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## Examiners' Report January 2010

### GCE English Literature 6EL03

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## Unit 3 (6EL03): Varieties in Language and Literature

This unit comprises the examined component of A2 Language and Literature. Students are expected to apply their skills and knowledge of literary and linguistic concepts gained in the AS units, as well as wider reading, to explore varieties of language and literature. They need to synthesise their learning and make observations about how language works across a spectrum of written and spoken production. They choose one of four topic areas and answer two corresponding questions: one on an unseen extract in Section A and one on two prepared texts in Section B.

**Section A** involves the analysis of one unseen extract. Candidates are expected to present a continuous commentary on the writer's or speaker's choice of structure, form and language and draw conclusions on attitudes, values and ideas conveyed in the text.

**Section B** assesses candidates' knowledge of the contribution made by contextual factors to the understanding of either two chosen drama texts or two chosen poetry texts. Students are expected to compare writers' use of linguistic and literary devices.

### Section A

#### Question 1

This question required candidates to write an extended critical analysis of an unseen extract corresponding to their choice of topic (A Sense of Place, The Individual in Society, Love and Loss or Family Relationships). A maximum of 10 marks at AO1 and 30 marks at AO2 were available. Family Relationships proved to be the most popular topic choice (probably because of the drama texts available in Section B), whilst A Sense of Place was the least popular.

Writing an integrated critical response is very demanding but the majority of candidates seemed well prepared for this question. The best answers were where students had clearly spent time reading the unprepared text through closely - trying to understand the writer's aims, the tone, the implied values and the overall structure - before beginning to write. There is in fact plenty of time for candidates to read and re-read the extract, before planning their answers. It is important to get to the core meaning of the text and then branch out, analysing a variety of linguistic and literary features. Higher band students organised their discussions by aspects (genre, audience, purpose, etc.), rather than trawling through the text bit by bit. This enabled them to explore the writers' attitudes and values in a convincing manner. Many lower band answers worked chronologically through the pieces, offering paragraph-by-paragraph explanations of the content. Some students presented a check-list of linguistic features but neglected to explore their relevance to the meaning of the text.

### General observations on responses to each topic area:

#### A Sense of Place

Mark Steel's column presented the greatest challenge, with students finding it difficult to go beyond generalisations about the humour: it would have helped to quote shorter individual phrases and spend time trying to pinpoint more precisely how the effects had been achieved. Some candidates were not secure when discussing the potential readership of broadsheet newspapers and offered generalisations about "the upper classes". Many missed the humour of the Mark Steel article.

#### The Individual and Society

The account of the hanging encouraged a number of answers which discussed reader's responses to the diary form looked closely at religious lexis. However, none noticed the double standards of Skinner's disapproval of the situation combined with his unhealthy interest in the gruesome details. Some higher band answers were able to discuss attitudes and values effectively, especially in relation to the crowd at the hanging.

#### Love and Loss

Responses to the Wharton diary were able to identify the formal/legal tone of the letter and comment on its potential readership. There were some especially perceptive responses to the Edith Wharton, with recognition of the ambivalent attitudes of Wharton to "Teddy" and shifts in tone during the course of the letter, also the constraints imposed by having two recipients/ audiences.

#### Family Relationships

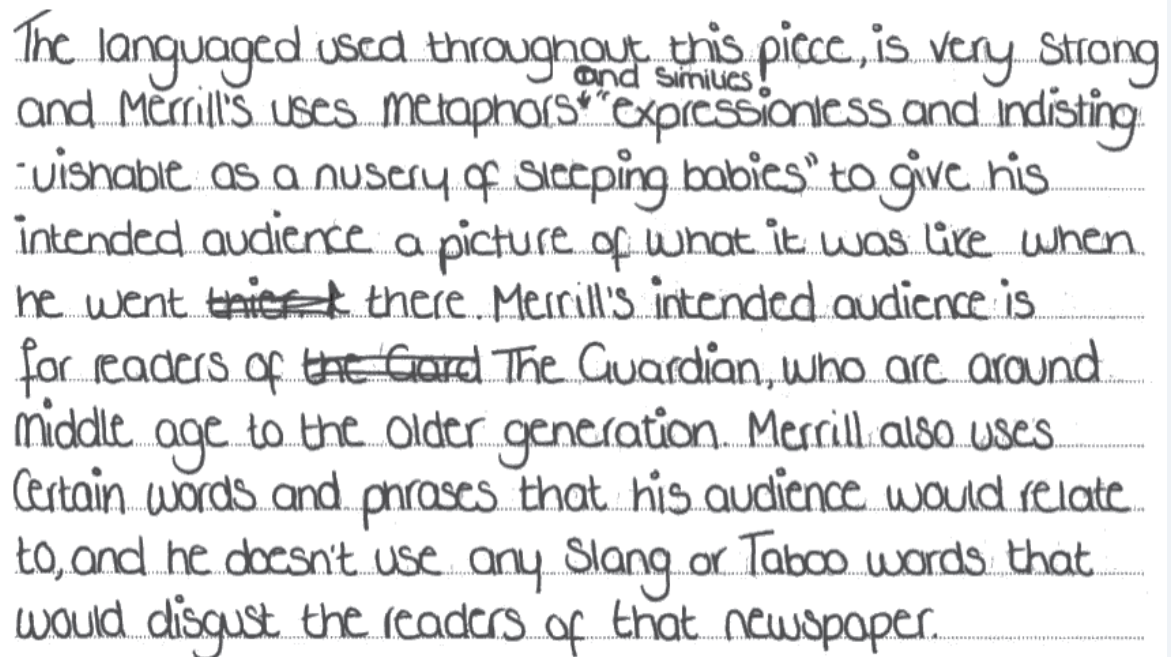
The Block piece allowed some candidates to use the fact of the writer being a novelist to discuss the literary nature of the piece and analyse the dual perspective of the remembered and remembering self. Higher band answers showed an enthusiasm for the writer's use of figurative language but lower band responses tended to make generalised observations about the atmosphere of the home.

At AO1 successful responses were fluently-written and used embedded quotations to good effect. They confidently identified linguistic features and were able to show how writers had used them to convey attitudes and values.

Here is an example of an answer that achieved a Band 3 score for AO1:

In addition, the main theme is continued by repetition of 'old'. This reinforces the idea of decay and the phrase 'indistinguishable as a nursery of sleeping babies' suggests that the older generation are as vulnerable as new borns, yet are not paid specific attention to. The pre-modifier 'indistinguishable' brings our attention to this and is possibly an attack on society to deal with this issue. The writer is trying to alert our attention to our social responsibility and moral obligation to those that cannot take care of themselves.

On the other hand, lower band answers were more inclined to make vague observations. They may have identified relevant linguistic or literary devices but neglected to explore their significance to the text as a whole. Here is an example of an answer that was awarded a Band 1 score:



The language used throughout this piece, is very strong and Merrill's uses metaphors <sup>and similes</sup> "expressionless and indistinguishable as a nursery of sleeping babies" to give his intended audience a picture of what it was like when he went ~~there~~ there. Merrill's intended audience is for readers of ~~the~~ ~~Guard~~ The Guardian, who are around middle age to the older generation. Merrill also uses certain words and phrases that his audience would relate to, and he doesn't use any slang or taboo words that would disgust the readers of that newspaper.

When discussing audience, it is more productive for students to consider how the reader is positioned by the text (e.g. how they might react to certain attitudes or ideas), than to make generalised assumptions about the likely age or social grouping of the target audience. The latter approach does not offer an opportunity to fully explore the writer's style or technique.

At AO2 successful responses explored a range of linguistic and structural features. Higher band students discussed writers' attitudes and values confidently and supported observations with appropriate exemplification. The most effective answers were written in a fluent, concise style and quotations were usually short, focused and smoothly embedded in the commentary.

The following excerpt is drawn from a response which was placed in the top band for AO2. The candidate has made perceptive observations about the writer's attitudes towards the place he is visiting, as well as commenting concisely on the structure of the text:

The writer is intending to inform the reader of his childhood experiences, and in doing so delivers the thoughts and feelings of his remembered self, reflecting on the naivety of children, writing, "I think of flowers and teddy bears and seascapes." His remembered observations also link to this, as young children may not gauge the full significance and meaning of events, but remember colours and textures; the stimuli which surround them. This is reflected in his recollection of the <sup>atmosphere and</sup> appearance of the building, as he describes the "large steel letters" and the "tranquil, humming corridors", although it has been described as such by his adult self.

Block uses the present tense, writing "my mother clutches my arm" in an attempt to engage the reader and bring them into the moment which his remembering self is recalling. As the writer was very young in the event he is describing, it is clear that the significance of the events which were occurring had not entirely been understood by his younger self, and that this understanding has been obtained after later reflection. This is demonstrated by the fact that he reveals, "I don't think that I'm about to meet my great uncle, before he dies," showing the ignorance which accompanies childhood innocence.

The following excerpt is drawn from a response that falls into the mid-range of achievement. There is some exploration of the writer's attitudes but comments lack precision and textual support. The candidate has elected to discuss the extract in a chronological fashion, which tends to restrict an analytical approach to attitudes, values and ideas:

The Article then takes a turn for the general and imaginative. The writer shows his attitudes towards the way the youth are taught the ways the British conquered all. He directly intertwines the idea of dinosaurs and WWII to demonstrate the ways it can compare a child to learn all these airbrushed facts. The mention of D-Day is also important as it was mainly the US who fought that day. The writer is demonstrating that the way Britain has become we feel we were involved in every single big event in the history of man.

## Section B

### Questions 2-5

This section required candidates to write a critical comparison of two prepared texts. The drama texts were chosen by the majority of students in all four topic areas. Generally, essays were unbalanced, with students having to work hard to address the three different AOs. If AO1 was covered well, then AO3 was virtually ignored, and as this carried the greatest proportion of marks some clearly able students came out with a low overall score. Aspects such as structure and form (AO2) were least well addressed, as if teaching had focused on the linguistic side and on context; by contrast, some answers were still adhering to the profile of an English Literature response, with excellent comment on set, music, structure, imagery but little use of specifically linguistic analysis/terminology.

#### General observations about responses to each topic area:

##### A Sense of Place

This was the least popular topic and no students opted for the poetry texts. A few candidates had an excellent grasp of the Translations and, if so, the question was a gift, with the effect of the English occupation on Ireland as presented through issues of place name change, education, language and relationships offering so much. Only one managed to apply the question to *Stuff Happens* with any confidence and detail: students seemed confused about whether to consider Iraq, or the USA or Blair and his government. In truth students just seemed confused about the play itself with vague notions about the issues and events (one referred to Afghanistan throughout). While most had been prepared a bit on Hare's use of language, few were able to include dramatic techniques, with little sense that this was a stage play or that it was structured (a problem with *Translations*, surprisingly), so scores on AO2 were low.

##### The Individual and Society

The question lent itself to AO3 in terms of context of composition, although some also considered first performance and (for Shakespeare) difference in past and present reception. Students addressed "hostile world" by looking at 17th century Venice, racism etc., although some demonstrated an insecure view of Othello's own race and position (slavery figured in several answers). Some answers argued that Iago was part of the hostile world, others that Iago weaves a fictional hostile environment round the naïve Othello, in contradiction to the civilised Venetian society. The danger here is the temptation to discuss Iago instead of exploring the world of the play. *Equus* caused more difficulty: a few considered 70s materialism and commercialism, differing approaches to religion, attitudes to psychiatry etc., but many saw Alan as having just provoked hostility by his crime against the horses. The best answers tried to compare the experiences and situations of Othello and Alan, with their two "crimes", the killing of Desdemona and the blinding of the horses, offering a fascinating challenge. A surprising few included the physical presentation of the "horses" and staging of *Equus*, despite Shaffer's insistence on this as vital. A considerable number of students referred to recent productions of the plays, which helped them to address contextual factors.

### Love and Loss

The plays and the question encouraged successful comparison and contrast across all three AOs. The contrasting language and attitudes to love (and different types of love) were especially fruitful but also structure (memory play and reverse chronology). However, few spent time explaining or demonstrating the distinctive “Pinteresque” features of *Betrayal*: for example, they often mentioned the Pinter pause, but rarely showed how it worked. Not many answers explored the dramatic possibilities offered by the reversed chronology of the plot. Several treated *Betrayal* as a story - confusing the start/end of the affair and the start/end of the play itself. Students were generally much more secure with *The Glass Menagerie*: they were confident when discussing a range of dramatic features and were keen to explore the possibilities offered by the narrator. However, AO3 was almost wholly confined to the two playwright’s personal histories, often tacked on at the start of the answer and subsequently ignored - a few included the original performances, or the very middle-class literary-London context of the Pinter.

A few students answered on the poetry texts but they tended to contrast Plath and the Metaphysicals in fairly simple terms: her cynical and sad attitudes; their ideas of eternity because of religion. Some candidates demonstrated a very insecure grasp of period for the Metaphysicals, and context on Plath was confined to Ted Hughes and “confessional poetry”, with no explanation of what this might be.

### Family Relationships

The two plays work extremely well together and offer students the opportunity to explore a number of interesting links. However, it is surprising that more students had not been prepared on the theme of past events: a considerable number of candidates seemed to lose sight of the question, preferring to demonstrate their knowledge of the texts, and some lower band answers seemed to be working out their response on the spot, especially with *A Doll’s House*. Higher band answers discussed the roles of women in society and were able to make convincing links with language features, but context was not always adequately addressed, despite being so rich for both plays. Many did not even mention Norway for the Ibsen, with just a vague reference to “Victorian” marriages. With *All my Sons*, higher band answers mentioned the attitudes of Post-War America but quite a few answers became submerged in details of the relationships between the characters.

There is a maximum of 10 marks available for AO1 and successful responses expressed ideas in a fluent manner, using a range of appropriate linguistic and literary terminology. The following extract is from an answer that was placed in the top band of this assessment objective:

Torvald's attitudes are also portrayed as he talks about Krogstad's morally corrupt past "an atmosphere of lies contaminates and poisons every corner of the home" The figurative language and the use of negative adjective phrases conveys his strong attitudes of disdain to deception and crime. This Torvald's perception of Krogstad's personage is a prolepsis of how ~~is~~ deception through crime will effect from the past will effect his relationship with Nora.



A number of answers provided a fluent discussion of the texts but students neglected to use the appropriate terminology. The following extract is from an answer that falls into the middle band for AO1:

Othello's threat from the hostile world comes from his race and his easy manipulation by Iago. Everybody, besides Desdemona is against him from the start because of him being the moor and also an instance where he hits Desdemona in front of Iodanica which 'would not ~~be~~ believed in Venice'. His downfall is 'the green eyed monster' of jealousy.

Here, the student has made relevant observations in a clear manner, supporting them with embedded quotations, but could have used more specific terminology.

There is a maximum of 10 marks available for AO2 and successful responses were able to show a good appreciation of possibilities offered by the dramatic form, make sophisticated comments about structure and analyse language effectively. This extract from a top band answer shows the candidate's ability to provide an integrated study of the structure of a drama text:

In "All my Son's" the past is revealed within the dramatic structure of the play as the arrival of Anne and George act as catalyst in which over a day relationships are destroyed. The theme of money is central to family conflict, as does past profiteering in the war is exposed as criminal. Similarly in "All my Son's" Joe hypocritical comments acts as a prolepsis for his own wrong doing "he's a little man" ~~this attitude of Joe has~~ the use of the diminutive little ~~actually is~~ conveys Joe's attitude that he believe he has a higher reputation to Steve as he has not yet been caught for his past actions.

Lower band answers demonstrated knowledge and understanding of texts but neglected to provide a detailed study. The following extract is taken from an answer which was placed in the bottom band at AO2 because, despite showing an awareness of form, the student only provided a limited critical awareness of key features:

Although a poem, 'The wife of Bath' prologue is said as a story. It is told ~~on~~ while on a pilgrimage which seems quite ironic, given the way the ~~wife~~ speaker talks and what she talks about, 'Husbands at chiche dre I have had fy.re.' It isn't something you would expect to be spoken about at a pilgrimage.

With 40 marks out of 60 on offer for AO3, it is vital that candidates draw close links between their two chosen texts and demonstrate a confident knowledge of a range of contextual factors. Higher band answers showed a sophisticated appreciation of the contexts of production and reception and made original comparisons between the two texts. However, there was often a tendency to provide an imbalanced discussion of context, favouring one text ahead of another, or to focus on a limited range of factors.

The following extract is taken from an answer that was placed in the top band for AO3:

In A dolls house, it can be seen through Nora's dialogue that Torvald values his reputation over his relationships "it'd be painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed me anything. It'd completely wreck our relationship." The negative adjectives "painful", "humiliating", "wreck" give a strong strong portrayal that Tor of Torvald's values, that he is very ethical and values societies social constructions. This emphasises the social context Torvald's values emphasise the social context of the play that male and female roles were ~~se~~ separate.

Here, the candidate has provided an integrated discussion, cleverly using the reference to money to link the plays, making relevant comments on social context and analysing appropriate textual references.

Some answers showed confident knowledge of the context of reception and provided detailed commentaries on recent productions. However, they became distracted from the question and forgot to make links with linguistic and literary features of the texts. The following extract, from a middle band AO3 answer illustrates this point:

In many productions of the play, 'Othello', the title character has been portrayed in many different ways, with actors such as, Lawrence Olivier, Patrick Stewart and Orson Welles. Some contextual changes made there as two of those actors are white. Specifically in 'Othello' with Patrick Stewart where the rest of the cast was black creating a 'photo negative' effect which leaves the audience feeling like the other 'outsiders'. The most recent production in 2009 however, starred Lenny Henry and Conrad Nelson, Lenny Henry being a well known comedian immediately had sympathy ~~with~~ from the audience. Nelson's Iago, described as 'reptilian' was also well accepted as the villain; receiving boo's upon his curtain call.

General points for centres to bear in mind when preparing for future examination series:

- Students need to spend time reading and re-reading the unseen text, and planning their answers carefully
- Students should organise their discussions around key aspects of the unseen texts, rather than present a chronological commentary
- Students need to develop detailed knowledge of a wide range of contextual factors
- Students need to give equal weight to both of their chosen texts.

## Grade Boundaries

Paper No.	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E	N
01	100	75	64	54	44	34	24

**Note:** Grade boundaries may vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the question paper.

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