

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474


For first teaching in 2015


H474/02 Summer 2019 series

Version 1

Contents

Introduction	3
Paper 2 series overview	4
Section A overview.....	5
Question 1	5
Question 2	6
Question 3	6
Question 4	7
Question 5	7
Question 6	8
Section B overview.....	9
Question 7	9
Question 8	10
Question 9	10
Question 10	10
Question 11	11
Question 12	11


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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. 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 can be downloaded from OCR.

Paper 2 series overview

Within the stated outcomes for H474 English Language and Literature, candidates will have pursued a course of study which invites them to:

- develop and apply their knowledge of literary analysis and evaluation
- develop and apply their understanding of the concepts and methods appropriate for the analysis and study of language
- use linguistic and literary approaches in their reading and interpretation of texts, showing how the two disciplines can relate to each other

Paper 2 offers candidates two traditional literary forms – poetry and drama - and invites them to explore set texts in the light of questions which channel precise analytical thinking. Fundamentally, this paper is about close textual analysis and the primary skills demonstrated here will be in the precision of selection of details and in the depth of exploration that candidates can offer. As ever, textual detail does not exist in isolation, and candidates will always relate their study to the wider generic implications of their textual study, anchoring extracts and poems to wider collections and whole texts. Throughout, apt and judiciously selected technical knowledge will inform their discussion.

As in previous years, all poetry collections were represented in 2019, with Duffy predominating over Blake for popularity. *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Othello* predominate to a greater degree in Section B but where candidates are offered *Jerusalem* as their focus, they invariably offer engaging and engaged responses.

In what is the most overtly literary of the components for this qualification, candidates are generally on familiar territory in tasks which invite analytical study of literary texts. What seems less comfortable for the candidature in this series is the confidence to focus their analytical skills precisely on a given poem or extract from a studied collection or set text. In summarising feedback to this session, reported that candidates spend too little time focusing on the poem or extract in hand through the perspective of the given question, and still prefer to download learned contextual facts, and generic commentaries on texts which don't engage with the question in hand.

The guidance offered in previous series is represented here, to remind centres of the most successful strategies for Paper 2:

- candidates are advised to make use of their time by annotating the given poem/extract in relation to the focus of the question and making brief, effective plans, especially where connection to other poems in the collection is required;
- candidates must judge which concepts and methods are most useful in relation to the text and the question in hand: shoe-horning linguistic knowledge into discussions where this does not illuminate the text is unhelpful;
- whichever concepts or technical details candidates identify, they should be alert to the meaning generated by such techniques; mere labelling is not an illuminating approach;
- the most useful contextual comments consider generic conventions or the place of a poem or extract within the wider collection or play – suppositions regarding an author's private life almost always detract from the quality and focus of a response and historical and biographical detail should be considered with a light touch;
- the given poem or drama extract should remain front and centre of the response and respond to the terms of the question to construct a specific, targeted response - the strongest candidates would be expected to present a precise line of argument.

Section A overview

Candidates generally made the set poem the centre of their discussion but, as is highlighted above, did not always allow the question focus to frame their thinking. Weaker responses, therefore, offered whatever knowledge the candidate had of the poem in hand and the broader collection with little more than passing attempts to consider the poetry studied through the light of that question focus. Stronger work focused closely on the question posed, using this to illuminate a poem that they clearly knew well and had studied for technical characteristics – but never allowed the technical detail to overpower the consideration of the question.

In a similar way, weaker responses were almost always able to offer a range of comparison poems, but these rarely helped to illuminate the poem in hand. At this level, many candidates merely offered alternative poems as 'not containing' a technical aspect found within the core poem, or of having different form or features and relying on these oppositions to garner AO4 credit. Stronger responses understand the nature of the comparative element as inviting them to use alternate poems from their studied collection to support the formulation of an argument in relation to the question focus, to contrast with and reflect on the core poem at hand. Comparative material is most aptly and successfully used when it illuminates the question focus. Strong responses also make analysis of the literature the focus of their discussion and deal with context in an unfussy way, blending it seamlessly into the discussion.

Question 1

1 William Blake

Explore how William Blake presents ideas about faith and hope in 'The Chimney Sweeper' (I) and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Blake's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

This is a popular question choice and it is clear most candidates know the whole collection well, drawing a range of material into their responses from both Innocence and Experience. Indeed, the brevity of the poems and the construction of the collection appear to aid weaker responses.

Most were able to offer a reading of Blake's views on faith and hope. Weaker candidates seem to expect description of rhyme scheme to do significant work in their analysis. The rhyme scheme was very often described as ABAB – rather than AABB - and very rarely did analysis of this aspect get further than talking about nursery rhymes. The best answers nearly always looked at the ending of the poem and the ambiguity revealed there. Many examiners saw quite a lot of prosodic analysis with technical terms; where this was accurate and used well it gave sharpness to the analysis but often it was wide of the mark in terms of accuracy.

The choice of comparison poems often included The Chimney Sweeper (E) and this was often done well. Holy Thursday and The Echoing Green also featured and offered useful comparative material.

Question 2

2 Emily Dickinson

Explore how Emily Dickinson presents ideas and feelings about striving for freedom in 'The Soul has Bandaged Moments' and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Dickinson's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

Few responses were seen to this question.

Some very good analyses traced the structure of the poem very well. There was a freedom and responsiveness in stronger candidates' work which seemed prompted by the ambiguity and indefinite nature of the imagery in the poem. Such approaches exemplify the best kind of discussion, where candidates are prepared to explore within exam conditions and do not seek to offer one learned reading of a poem.

Gothic was often mentioned and provided good quality literary context and most also had an awareness of Dickinson's personal struggles.

'One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted' or 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain' were useful comparative choices.

Question 3

3 Seamus Heaney

Explore how Seamus Heaney presents childhood memories and discoveries in 'Death of a Naturalist' and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Heaney's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

Responses to this question were sometimes a little disappointing – some candidates were far too selective in the consideration of the given poem and merely touched down on this before leading off on other poems with which they clearly felt more confident.

Strong responses showed engagement with the rich and varied imagery contained in the set poem and perspective was often explored very well. Many good responses also looked at the register the poem was written in. Tracing the development of the poem tended to be a mark of the good or excellent responses.

'Churning Day' was by far the most popular selection for comparison.

Question 4

4 Eavan Boland

Explore how Eavan Boland presents ideas and attitudes towards the rituals of household work in 'Woman in Kitchen' and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Boland's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

Those few candidates offering Boland found the poem and the question accessible and responses were often clear. There is a risk with poetry that presents ideas that are domestic or less remote than others in the collection, for candidates to skate over the surface of the poetry without taking the time to explore the full implications of the imagery and language choices. Weaker candidates did tend towards being descriptive rather than analytical.

'Degas' Laundresses' made an apt choice for comparison.

Question 5

5 Carol Ann Duffy

Explore how Carol Ann Duffy presents ideas and feelings about love and the natural world in 'Write' and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Duffy's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

Duffy's collection is popular with centres and clearly engaging to candidates. There is a risk with this author that candidates' apparent knowledge of, and prurient interest in, the author's personal life overwhelms their reading of the poetry as text. There is a strong tendency, therefore, for candidates to persistently conflate the speaker with Duffy and for many to focus on mapping imagery within the poem to learned details of Duffy's life. Such approaches tend to lack focus on the given question and lack of question focus was a significant issue for many responses to Question 5. More useful contextual readings view the collection as a whole unit, contextualising the set poem and relating it to the whole text.

Weak responses seem only to be able to write about Duffy's collection through a very narrow lens, ignoring the framing of the question. These discussions often didn't see the poem as a whole and picked isolated images to discuss, without linking firmly to the question. Some hardly waited before discussing other poems in the collection. Stronger responses immediately registered the ambiguity in the attitude to love and had interesting things to say about why Duffy may have used natural imagery, often drawing useful insights through comparison poems such as 'Your' and 'Hour'. Structure was the focus of many good responses and some of the best linked the variation on the sonnet form from this jigsaw-type structure to the more conventional "Rapture" sonnet form.

Question 6

6 Jacob Sam-La Rose

Explore how Jacob Sam-La Rose presents ideas and feelings about the experience and impact of music in 'After Lazerdrome, McDonalds, Peckham Rye' and make connections with one or two other poems from your collection.

You should consider Sam-La Rose's use of poetic and stylistic techniques and significant literary or other relevant contexts.

[32]

Candidates responding to this collection were usually very focused on the question throughout. Many were able to explore the religious imagery and the significance of music to the writer and his life. There was a lot of discussion of the unconventional layout of the given poem, although not many candidates really nailed the effects of that unconventionality.

Stronger discussions were often fresh and engaged. There was often good knowledge of the other poems in the collection such as 'Make Some Noise' and appropriate choices and plenty of detail and reference characterised these answers. Context was often useful and interesting – the accessibility and non-canonical nature of Sam-La Rose's poetry appears to encourage a less learned and formulaic approach often seen with the other collections.

Section B overview

Many candidates do not balance the demands of this task well. The question invites, first and foremost, a consideration of the dramatic and stylistic techniques in a given extract. The greatest part of the response, therefore, should be a close reading of the extract in the light of the question focus given. As part of that response, it will be necessary to relate that exploration to the text as a whole and to any relevant context, but these contextualising comments ought not to dominate. They are the background framing to an analysis of the extract. Candidates must understand that they should focus their response around the given extract. There were far too many responses dominated by detailed analysis of sections of the text not given in the question. These diversions are unhelpful and can only reasonably be credited as AO3, which is not the dominant assessment objective for this task.

Selection from the extract is critical, therefore, and candidates should use their time to prepare their reading of the extract in the light of the question, annotating the most revealing dramatic and stylistic elements. The best responses gave depth and breadth to their reading.

There was probably a little more technical analysis in section B than section A – both technical terms and sociolinguistic terms and concepts. The important thing is that sociolinguistics *assists* in the analysis and that candidates select judiciously from their range of linguistic knowledge to apply concepts appropriately.

A Streetcar Named Desire dominates Section B with *Othello* as a popular alternative option.

Question 7

7 William Shakespeare: *Othello*

Explore how Shakespeare presents Desdemona in this extract from *Othello*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Question 7 suffered greatly from insufficient focus on the extract. A surprising quantity of candidates didn't analyse the song or its significance to Desdemona. The tendency to look at the play as a whole was legitimate in contextualising Desdemona's journey *only if* the response ultimately arrived at a close analysis of Desdemona's presentation in the Willow song scene.

There were lots of comments on 'women at the time' or racial stereotypes – generalisations are best avoided in favour of specific consideration of details prompted by the extract.

The strongest responses saw a range of qualities in Desdemona and offered more than flat readings of her characterisation; they often presented her in contrast to Emilia and particularly to Emilia's lack of squeamishness about infidelity but responses that diverted to a detailed consideration of the attendant were distracted away from the task in hand.

Question 8

8 Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Explore how Wilde presents Lady Bracknell in this extract from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Although few responses were seen to this question, those candidates responding to this text generally demonstrated solid awareness of the characterisation within the extract, seeing the superficiality of Lady Bracknell and her focus on the material. Strong candidates were able to bring out the wit, comedy and sharpness of Wilde's exposure of the type.

Question 9

9 Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Explore how Williams presents differences in social status in this extract from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Many candidates engaged well with the concept of social status, framing their discussions in relation to both class and gender. Many saw the sociolinguistic implications of the extract and where this was explored well, provided the basis for sophisticated and illuminating analysis. Where it was done less sensitively, analyses amounted to name dropping of linguistic and behavioural theorists without close reference to the language of the extract or any sense that these were appropriately chosen.

There was a wide range of responses – from those who ignored Blanche's joke and Stanley's violence to those which drew perceptive characterisations of the social interplay at work. Most identified Stella's status as betwixt and between and the strongest responses read the power shifts between Blanche and Stanley well.

Context was sometimes dutiful and mundane but at its best there were some excellent examples of where specific research, for example into the social history of New Orleans and its geography, could be brought to bear helpfully.

Question 10

10 Brian Friel: *Translations*

Explore how Friel presents Owen in this extract from *Translations*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Very few responses to this text were seen.

Question 11

11 Timberlake Wertenbaker: *Our Country's Good*

Explore how Wertenbaker presents Mary and Dabby in this extract from *Our Country's Good*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Very few responses to this text were seen.

Question 12

12 Jez Butterworth: *Jerusalem*

Explore how Butterworth presents Johnny 'Rooster' Byron's account of his birth in this extract from *Jerusalem*.

You should consider the use of dramatic and stylistic techniques in the extract, its significance within the play and any relevant dramatic or other contexts.

[32]

Candidates enjoy writing about Johnny 'Rooster' Byron, and all have strongly held views about the character. This engagement led to lively and often rich consideration of the Rooster myth in response to this extract – some wanting to shoot him down in flames and others persuaded by the romance of his magical storytelling.

The best responses captured the élan and verve in the language of Rooster. The force of personality and breathless energy were often commented on along with the sense of speed achieved by the way sentences were organised. Such responses also looked at the structure of the story and the way that Rooster managed interruptions seamlessly. They also engaged with the structural interplay between Rooster and Ginger and what this revealed of the character. Weaker responses picked off references from random parts of the extract and discussed them without linking to the question. Discussion of Rooster as a character rather than the way the account was presented was a common weakness in unsuccessful responses to this particular question.

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