris.

Question 5*

5* To what extent does Shakespeare suggest the love of Romeo and Juliet is fantasy rather than realistic?

Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

Most candidates wrote well-structured responses in which they systematically argued for their love being fantasy and then for it being realistic before presenting their personal conclusion. Many understood the tension between the idealistic, poetic way the young lovers expressed themselves early on and the harsher realities that emerged later. Most candidates acknowledged the contextual factor, with some directly referencing the different reactions of a modern audience compared to Shakespeare's contemporary audience. This was particularly well-handled weighing up expectations surrounding marriage and family honour and responsibilities. Most responses seemed to focus predominantly on Romeo and his 'impulsiveness', as well as his introduction as being besotted by Rosaline, suggesting fickleness, lack of reliability and a tendency towards fantasy. However, there were some nicely balanced responses which noted Juliet's equally impetuous nature and referred to the encounter between Juliet and Friar Lawrence in the 2023 paper extract for well-analysed support.

Less successful responses demonstrated confusion over what kinds of fantasy and reality are worth exploring; some candidates took it at face value and argued that "things like this would never happen in real life" which didn't allow them to access the full range of the criteria and dig into AO2 and resulted in rather truncated answers. In some, there was uncertainty as to whether it was the love itself which was fantasy or realistic or Shakespeare's presentation of it.

The question enabled candidates to show off their knowledge of a wide range of characters and moments in the play, and explored how, considering the attitudes of the time, there was no way either of the protagonists could have imagined that pursuing their love was anything other than a self-deluding exercise. The quality of discursive writing and independent thinking was evident in responses which looked at the Nurse and Friar Lawrence. These candidates argued that in acting as 'fantasy' parents, they were irresponsible in encouraging Romeo and Juliet's relationship, some suggesting that the Nurse and Friar Lawrence were living out fantasies of their own. Many candidates referred to the prologue and the swift turnaround of Romeo's affection from Rosaline to Juliet. The most successful responses identified links between fate, the stars, how Romeo compares Juliet to the sun (with one seeing it as 'heliocentric') and a kind of fantasy of being 'in love' leading to the grim reality of double suicide.

Those that believed it to be more realistic did comment that love at first sight can happen and that this was a contrast to Romeo's love for Rosaline. They referred to the young lovers' desire to enjoy their courtship and defer reality for as long as possible. The religious language Romeo uses about Juliet and her statements "I'll no longer be a Capulet" and "It was the nightingale, and not the lark" appeared in many answers.

Overall, most candidates showed some awareness of how the real world impinged on their fantasy, showing how little chance Romeo and Juliet's love really had in the light of Mercutio and Tybalt's deaths, Romeo's banishment and the Friar's letter not reaching Romeo.

Question 6*

- 6*** Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents love in this play. Refer to this extract from Act 2 Scene 9 and elsewhere in the play. **[40]**

This question enabled candidates to consider a range of 'versions' of love, from romance to friendship to lust to inevitably doomed. Most candidates understood the way the servant and Nerissa build up Portia's anticipation of Bassanio's arrival, especially in the light of her disappointment with the first two suitors failing the casket test. Many candidates used the extract as an introduction to the theme of love in general ("Cupid", "Lord Love") as well as the relationship between Portia and Bassanio specifically. Higher-level responses analysed the ways in which Shakespeare describes the attractive qualities of Bassanio's ambassador with the 'gifts of rich value' and the imagery of April as the forerunner of Spring. Some considered the way Portia is set up as a prize for Bassanio, with reference to patriarchal attitudes to women and marriage. Less successful responses struggled to locate the extract accurately within the play's narrative and found the perspective of the unnamed servant and Nerissa difficult to interpret, however all had something to say about the nature of Portia and Bassanio's relationship, some being critical of the values on which it is based.

In moving to the wider text, successful responses considered love in the way Bassanio describes Portia to Antonio and his need for money, a further test of love between these friends. Many connected the extract with Bassanio betraying Portia by giving away the ring. In addition to writing about the love between Antonio and Bassanio, some seeing this as platonic friendship and others as homoerotic, a few candidates chose to consider the different challenges faced by Jessica and Lorenzo in their pursuit of love.

Other responses focused exclusively on Bassanio and Portia's romantic relationship, often missing other important expressions of love in the play, such as Antonio's loyalty or the comic subplots. As a result, these answers sometimes lacked breadth and depth, relying heavily on plot summary rather than exploring Shakespeare's methods or intentions.

The most successful responses noted how love is constantly 'tested' in the play providing a very perceptive counterpoint to the initial presentation of love in the extract. Other equally strong approaches weighed up the complexities of love with insightful contrasts of Bassanio and Portia - socially accepted - and Lorenzo & Jessica which is not. They considered not only the fractured parent/child relationships between Shylock & Jessica, but more subtly Portia and her father, and even more perceptively Launcelot Gobbo & Old Gobbo.

Other successful responses focused on Christian love and the double standards where the Jews were concerned. The question also provided ample opportunity to discuss context in detail such as societal expectations regarding women and the transactional nature of relationships.

Question 7*

- 7* How does Bassanio's relationship with Antonio influence the way the play develops?
Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

The question invites candidates to reflect objectively on the way that Shakespeare deliberately crafts the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio to impact the plot development of the play. Most candidates had a good knowledge and understanding of how Antonio supports Bassanio in his pursuit of love, to the extent that he is prepared to risk his life for him through the bond with Shylock. Successful responses focused on Shakespeare's presentation of the relationship and the influence the relationship had on the development of the play, evaluating its impact on the courtship between Portia and Bassanio, the bond, court scene and the finale of the play. The strongest analysed language, for example the metaphor of archery that Bassanio uses to persuade Antonio to lend him money, stating, 'I urge this childhood proof/Because what follows is pure innocence.' Most responses considered the inequality of the relationship, some quoting Bassanio's confession that 'I have engaged my friend to his mere enemy' and stating that he is 'worse than nothing.' These responses explored the building tension, with the court scene and ring plot, but some lost focus on the question and made straightforward comparisons with other relationships in the play.

Less successful responses stated what would not happen without Antonio and Bassanio's relationship or gave a narrative account of events which took place as a result. While they made use of some supporting textual references, this approach often lacked AO2 and made only passing references to context.

The idea of Antonio having unrequited romantic feelings for Bassanio was generally well-handled. There were some good contextual references to the ways in which the contemporary audience would have reacted to their relationship in the light of attitudes to homosexuality. Other insightful and, at times perceptive AO3, referred to Antonio demonstrating Christian principles of love in potentially sacrificing his life for his friend or – as one candidate commented – male friendships were encouraged at the time because 'women were deemed to be incapable of complex thought.'

Question 8*

- 8* How does Shakespeare present the dangers of knowing too much about the future? Refer to this extract from Act 5 Scene 5 and elsewhere in the play. [40]

Most candidates found the extract accessible, understanding how Macbeth's aggressive reaction to the messenger stems from fear and his realisation that the witches are equivocators. The direct repetition of the witches' earlier prophecy provided a natural link to encounters with them elsewhere in the play, in particular the initial meeting and prophecy that Macbeth will be 'king hereafter.' Less attention was generally given to the later encounter which included the apparitions which was the extract in 2023. Many responses explored the equivocating nature of the witches' language, 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' often seeing how it was mirrored by Macbeth's statement, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' showing how corrupted he and Lady Macbeth were by the promises of the prophecies.

Successful responses showed understanding that knowing the future has brought very little benefit to Macbeth and, at the end of the play, he only has his strength to depend on. Some saw the rhyming couplet, 'Come wind, come wrack/At least we'll die with harness on our back' as a last heroic attempt by Macbeth to control his future and others that it is the desperate statement by a man who recognises he has lost everything that he and Lady Macbeth desired. The strongest linked his 'I gin to be aweary of the sun' to his despair and desire for an end to life also seen in his 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow speech.'

Less successful responses were uncertain as to why Macbeth was so angry with the messenger or thought that Macbeth had ordered the woods to move. They gave a straightforward narrative account of his visits to the witches and what Macbeth did to retain the crown because of his belief in what they told him about the future.

Most candidates incorporated relevant context such as Jacobean fears of witchcraft, and how Shakespeare would be pleasing his patron, James 1 by revealing their evil influence on Macbeth. Other relevant context included the religious nature of Shakespeare's audience with the idea that knowledge of the future should be in the hands of God. Some of these referred to the Divine Right of Kings, and that the prophecies about the future lead him to commit regicide. High level AO3 also included references to Banquo who will 'get kings though thou be none' which led Macbeth to attempt the murder of him and Fleance, some commenting further on how this would also be received by James 1 who is believed to be a descendant of Banquo. This was often linked to the virtuous way Banquo understands that the witches are equivocators, citing his advice that 'the instrument of darkness tell us truths' and recognising that Macbeth is intrigued by them.

Question 9*

9* 'He has none of the qualities of a true king.'

To what extent do you agree that this is how Shakespeare portrays Macbeth? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

All candidates were able to offer a judgement about whether what Macbeth said and did in any chosen moment exemplified kingly behaviour or not. The "how far do you agree" stem made the question accessible across the mark range. Most candidates identified what they felt to be the qualities of a king, either in an opening thesis statement or as they explored specific scenes. Many chose to start their analysis in Act 1 scene 2 by discussing how Macbeth appeared to have nobility and loyalty by defeating a traitor in battle in support of Duncan before he was influenced by the witches and Lady Macbeth into killing his king. They followed the downward spiral of Macbeth's character, with some referring to the dramatic structure of a Greek tragedy.

Successful responses explored Shakespeare's use of Duncan and Malcolm as dramatic foils, analysing how they possess the kingly virtues that Macbeth lacks. Many of these referred to Macbeth's dagger speech to show that he knows he is committing regicide by killing the divinely appointed king who 'Hath borne in his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels. Some compared Duncan's faith and seeming naivety to Macbeth's increasing paranoia and even to Malcolm's testing of Macduff to test his loyalty. Higher-level responses compared Malcolm's wisdom and compassion with Macbeth's cruelty and violence, some seeing how this was evident in his bloodthirsty killing of the Thane of Cawdor. Many highlighted how Macbeth brings chaos and fear to Scotland and Malcolm restores calm and security as he brings Macbeth's rule to an end. Examiners were very impressed with the wide-ranging nature of candidates' responses and the quantity of well-selected textual references they used to support their argument. Candidates at all levels made some comment on the language and often structure, often quoting the repeated references to 'horror' in Macduff's reaction to finding Duncan's body, which was the extract in 2024. A few candidates also referred to Banquo who will 'get kings' and how this led Macbeth to plan his murder and that of his son, Fleance. They contrasted Banquo's recognition that the 'instrument of darkness tell us truths' with Macbeth's willingness to believe the witches' prophecies.

Some less successful responses focused more on Lady Macbeth with a brief tenuous link to the question, for example that her flaws are proof that Macbeth is too weak to be a king and that he could not control his wife. They showed other uncertainties about kingly virtues, some arguing that Macbeth's reaction to Banquo's ghost showed him to be a coward and therefore not fit to be king. Lower-level responses often described Macbeth's negative actions, adding that a king would not do these things, with limited commentary on how Shakespeare presents his character.

Most responses used some relevant context, discussing the Divine Right of Kings (some mentioning James 1 work, Basilikon Doron, Great Chain of Being) and attitudes to the supernatural. As in Question 8, they often wrote about the way Shakespeare wished to please his patron, James I, by presenting regicide and working with the supernatural as inherently evil, a few referring to the Gunpowder plot. Some candidates also mentioned how James 1 was believed to be a descendant of Banquo, who is presented in a positive light. The most successful integrated this context naturally into their discursive writing.

Exemplar 3

9	In Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', Shakespeare portrays Macbeth throughout as the antithesis of what a King should be. In the Jacobean society, the king was someone who was chosen by god, and by going against this, it means Macbeth could never be the true king. It is also seen portrayed that Macbeth does not bring good to his country, but but rather suffering, ^{and corruption} suggesting he does not have the qualities of a king, such as valuing your country over yourself going about it. Towards the end of his soliloquy, Macbeth there is a bell and Macbeth states 'hear it not Duncan', 'for it is a knell'. A knell references a bell that is symbolised for a death, which shows how Macbeth is acknowledging the gravity of his actions, and what in his unwavering ambition involves. Despite this, his willingness to go ahead with the act, proves that Macbeth will never be able to be considered as a 'true king'. The Jacobean society was highly religious, and most worshipped god and ^{which} The Divine Right of Kings, recognised that the true king was one who is chosen by god, and by committing regicide, not only is Macbeth stealing the kingship that does not belong to him - as he was not chosen by god - but is also committing an attack against god. By killing god murdering god's earthly deputy, Macbeth is condemning himself to hell, and attracting deep hatred from both other characters and the viewing audience.
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This response to Question 9 on *Macbeth* demonstrates skills in writing a thesis for a discursive essay in the opening paragraph and goes on to integrate contextual understanding which informs the evaluation of the play.

Assessment for learning



Candidates should be taught the whole play, building a secure knowledge and understanding of the characters, plot and themes before they work on examination technique. Some candidates have clearly learned 'exam-useful' quotes, but when they are used out of context, misremembered, or misunderstood, they lead to responses in the lower levels.

Working with Shakespeare needs to be genuinely active so that candidates can actually see the full stage picture and appreciate *why* the characters do and say what they do. National Theatre productions are free for most centres and the RSC resource packs are very effective, including storyboarding to help candidates understand how the play develops. The other simple, but effective activity is the motivation map. You can do it like a mind map for individual characters or as a grid for the whole play. It simply maps which scenes characters appear in and what they're trying to achieve in each scene. The whole play grid version develops into a great classroom display for visualising when characters actually appear on stage together and when their wants/needs/motivations align or conflict with other characters. It's great for then getting scenes back up on their feet as they worry less about what the characters' words mean (and feel that the text needs 'translating') and focus much more on what the characters are trying to do with those words - that sharpens an appreciation of Shakespeare's choices of those.

Question 10*

10* Explore how Beatrice's 'merry war' with Benedick is presented in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Refer to this extract from Act 1 Scene 1 and elsewhere in the play. **[40]**

Most candidates enjoy the opportunity to write about Beatrice and Benedick's relationship and have studied the text in considerable detail. They showed understanding of the way this opening scene sets up the 'merry war' between Beatrice and Benedick, with most commenting to some extent on Leonato's dramatic role. The extract provided opportunities for candidates to consider the tone of Beatrice's interest in Benedick, analysing the imagery of disease that she uses in professing sympathy for Claudio as his companion. Many saw her concerted attack on Benedick as evidence that she is more interested in him than she wants to appear, referring to the melodramatic claim to 'burn my study' if he was in her 'books' and the crushing attack on his lack of constancy, which changes at the 'fashion of his hat.' As the opening scene of the play, candidates often started with the extract and moved outwards to analyse the direct encounters between Beatrice and Benedick elsewhere in the play.

Many candidates could confidently quote and analyse the ways in which their relationship develops and had a strong appreciation of the characters' interactions, evaluating the cumulative impact of their 'merry war' as opposed to considering isolated insults. Many candidates linked the merry war with AO3 and societal expectations around both women and marriage itself, with stronger responses drawing on the contrast with Hero. Many candidates recognised not only the comedic effect of their banter, but also the deeper affection between them, appreciating the 'merry war' as a self-defence mechanism.

Less successful responses showed limited knowledge of the text and a less confident grasp of the play's comedic tone and social context. Some less successful responses struggled with decoding Beatrice's insults in the extract and were unsure of how to link this to the question.

Context was often generic (e.g., "women had no rights"), and few made meaningful connections to the play's comedic form or genre conventions.

Question 11*

11* 'People in love can behave foolishly.'

To what extent do you agree with this view of lovers in *Much Ado About Nothing*? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas. [40]

There were very few responses to the discursive question on *Much Ado About Nothing* and so the feedback is limited in scope. Most candidates focused on the foolishness in Claudio and Hero and saw their relationship as a counterpoint to the banter between Benedick and Beatrice. They contrasted the promising start to Hero and Claudio's relationship with the ease with which he denounces her, often citing the metaphor of a 'rotten orange.' The ease with which he is taken in by Don John's plot was seen as evidence of his folly, however some of the higher-level responses felt that it went beyond foolish behaviour to something sinister and cruel. The discussion of Hero and Claudio's relationship was often linked to expectations of the Jacobean period of both women and marriage and how in Hero and Beatrice we see both the epitome of that view and its opposite. There was also some interesting referencing of Margaret and Borachio and them getting embroiled in the treachery. For one candidate, the foolishness of the lovers highlighted the pathos of Don Pedro who remains alone at the end of the play.

Many candidates saw the 'merry war' between Beatrice and Benedick as evidence that 'People in love can behave foolishly', as they both profess an intention never to marry and disdain for each other until they are tricked into declaring their real feelings. Some made effective use of the extract provided for Question 10 and, where it is relevant, there is nothing in the rubric to prevent them doing so.

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