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Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel GCE
In English Literature (8ET0_01)
Paper 01: Poetry and Drama

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Introduction

Candidates and their teachers continue to demonstrate an enthusiasm for this component with responses that built on previous years' hard work, knowledge and experience. Many candidates showed a confident engagement with the texts that was borne out with knowledgeable, entertaining and passionate responses. The paper makes rigorous demands of the candidates, and yet a majority were able to manage their time successfully and fulfil the requisite Assessment Objectives. This is, of course, testament to the dedication and quality of the teaching they have received. 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. A majority of candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the anthology and were able to choose wisely and pertinently. 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.

Section A

Examiners noted that centres had prepared their candidates well for the poetry section of the paper, with most able to write well on both the named poem and their chosen poem. In a vast majority of cases candidates attempted to approach the comparative element conceptually and construct an ideas-driven response that read well and achieved a coherent, successful and well-structured comparison. Better responses recognised the writers' craft through an appreciation of the constructed personas within the poetry, as opposed to assertions that it was the poet's action/thought/belief. Candidates who attempted to compare using a technique focus in discrete paragraphs were often limited in the depth and range of their analysis and the mark they received. Examiners noted that weaker responses often had an over-reliance at times of word classes and linguistic terminology in place of literary terms and concepts. It was also noted that candidates often struggle to write successfully about structure in poems; many students resorted to feature spotting but could not effectively analyse the meaning derived from the structure. Candidates tended to link the structure to very generic statements that did not support analysis of the poetry, or to the specific question, with a lack of understanding of the significance of rhyme and rhythm in particular. Enjambment was also included in many responses without truly grasping the significance and was, therefore, mainly unconvincing.

Section B

Examiners noted that candidates were well-prepared for the play section of the paper and that a majority of candidates were able to balance the demands of the two separate assessment grids throughout their answer in an integrated manner. There is still a reliance on the 'contextual paragraph' for some candidates and examiners noted that these responses felt too 'learned' and did not address the specifics of either the question or the statement. 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.

Although there is no requirement to name and quote critics to fulfil the demands of AO5, candidates who did so judiciously tended to show more engagement with the texts and an understanding of the different ways the plays have been received and interpreted by audiences throughout the years. However, some weaker answers identified critical views and named critics but made no use of them to extend or develop their argument. Again, these could feel too rehearsed and not rooted enough in the question or the text. 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. Moreover, it is important that candidates do not ignore the question itself which directs candidates to consider the writer's dramatic presentation of the given character or theme and thus to focus on the writer's craft. Examiners noted that some candidates engaged too directly with the statement and did not address the question. 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. Examiners noted that the best candidates utilised introductions and conclusions effectively, with introductions that demonstrated a thesis within a couple of sentences that was developed throughout the response, and conclusions that drew the essay to a close without summarising everything that was just written. Overall, examiners noted that AO2 was covered well this year, with a majority of candidates able to write about the characters as constructs. However, they also commented that analysis of dramatic impact is often missing from responses and that students should be encouraged to analyse the play as a whole and consider the dramatic element of the writer's craft.

Question 1

This was a popular question, possibly as the idea of change allowed for a number of different poems to be used as a comparison piece. *To My Nine-Year-Old Self* and *An Easy Passage* were the most popular choices, although there was also a good range of other choices, some more successful than others. Examiners noted that some candidates were not particularly confident in their analysis of *The Furthest Distances I've Travelled* and lapsed into narrative and 'telling' without analysis of language. These responses often consisted of general comments on the poet's use of enjambment and rhyme and candidates were then unable to develop their comparison beyond the general. Better responses were able to analyse the different line lengths and fragmented sentences that change to a more uniform structure by the end of the poem that mirror the changes in the speaker's life. These responses were then able to interrogate the idea of change in some detail with their chosen poem.

Question 2

Most candidates could engage with the concept of morality and were able to provide a convincing argument; although examiners did note that in a few cases students struggled with the meaning of the word 'morality'. A majority of candidates chose either *The Lammis Hireling* or *The Deliverer* and produced thoughtful and probing responses that used a wide range of references from the poems. Candidates often chose their texts on the basis that both depict a morally unacceptable or ambiguous event, though less successful responses proceeded to make fairly literal connections based on characters. Many focused on the moral ambiguity, and were particularly keen to discuss narrative voice. Some were, perhaps, overly focused on narrators, and the best responses managed to acknowledge and analyse these important issues without letting any single aspect dominate their response.

Better answers explored the presentation of morality across the whole poem – others focused only on the first few lines. Pronoun shifts and the ending, with the Uncle's avoidance of eye contact, were productive ways into ideas of othering/prejudice/guilt. Better answers were able to explore the unlikely justifications the human psyche comes up with for atrocities, and the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable actions under pressure of extreme deprivation or misery.

Question 3

Most candidates were able to present a relevant response to the tasks, and it is pleasing to note the popularity of the play with centres. Although candidates do not need to make use of the critical quotation in the task, it is often helpful. The idea of 'more comedy than tragedy' often invited some critical discussion, and the best responses not only formulated their own critical response to this idea, but examined the interplay between the two genres in the play. Less successful responses simply went through the comic scenes chronologically and explained why they were amusing. Though there was often useful contextual material to support this, there was sometimes little consideration of why Marlowe included these scenes in a tragedy, or their impact on the overall plot or Faustus's development. Stronger responses were able to analyse and evaluate the dramatic impact of the comedic scenes in the play – in particular their positioning in relation to Faustus's decline and fall.

Question 4

Candidates seemed well prepared for the question, particularly the contextual element of the question. Some discussed theological concepts of damnation such as the sin of despair and the contemporary debate over predestination; again, it was pleasing to see even weaker candidates engage clearly with these concepts. Many answers, with references to contemporary religious beliefs, were able to discuss whether Faustus could in the end have been saved from damnation. The downside was that some candidates focused too heavily on the theological arguments rather than engage with the stagecraft and the question's focus on the 'dramatic presentation of damnation'. Higher-level responses made good use of the stage effects in the dramatic final moments and saw the opportunity to use their knowledge of the tragedy versus morality play debate, a useful contextual and structural area to explore. Better responses also looked not only at actions and stage directions but also at the ways in which language and syntax communicated hubris and later desperation.

Questions 5, 6, 7, 8

Unfortunately, no centres appeared to have studied *The Duchess of Malfi* or *The Home Place* and no responses were seen.

Question 9

Candidates engaged well with this question and provided lively and personal responses to the text, particularly channelling their argument around the notion of 'toxic masculinity'. Examiners noted that, in the main, candidates did a better job of focusing on both the statement and the question, using the statement as intended to frame their own argument. Most candidates drew comparisons between the brutish Stanley and the less brutish character of Mitch (with some including Mitch's clumsy attempt to force himself on Blanche due to societal expectation and a misguided need to live up to Stanley as a role model). Some also convincingly made reference to Allan Grey and his continued presence in Blanche's downfall. There was some convincing recognition of elements of Greek tragedy, which also aided AO3 and AO5, and took responses above the straightforward commentary on Stanley representing New America, though better

responses were able to explore how Stanley is constructed to represent the new American (European) immigrant and to exemplify the raw edge of the American Dream. Examiners noted that it was refreshing to find many candidates exploring the constructed nature of the play, suggesting, for example, that Williams exaggerates Stanley's coarseness to make the apparent contrast to Blanche's affected refinement as conflicting, or as tense, as possible; a few linked this opposition to themes of 'brutal desire' and death. Many seemed of the opinion that Stanley's brutish version of masculinity is all too believable (and some remarked that this is still the case), but often offered the reason that this was necessary for survival in New Orleans at the time. Almost all candidates made some link to Williams's biography, with differing views of how far brutish masculinity might be something he either feared or desired, or both, and in some cases explored the apparent contrast of Stanley to Allan Grey. The majority of answers thought Stanley had few redeeming qualities and candidates clearly enjoyed examining his character.

Question 10

On one level, candidates responded to the ways in which characters were lonely - the least secure responses used this as a frame to present a narrative summary of Blanche's mental deterioration, with the sense that pre-prepared responses were being included, and had very little reference to other characters. Better responses presented analysis of a range of characters as well as dramatic methods. Allusions to death throughout the play were explored and the play was framed as a typical example of tragedy. The best responses confidently considered how the play and setting provided a social commentary on the changing society at the time of production. There was some success with the recognition of the symbolic significance of the naming of the streetcars in the opening of the play and the significance of the reference to Elysian Fields. Strong candidates recognised the dilemma faced by Stella and the possibility of loneliness in contemporary society if she believed Blanche over Stanley – therefore leaving her with no choice. Another convincing argument was that Stanley's fear of loneliness was the driving force behind his actions, as he feared Blanche would take Stella away from him. As with question 9, there was also some convincing recognition of elements of Greek tragedy, which also aided AO3 and AO5. Blanche's final scenes gained some attention in better answers, and some pointed out that she seems to welcome death in her fantasies. Better candidates also explored stage effects related to the theme of death, and how these often appear or are heard at moments when a character is clutching after a last straw of human companionship. A very few students mentioned the ghostly presence of Allan Grey, drawing together the themes of death and loneliness.

Question 11

The Importance of Being Earnest continues to be chosen by a number of centres and the standard of responses was good, demonstrating quality teaching of the play and a real engagement with the text and the context. Candidates were able to present a convincing relation between the behaviours of the characters in the play to Oscar Wilde's life and contemporary values and the restrictions and hypocrisy of Victorian society. Examiners did note that candidates were not fully engaging with the critical statement and could be over-reliant on prepared contextual paragraphs which did not fully allow for development of ideas. There was an understanding of why superficiality was presented in the play, but not always an exploration of the dramatic presentation of this and so the AO2 mark sometimes suffered.

Question 12

As with the previous question, there was a good engagement with the text. Clear links were made with Wilde's own life and belief system. Better candidates compared the presentation of different classes with a secure grasp of satire and irony within the play. Examiners did feel that while candidates were often secure in their understanding of language, including subtleties of humour, there was less success in demonstrating an understanding of the dramatic presentation of social classes which limited some candidates from receiving the very highest marks.

Question 13, 14, 15, 16

Unfortunately, no responses were seen on *The Pitmen Painters* or *The Rover*.

Question 17

There were very few responses to *Waiting for Godot*, which is a shame as it is a play that provides a rich and varied learning experience for students. The few responses seen only answered question 17 on the importance of stage directions. Whilst there was a degree of surface reading and narration, most responses identified stylistic devices used to convey existentialist principles. The best responses traced the subtle differences between repeated elements of each cycle and presented thoughtful discussion of Beckett's intentions.

Question 18

No responses were seen to this question.

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