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Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2022

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary

In English Literature (8ET0)

Paper 1: Drama

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## **Introduction**

Despite the challenges of the past few years, for teachers and students alike, it was pleasing to see the number of students sitting the exam and producing work of such high quality that built on previous years' knowledge and experience. There was a range of responses that demonstrated students' engagement with the literary texts and produced passionate and intelligent responses to the questions. The paper is rigorous, and demands a lot of students in its two hours, and yet whilst this is the first public exam for this cohort, a majority of students were able to complete both sections in full. This is testament to both the hard work of the students and the dedication and quality teaching of their teachers to prepare the cohort for their exam.

## **Section A**

In Section A, candidates are presented with a named poem from their anthology, and they must then select a suitable poem from those they have studied with which to compare it and fulfil the demands of AO4. As part of the Advanced Information for this paper, students were given a reduced list of poems to study, which seems to have helped with the revision and preparation for this question. A majority of candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the anthology and were able to choose wisely and pertinently. The most successful responses compared throughout, developing a thesis statement and then exploring ideas in the poems to achieve a coherent, successful and well-structured comparison. These candidates were able to explore the poem as a whole, demonstrating an understanding of how form, structure and language work together to create an impact on the reader. Candidates who compared using a technique focus in discrete paragraphs were often limited by this approach and unlikely to receive more than level 3 marks. Weaker responses often fell into narrative and descriptive approaches, or lost their focus on the question through – on occasion - a poor choice of second poem. There was at times an over-reliance of word classes and linguistic terminology in place of literary terms and concepts. At other times, students resorted to feature spotting but could not effectively analyse the meaning derived from form or structure, beyond general comments on enjambment or caesuras, which could often be unconvincing and not focused on the question.

## **Section B**

In Section B, the four assessment objectives are assessed in two separate strands and candidates need to balance their content accordingly. In the majority of cases, candidates demonstrated a good understanding of relevant contextual factors and were able to include them in their answers. There was also understanding and knowledge shown of alternative readings, with a range of critical responses learned and applied to the questions. The critical statement is there to help candidates develop an argument and introduce contextual factors and alternative readings and interpretations, in light of the question. Some students focused too much on the statement and did not fully focus on the question, and at other times rarely looked at either and produced a response that had been prepared and only tangentially addressed the question focus. Nevertheless, most candidates were well-prepared for the play section of the paper and were able to balance the demands of the two separate assessment grids throughout their answer in an integrated manner. Centres are reminded that contextual factors include literary context as well as the context of production and reception. Biographical factors, whilst

interesting, often only provide students with general statements and assertions. Candidates must remember to use these details as part of their argument and to root everything in the text.

While there is no requirement to name and quote critics to fulfil the demands of AO5, those candidates who did so generally demonstrated an understanding and engagement with the play at the discriminating and critical level, particularly where they were integrated into a wider argument. Weaker responses might identify critical views, and name critics, but not use them to help develop or extend their argument. Sometimes, this felt quite rehearsed and was not rooted enough in the text or the focus of the question. Centres are reminded that candidates can very successfully cover the demands of AO5 by developing their own alternative readings and responding to the given statement, which is there to stimulate debate. More successful responses also demonstrated a range of references to the play as a whole to demonstrate the candidates' understanding of the writer's craft or how meanings are shaped. Higher level responses were from candidates who were able to cross-reference and develop a coherent answer to the question and were able to think about the plays as dramatic texts and explore their dramatic methods and impact. Weaker responses might not fully engage with the idea of characters as constructs and so miss out on the dramatic crafting of the play by the writer.

### **Question One**

This was the most popular poetry question of the two, and the most popular poem for comparison was 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled' – both poems seem to have an initial focus on literal journeys, but broaden out into much more abstract themes of metaphorical journeys and personal change. Candidates coped well with presentation of physical journeys, with most making convincing links to the psychological journeys or maturation of the speakers in each poem.

It was pleasing that most candidates made some attempt to engage with language and imagery and examiners noted there were fewer wholly generalised or descriptive responses than in previous sessions. Candidates accepted the complexities and potential ambiguities in Nagra's text and were willing to consider alternative readings more readily. The weakest candidates tended to think of adjectives describing the journey and use this to structure their comparisons. Some took a more chronological approach – which, given the conclusions drawn in both poems, was often appropriate. Some struggled to say much beyond surface reading of the Flynn pairing. There was some identification of human relationships being foregrounded but less detailed supporting evidence. Some good responses focused on the attitudes of the West towards members of other cultures, with interesting points about how these are pointed out quite openly in the named poem, but can also be revealed as underlying cultural assumptions in the speaker in 'Furthest Distances'.

Other candidates focused on metaphorical journeys. The journey into adulthood in 'An Easy Passage' – expressed around the framework of a short physical journey – elicited some good responses. Another popular choice was 'The Deliverer', where some candidates had problems: the relevance to any sort of 'journey' was difficult to find, and with both texts focusing on non-Western characters it seemed that candidates were writing on a pre-prepared text pairing writing about different cultures.

## Question Two

Although candidates seemed to find 'History' quite a challenging poem, it was encouraging to see so many attempt this question, with some very good responses read. There were successful candidates who considered the context of the Burnside poem and how the parent was trying to protect the child in a changing and dangerous world. A few thought the poem was set in a war zone, and while there were some convincing discussions of structure and layout as reflective of the remains of the towers, and the debris on the beach as allusions to destruction, a number of candidates got caught up in trying to define structure at the expense of considering thematic concerns, language or imagery. For weaker responses, a sense of overview for 'History' would really have helped. There was a tendency here for candidates to prioritise the poem that they had chosen for comparison; but taking time in the introduction to communicate a sense of overview for 'History' would have been helpful, not least for candidates to prove their overall understanding of the poem and its relevance to the task.

The most popular pairing for this question were 'Effects' 'Material' and 'On Her Blindness' with successful responses noticing the contrast in the parent-child relationship and the child-parent relationship in the poems. Some excellent responses drew out the impact of this different emphasis and how the poems used small individual moments and characters to reflect the wider relationship. 'Genetics' was also a popular choice – the poem's structure and main conceit is clearly appealing - but these responses often struggled to go beyond description and into analysis.

## Question Three

*Doctor Faustus* remains a relatively popular text and it is clear that, where it is taught, both teachers and students engage with the play well and are able to focus on the story as well as wider contextual considerations. Question three was the more popular of the *Faustus* questions, with most responses working well with the question and with the critical statement as to the contrast between Faustus' dealings with demons and his recognition of God. In better responses, candidates were able to generate useful and probing discussions about repentance, moments of blasphemy, and opportunities for Faustus to engage with God (as with the Good Angel and the Old Man, often analysed as representatives of God). The best responses engaged with Faustus' final soliloquy – not only as the dramatic climax of the play, but also where he necessarily does engage with God. These candidates were able to demonstrate discriminating understanding of the play, and a consistent and effective argument, but were also able to integrate contextual knowledge of pre-destination and social attitudes to religion with the presentation of Faustus and his challenge to established doctrine.

## Question Four

This was not as popular a question, but candidates who did engage with this were able to produce convincing responses that understood the dramatic relevance of the minor characters, including as foils to Faustus, or as comic subplots to increase dramatic tension. There was understanding shown of the role of stock characters in contemporary Elizabethan drama as well.

### **Questions Five and Six**

There were more responses seen on *The Duchess of Malfi* than in previous years, which is encouraging as this play offers a lot for students, and there is a good Globe version currently available on the BBC iPlayer as well. The few responses seen on question five did show an engagement with the play and with the presentation of marriage, with relevant contextual points made about upper class women and their lack of agency. Slightly more popular was question six and the dramatic presentation of evil. This was well answered, with students engaging with the political content of the play, as well as the dramatic presentation of the malcontent Bosola.

### **Questions Seven and Eight**

There were no responses seen to the Brian Friel play, which is probably indicative that it will shortly be removed from the specification and replaced by *Les Blancs*.

### **Question Nine**

The question on work was generally handled well by a good number of candidates, with the very best responses able to look at the critical comment of the 'gritty working class' in relation to the question focus of work itself. This enabled controlled and sometimes discriminating exploration of the urban setting, the violence and hyper-masculinity of Stanley, alongside the idea of work and the identity and status it gave to characters. Higher level responses also considered the discussion of minor characters such as the flower-seller as emblematic of new and diverse workforce issuing a direct threat to Blanche's existence. There was also good contextual discussion of the lack of work opportunities for women in a post-war setting, and how Blanche's identity and status had been removed once she lost her position as a schoolteacher. Weaker responses failed to engage with the work aspect of the question focus, and so repeated prepared material on social class or new America.

### **Question Ten**

This question on stage directions was the most popular of the *Streetcar* questions. There was a range of approaches taken to this question, with the very best answers setting out a clear argument relating to the significance of staging, costume, music and props – and how these all contributed to the play. The candidates could explore ideas of the writer's dramatic craft, as well as incorporating contextual factors regarding the setting and the elements of stagecraft that portrayed details that Williams was not able to present literally on stage at the time of production. Ideas and understanding of plastic theatre were also helpful in developing and presenting the argument. Weaker responses looked at a smaller range of references, often focused on the opening scene and the descriptions of Blanche, Stella and Stanley and word-level analysis ('daintily' 'heaved' 'breathlessly') rather than looking at dramatic methods beyond this. A number of candidates looked at the stage directions in chronological order, which provided a clear structure to their response, though maybe left them without the focus on the importance and significance of the stage directions, which the better responses were able to do.

### **Question Eleven**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* remains a relatively popular text and most candidates were able to use the critical comment on 'marrying well' to develop an argument on the dramatic presentation of love. Most candidates were able to discuss Wilde's satirical treatment of Victorian attitudes to marriage and class. There were some assured and perceptive responses here, with a firm grasp of both the satire and the potential comedy of the dramatic presentation. Weaker responses did rely on too much biographical context of Wilde's life, with a descriptive approach to the question, and no real analysis of dramatic methods. More confident responses were able to look at the various romantic couples in the play and explore whether Wilde was satirising or subverting the Victorian approach to love and marriage, and if indeed this was a happy ending.

### **Question Twelve**

This was the least popular of the Wilde questions, possibly because it is quite hard to write about comedy. Weaker responses worked through scenes and explained why they were funny, without grasping the relevance of the humour. Better responses were able to hone in on Wilde's use of satire, with relevant contextual points on the comedy of manners and his subversive use of humour often aimed at the audiences of his play. Able students were able to add in theories of laughter, or to consider differences in what people find amusing and comedic at the time of writing and for more modern audiences.

### **Questions Thirteen and Fourteen**

Only one response was seen to q14 with regards to the presentation of friendship. *The Pitmen Painters* is an interesting play and it is a shame that centres have not engaged with it, but hopefully the newer texts from next year, *Les Blancs* and *Sweat* will be taken on.

### **Questions Fifteen and Sixteen**

Unfortunately, there were no responses seen to *The Rover*, which is a shame as this is a fascinating play written by a fascinating woman.

### **Questions Seventeen and Eighteen**

Again, no responses were seen to *Waiting for Godot*, which is disappointing as this is an excellent play that offers lots of opportunities for students.

