



Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback
October 2020

Pearson Edexcel Advanced Level
In English Literature (9ET0)
Paper 1: Drama

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Introduction

This was a very unusual series. Examiners did not see the range of responses that would be expected in a full summer series, but the majority of candidates were able to approach the paper with some confidence and were able to offer close readings of their texts and to locate their responses in appropriate literary and social contexts.

However, what was also clear is that many of the students had not had recent practice under timed conditions and timing appeared to be an issue in quite a few instances. There was also more evidence of a higher percentage of candidates relying on prepared essays than would normally be expected. In addition, there were more than usual responses not rooted in either the text or the question.

These latter features of candidate performance were of course to be expected in this year's extraordinary circumstances: one candidate, for example, voiced his sorrow that his class had not been able to finish *King Lear* before lockdown. Under the circumstances, candidates performed very well.

Overall, issues where performance was weak were similar to those in previous series. Some responses were not able to move beyond fairly general comment on the writer's craft and thus did not have access to the higher levels on AO2 which requires evidence of clear and detailed understanding of how writers use language to make meaning in texts. The loose connections as to how the writer has created meaning resulted in rather generalised arguments, offering personal rather than analytical responses to the questions. In general, these students needed to be reminded of the importance of the key words 'presents' and 'presentation' in questions.

Another area of relative weakness was where candidates failed to use contextual material to provide depth of critique in response to the question. In many cases this information was merely reported verbatim or quoted without being tied clearly and relevantly to both the text and the question.

Where candidates achieved higher levels, contextual links were stronger and used to focus directly onto the question.

SECTION A: Shakespeare

The majority of responses were on *Othello* and *Hamlet* with a few on *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*.

The questions in this section offered a choice between a broad theme (on death, honour, relationships, love respectively) or a more focussed question on an individual character (Claudius, Malvolio) or feature, such as imagery. The broad questions allowed confident, well-prepared students to access the higher levels on the AOs. If you know the play well, you can answer such questions. The *Othello* question on honour appeared to tempt some candidates simply to write character studies rather than look at the nature of honour as something essential or constructed or applied by others. Some candidates fared well on the more character-based questions – but quite a few failed to move beyond 'clear and relevant' on these. A discriminator, as ever, was whether candidates responded to a question's invitation to comment on presentation and on Shakespeare as dramatist rather than mere character study.

In this restricted series, very few candidates reached the highest levels on AO5 and a significant number seemed to forget to engage with at all with critical ideas. Again, this is perhaps an inevitable result of the unusual circumstances under which these papers were taken.

Question 3

Hamlet

The question asked about the presentation of Claudius.

This was the more popular *Hamlet* question. Most responses tended to be assessed around the top of Level 3, i.e. not moving much beyond a worthy character study of Claudius.

Question 4

Hamlet

The question asked about death.

Fewer candidates chose this but performance was better than on Q3. The best responses shaped convincing arguments and ranged confidently across the text. There was some strong performance here on AO5 where critical arguments are explored in some depth. Here is the opening of a higher level response where the candidate explored the theme of death in relation to Shakespeare's dramatic intent:

The theme of death in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' plays a pivotal role in transforming and catalysing the plot, helping explore the ambiguity of King Hamlet's death and unravelling future consequences due to revenge for death. Hamlet's father's death allows for the exploration of Claudius' character and also Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude and Claudius. Ophelia's death enables the trigger of Laertes leading to the tragic destruction of both families in 'Hamlet'...

Question 5

King Lear

The question asked about family relationships.

All candidates chose this question on *King Lear*. Performance was mixed, with weaker responses simply describing the family dynamic and stronger answers showing a sound grasp of critical argument around the play, with Rutter, O'Toole, Kermode and Dollimore being cited most often.

Question 7

Othello

The question asked about the use of imagery.

A range of responses were seen here, though few were at Level 5. Those at the lower end were descriptive in the main, showing limited understanding of Shakespeare's intent, and relying instead on explaining individual images in their own words. Some techniques were identified but mainly surface readings were offered and candidates seemed to struggle to engage with critical ideas around this topic. At the upper range responses showed a controlled, clearly-organised argument around patterns of imagery and their function on the text.

Question 8

Othello

The question asked about honour.

This was the most popular question on this section. Generally, candidates appeared to know the text well and ranged confidently across it. Weaker responses struggled to stay with the topic of honour. Some appeared to re-hash responses to a previous question on 'reputation' and this was not always successful. References to critics were sustained but not always developed in detail. Loomba, Leavis and Coleridge were referred to most often. Here is the opening paragraph of a response that was placed at low Level 3 by examiners. It is clear and there's a sense of a dramatist at work but it is essentially character-driven and lacks a nuanced argument:

Shakespeare presents the theme of honour in Othello as lacking among characters which eventually leads to their death. Shakespeare uses language to show how Iago believes that Othello is undeserving of his honour. He also goes ahead to show the audience how Desdemona's attitude signifies dishonour to her father and honour to get husband. Lastly Shakespeare uses Othello's insecurity to present to the audience how he dishonours the trust upon which marriage is based on. Therefore through these methods Shakespeare has effectively presented the theme of honour as lacking among characters ...

Question 15

Twelfth Night

The question asked about the presentation of Malvolio.

Most candidates responded to this question with a strong sense of argument around Malvolio's function in the play. While weaker responses tended to offer up what seemed like pre-prepared character studies, the best answers considered his function in terms of the play's themes, genre and social contexts. Many made reference to theories of comedy and to a range of critical views.

Question 16

Twelfth Night

The question asked about love.

The less popular question. Only a few chose to do it and most responses were located around Level 3 with familiar discussion of Shakespeare's 'feminist' message about the liberation of females and so on. Stronger responses explored in detail how Shakespeare used his theme to various dramatic ends. Here is an extract from a high level response to the question. Note the sustained engagement with critical argument:

Throughout 'Twelfth Night' Shakespeare treats the theme of love as a powerful force that guides the actions of many of the characters. We see differing kinds of love dictating the actions of many different characters, with often one character being motivated by multiple kinds of love. Familial love, foolish romantic love and self-love are the primary ways in which we see Shakespeare explore the theme which, when looked at in the context of archetypes of the time, such as the Petrarchan lover and the Puritan, can be understood to serve a greater comedic purpose. Thus we see Shakespeare treat the theme of love as a force that guides, not only the characters, but much of the comedy.

The first way we can come to understand how Shakespeare treats the theme of love is the use of familial love. This love and the grief that comes from loss of family is seen to be a primary motivation for both Olivia and Viola. Schalkwyk argues that the two women are 'conjoined in the mutual depth of their loss' of both their brothers. Such an idea is evident from our first impressions of both

characters. When we first hear of Olivia, Orsino states that 'A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh / and lasting in her sad remembrance'. The juxtaposition of the ideas of 'death' and 'fresh' indicates the eternal nature of Olivia's love for her brother and suggests that it is unchanged since his death. We are given a similar first impression of Viola, whose second line in the play is "And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium". The immediate consideration of her brother, especially when contemplating how she should proceed, highlights the closeness of their relationship. Further, both characters being initially presented in the context of the death of their brothers highlights the importance of familial love to them and draws an immediate parallel between them, illustrating Schalkwyk's point.

Nonetheless, the depth of Olivia's loss is somewhat undermined when we consider her interaction with Feste. When Feste asks why she is grieving, and she responds that it's due to her brother's death, he answers, 'The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven. Take the fool away gentlemen. The contrast between referring to her both as 'madonna' and 'fool' highlights Feste's role in the household as both Olivia's servant but also as an insight into the ideas of the play. This insight, and Olivia's acceptance of it, allows us to see that while Olivia is in mourning, it is perhaps not as great as Orsino believes and reveals that the depth of her grief may not be as great as we first thought. The character of the Fool was very common in Shakespeare's plays... usually giving consistent insight into and comment on the play. Thus, this reflects how an audience at the time would have placed great value into the insight of Feste and would understand how the depth of Olivia's loss may be being exaggerated. This undermines Schalkwyk's argument, as Viola's familial love and grief are shown to be motivating forces until the end of the play...

SECTION B: Other Drama

A Streetcar Named Desire was by far the most commonly studied play, with almost three-quarters of candidates answering on it. *The Importance of Being Earnest* saw some responses and a further few had studied *Dr Faustus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Most responses were clear and showed, in the main, a good understanding of the plays. Context was addressed, but often comments were generalised and there was often not enough detailed linking between these contexts and the text itself. As has been the case in previous series, this meant that, although links were clear, they often remained at Level 3 for AO3. Students need to be reminded of the need to address context subtly and circumspectly, particularly in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Many wrote about the play as if it were merely a re-enactment of the conflict between Old South and New South, with Blanche and Stanley being merely counters ('allegorical representations' as one candidate put it) for socio-economic forces rather than rounded and complex dramatic characters.

Again, as in previous series, the best responses fully addressed the writer's craft and considered staging in their textual analysis, rather than just looking at language and dialogue. There were some good examples of this in responses to Q24.

Finally, it was clear in this section that some candidates – definitely more than usual – had struggled with timing and their responses suffered as a consequence of too long spent on the Shakespeare section.

Question 18

Dr Faustus

The question asked about the play as being about self-destruction.

There were not many responses but most got into Level 4. Candidates were confident in their arguments and could move beyond the general in discussions about context.

Question 19

The Duchess of Malfi

The question asked about minor characters.

Candidates seemed confident in respect of AO3, which underpinned answers and enhanced discussion of minor characters as key to Webster's exploration of social standing in Jacobean society.

Weaker responses showed some knowledge of the text but relied too much upon description and narration.

Question 23

A Streetcar Named Desire

The question asked about marriage.

This was the paper's most popular question and responses tended to be located around the Level 3/4 border. Arguments are usually clear and appropriate but sometimes would drift off topic or become a little repetitive. Weaker responses lacked detailed development around the play's context and struggled to stay on the topic of marriage (really wanting to write about the conflict between Blanche and Stanley).

Here is the opening of a response that was placed at the top of Level 3. There are the beginnings of a sound argument but the approach to context is quite generalised and sweeping. Higher level criteria involve 'detailed' links between the text and its context:

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams presents marriage as a tool for securing one's place in a changing society where the 'old fashioned' ideals of women being dependent on their male partners is questioned within a new American society undergoing changes in its social landscape. Blanche's desire for marriage and her dependency on kindness is criticised due to her first marriage and because of this it results in her tragic downfall in a society where she fails to adapt ...

Question 24

A Streetcar Named Desire

The question asked about the play's opening.

A broader range of responses was seen here. The question of course invited consideration of Williams' stagecraft but the best answers went beyond this and linked their analysis to the plays' overall themes and to its contexts. At the top end, arguments were controlled and covered a wider range of ideas. Weaker responses did not have enough to say about the play's opening and wandered instead into the standard Blanche v Stanley territory.

Question 25

The Importance of Being Earnest

The question asked about gender roles.

All the candidates chose this question on Wilde and most got into Level 4 at least, with articulate argument that occasionally could become inconsistent. As always with this text there was sound embedding of AO3 points. Most responses showed awareness of the writer's purpose throughout and many saw the men as equally important as the women in Wilde's subversion of stereotypes and expectations. It was good to see candidates writing about what the text offers rather than just their own preconceptions.