

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

**ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE (EMC)**

H474

For first teaching in 2015

H474/02 Summer 2023 series

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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. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. 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.

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Paper 2 series overview

Paper 2 offers candidates two traditional literary forms, poetry and drama, and invites them to explore set texts in the light of questions which require analytical thinking. Candidates may take a mainly linguistic analysis approach or a mainly literary analysis approach or an approach blending approaches; there is no hierarchy within the Assessment Objectives. To be successful, 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.

This paper is about **close reading skills** as described in AO1 and AO2. These Assessment Objectives are dominant and usually operate in tandem, with AO1 identifying methods and concepts, and AO2 exploring how they shape meaning. AO1 has extra significance as a measure of the quality of argument and writing. Texts do not exist in isolation, so candidates should relate their responses to the wider contexts of production and reception. AO3 comprises the placement of texts within a genre, a historical, political and social background or in relation to other texts (either within poetry collections or across a drama text). The author's life is a legitimate source of contextual evidence, but one to be pursued with a very light touch. The text itself is usually the best hunting ground for contextual material: it rarely needs to be brought in from outside it. It isn't enough for AO3 context to be simply included; it must be adding something to the interpretation.

In Section A, all poetry collections were represented in 2023; Blake and Duffy were particularly popular set text choices. *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Othello* predominate to a greater degree in Section B, but where candidates are offered *Jerusalem* or *The Importance of Being Earnest* as their focus, they invariably offer engaging and engaged responses.

A key message for Paper 2



One of the simplest pieces of advice that examiners can give for this component is that it is crucial to focus on the set poem and extract. In Section A, candidates are asked to make connections with other poems. This still means that the focus for candidates should be the set poem. Similarly in Section B, candidates can write about parts of the play other than the extract set, but it must not be at the expense of close analysis of the **set extract**. The long extracts in Section B need time and close work to analyse, and in Section A it is the **set poem** that examiners want most to read about.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">planned carefully, especially in selecting material to analyse from the set poem and extract in the light of the questionselected which of the writer's methods and concepts were most important in the poem or extract they were presented withtook care to explain as precisely as they could the effects of methods and conceptsensured that the text and question were kept at the forefront throughout and that AO3 context or AO4 links were seamlessly blended or embedded within an argumentshowed enthusiastic engagement with the text and a precise argument tailored to the question set.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">showed reluctance to engage in detail with the set poem or extract and supplemented that analysis with links to other poems or other parts of the play insteadimported into their arguments contextual references which did not further themadopted either linguistic or literary analytical techniques which were not best suited to the texts they were analysingshowed too little familiarity with the textsdid too little planning and shaping of an argument.

Section A overview

As always, Section A produced the full range of achievement. At the top, this was sometimes astonishingly accomplished and polished, making it particularly impressive that it was work achieved under the stress and constraints of the examination room. The poems offered something to engage with for all candidates.

It was noticeable that some very successful responses, at every level, engaged in simultaneous analyses of the set and a linked poem for at least part of the response. This 'use of one poem to reflect on another' produced successful responses. Most successful responses used the set poem to establish the grounds of discussion and show full knowledge of that text before moving off into the linked poem. Often, successful candidates linked only one other poem, which allowed them to engage more deeply in the analysis of it - although such was the knowledge of some candidates that they were able to range selectively across several poems, pinpointing key areas to bring into their analysis of the set poem.

Less successful approaches began with discussion of the set poem but very soon, before the poem had been adequately explored, moved off onto a number of linked poems, never to return to a close reading of the set poem. This approach rarely produced successful work because the focus needed to be on the set poem along with a question which is particularly relevant to that poem. Candidates who did not begin their work with the set poem and question tended not to produce successful work.

Question 1

1 William Blake

Explore how Blake presents ideas about the process of creation in 'The Tyger' 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 most wonderful and enigmatic of Blake's poems rarely produced disappointing work. It has several key advantages in that although highly compressed and 'gnarly' as one candidate put it, it is accessible to a huge range of interpretations. Its reference to 'the Lamb' also helpfully suggests to readers that a link to the poem of the same name could be made. A few candidates were familiar with an early draft of the poem where there are links and connections later suppressed by Blake and were able to include discussion of those drafts, which made for some impressive readings. Discussion of the engraving of the poem also proved useful for candidates who were familiar with it. The most successful responses approached the poem undogmatically and relished the 'polysemic' (popular word this year) nature of Blake's creation.

Less successful responses didn't focus sufficiently on the question (spectres of old questions did haunt the section this year) or spent too long on contextual material that did not improve the arguments being made. There was time to analyse the poem thoroughly and link it to another poem or poems, but not if too much writing time was spent on aspects which weren't contributing to answering the question set.

The overwhelmingly popular choice of link poem was 'The Lamb' and rightly so, but 'Human Abstract' was also a popular choice.

Exemplar 1

As a revolutionary poet, striving to defy the conventions of his time Blake proposes radical ideas about God's creations, by introducing the awe-inspiring yet dangerous symbol of 'The Tyger'. On initial impression, the poem's trochaic trimeter and persistent AABB rhyme scheme mimics the marching power of the tyger in the sinister forests of the night. Clearly Blake utilises colour

The best introductions showed immediate engagement with the text and task. They were specific to the task and weren't generic or pre-planned. They didn't focus entirely on AO3. They offered interesting and attention-grabbing entries to the argument.

Question 2

2 Emily Dickinson

Explore how Dickinson presents ideas and feelings about losing control in 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain' (280); 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]

There were relatively few responses to this poem. It is a challenging poem (as are all of the poems on the paper). There are teachers in centres that clearly love the poetry of Dickinson and have passed that on to their candidates. The responses were above average overall, perhaps because a thorough study of Dickinson's work can involve a level of commitment greater than with more accessible writers. There was some excellent work in which candidates were in their element with the unusual idioms and methods. It was sometimes moving to see the ability of candidates to connect so deeply with such a strange and otherworldly text. The most successful responses were undogmatic in their interpretation, kept context as servant rather than master, and engaged in the delights of close reading. There is so much to find in a poem such as this, that candidates equipped well with linguistic or literary methods, or both, found these poems happy hunting grounds. The most popular link poem was 'Because I Could not Stop For Death' followed by 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died'.

Question 3

3 Seamus Heaney

Explore how Heaney presents thoughts and feelings about being an onlooker in 'Punishment' 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]

This is a powerful poem and produced some powerful work. It is difficult to imagine a better question for this poem or poet. It helps if candidates know a little about bog bodies; otherwise, they struggle with some of the imagery, which some did. Knowing a little about the Troubles helps too, although as is often the case the context is there in the text. It was noticeable how many good responses did not consider the final two stanzas of the poem, which is a pity as they synthesise passionately the whole argument of the poem in the light of the question. The natural choice of link poem is 'Cassandra' and this was probably the most popular link, followed by 'Grauballe Man' (not in the set list of poems, but rewarded nonetheless) and 'Strange Fruit' – adjacent poems in *North*. Successful responses showed an awareness of the ways the poem explores perception itself; they relished the precise and sometimes horrific imagery and could show exactly how the poem shifts and develops as it progresses. Less successful responses did not engage very deeply with poem before linking to other poems they were more familiar with.

Question 4

4 Eavan Boland

Explore how Boland presents thoughts and feelings about responsibilities to children in 'Naoise at Four' 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]

This is another poem where some prior knowledge and understanding helped in avoiding misconceptions. The child in the poem is not Boland's own child but, as the poem states, her 'godson'; the first stanza is a dark window into the mythic past and only a shared name connects to the subject of the poem; being a godparent is a solemn undertaking with some life-long responsibilities. Without that prior knowledge, it was a struggle for some candidates to make sense of what is going on in the poem. There were a number of candidates who quickly made links to other poems without establishing any grounding in the poem. All of that is a pity, because once there is a little understanding, the poem has much that is accessible: the domestic imagery; the looming violence of the Troubles increasing protectiveness; the odd (but interesting and relevant to the question) semantic field of investment; the natural imagery of the woods 'where values can be learnt' and the powerful belief in the child as a special force for good in the world. The most successful responses really focused on the phrase 'feelings about responsibilities to children' and traced that through the poem with thought and care. 'Pomegranate' was the link of choice for many, with its shared themes.

Question 5

5 Carol Ann Duffy

Explore how Duffy presents ideas about the difficulties of expressing love through language in 'The Love Poem' 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]

This poet was very popular with centres and their candidates this year, on a par with Blake, although this was possibly not the poem many candidates were hoping to see. It is one of the few poems remaining on the set list that has not been set in this examination before, so it was a little surprising to see quite how many candidates were not prepared fully for this poem. Some prior knowledge helps, such as:

- which parts of the poem are original to Duffy and how can that be read as a poem in itself?
- what qualities characterise the selected quotations?

One discriminator for examiners was whether or not the candidates were aware of how the poem was constructed. If they weren't, then it could be an uncomfortable time for some candidates with many of the poem's unique qualities lost to them. Even when candidates knew how Duffy had constructed the poem, very few engaged with the way that the quotations interacted with the rest of the poem. The arrangement is not random. A number of candidates hadn't noticed that the poem is written in three stanzas with the anaphoric phrase 'Till Love' demarcating them. The following Level 5 exemplar shows straightforwardly how the structure can be discussed.

Exemplar 2

This poem has a complex form due to the many allusions. This makes the poem almost easier to read when the ~~lines~~ parenthetical lines are removed. That idea makes the difficulty of expressing love through language even more evident as Duffy included the allusions to address the 'Problem with Tradition'. The 'Problem' with writing love poetry is that it is almost impossible not to be ~~cliche~~ cliché when expressing love through language. For example "There is a garden in her face." Duffy has chosen to quote, this well-known line from blazon, as writing it originally would be seen as ~~unimaginative~~ unimaginative or lacking impact.

There were many successful responses too. These were characterised by sometimes extraordinary knowledge of the text and ability to quote at will from a wide range of poems allowing them to precisely select references relevant to the set poem and task. There were responses that enthusiastically entered into discussion of metalanguage and pointed out the many references within 'The Love Poem' and other poems of Duffy to the act of writing itself. The best responses linked technical analysis of the poetry to the idea of 'difficulties of expressing love', exploring non-fluency features such as hesitation, repetition, ambiguity, contradiction and paradox, to the extent sometimes of reading the poetry as performative using discourse analysis techniques. Those approaches work well here.

Question 6

6 Jacob Sam-La Rose

Explore how Sam-La Rose presents thoughts and feelings about cultural beliefs in 'Here, Spirits' 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]

This was a question that went to the centre of not just 'Here, Spirits', but Jacob Sam-La Rose's poetry as a whole. There was a sense that this was the theme but not necessarily the poem some of the candidates wanted to see on the exam paper, and certainly a few candidates did not appear to be very familiar with it. This produced the very-familiar-to-examiners trait of a brief comment on the set poem before linking to the poems that candidates perhaps wanted to be on the paper instead. This is not a successful approach. Some less successful responses mistook the whole tone of the poem for a sinister poem with the idea of inimical spirits seeking to harm. There are certain images that candidates taking this line focused on: 'phantom mouths/wreathed round the ankles' or 'What the spirits want, they know to take', and out of context that looks like a valid reading. Indeed, if it were constructed properly, it would be rewarded, but it misses the tenor of the poem. It is a celebratory poem, playful and intimate with an acceptance of the numinous without fear. It is about how a child's sense of self is developed by the culture they are raised in where almost unconscious acceptance of the culture is in the everyday. Of course, there is perspective at the point in the present where Jacob Sam-La Rose can see with gratitude the influence of his family, even if his beliefs have diverged. It is here that many of the most successful responses focused. The favourite link poem was 'A Spell for Forgetting a Father' with its theme of superstition and the supernatural, followed by 'Make Some Noise', which was useful for the contrast and conflict in cultures between the generations. As always with this poet, it is possible to sense intensity of engagement and enthusiasm in the writing of many candidates, which is a mark of the way candidates are being enthused by their teachers.

Section B overview

There has been a noticeable improvement in the focus on the extract this year, along with more focus on the texts as dramas. The extracts are long (this is governed by Ofqual regulations) and arguably the focus would be more detailed still if the extracts were shorter. It is essential, therefore, that the candidates know the play inside out, so they can get to work quickly on selecting the key elements to comment on and analyse. The question is the main tool of selection, and candidates should only bring into discussion those moments in the extract that are related to the question. Candidates who already know the key concepts and methods of their set text author have a head start when looking for examples of those aspects which can be used to address the question. Some of the best responses were from candidates who were ruthlessly focused on extract and question: the only AO3 contexts allowed in were essential to answering the question, and originated in the text itself. Selection is the key to success.

By far and away the most popular text was *again* 'A Streetcar Named Desire'. 'Othello' came a distant second and 'The Importance of Being Earnest', 'Jerusalem' and 'Translations' each had entries from a handful of centres.

Question 7

7 William Shakespeare: *Othello*

Explore how Shakespeare presents Iago's manipulation of Othello 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]

This is one of the great scenes in Shakespeare and the question could not be more welcoming. There were many wonderful responses. Successful candidates have above all to select: there is too much here to hope to cover the whole extract, and fortunately almost all candidates knew this scene well. There was perhaps surprising divergence on Othello's opening phrase ('Excellent wretch'), with candidates split between arguing it was a deeply affectionate, playful, oxymoronic declamation while others saw it as foreboding the tragic ending of their love with Othello's 'music' being corrupted by Iago's language. Fortunately, examiners did not need to make a judgement but only credit the argument and the exploration of the phrase. It does seem that some of the point of the scene is lost if we are to understand that Iago's poison is already at work in the first phrase of the scene. 'Stichomythia' was a favoured critical term this year and was applied entirely aptly to parts of the scene. More successful responses went on to explain the increase in pace and growing intensity, which the technique achieves. As always, a technical term is of use so long as it unlocks meaning. There are so many aspects to comment on in the scene that there is no need to take time on anything other than the briefest references to other parts of the play. There were some magnificent responses to the question, several of which spent time unpicking the fatefulness of Othello's first speech and then tracing that sense of gathering darkness as the scene develops.

Question 8

8 Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Explore how Wilde presents mistaken identities 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]

There were rather few responses on Wilde this year. It is another inviting question and the extract is most amusing. The art of analysing comedy is not easy, but analytical techniques, particularly linguistic work really well on Wilde and even preserves some of the patterning and symmetry in the text by highlighting it. There was some genuinely engaged responses even from less successful candidates who were able to apply methods and concepts with some skill to the rather mannered linguistic world of the extract. Approaches through drama worked well too, especially where candidates discussed different ways that key moments could be played. It is not even necessary to reference a specific production (although that too is a good route to success), but just to imagine the choices a director has at a given key moment in the scene. Note the phrase 'key given moment' – it isn't an approach that would be so successful if it were applied to the whole scene. This is a Language and Literature specification and not Theatre Studies, but it is more than acceptable to use some dramatic approaches to illuminate an argument.

Question 9

9 Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Explore how Williams presents the loss of Belle Reve 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]

This was overwhelmingly the most popular text this year. It is a very robust text and works well for a wide variety of candidates. All candidates find something to write about the text, and at the highest level candidates still find fresh things to write. This question focuses on Belle Reve, which provides a way of defining an approach and exerting discipline on the range of material. A particular learning point from this extract is that if candidates work from beginning to end of the extract, they were unlikely to reach the climactic monologue. So, selection based on prior knowledge and the question were key.

There is so much repetition of effects in the extract that it is wasteful of time to work through line-by-line picking examples – much better to characterise the sisters by the language techniques they use instead. That helps to avoid candidates offering broad commentary rather than analysis and gives shape and economy to the response. Use of technical analysis, discourse analysis, linguistics, stylistics, dramatics must be purposeful. These tools are used to establish how meaning is shaped. At times, responses can overly focus on the analysis and so lose sight of its purpose, which is to serve an argument. On the other hand, some outstanding responses examined the differential impact of the loss of Belle Reve on Blanche and Stella through their language choices. That is the kind of synthesis required for Level 6. The most powerful responses looked at the relationship of the sisters, and most did so. Successful responses tended to treat Blanche's language as mainly strategic or tactical rather than heartfelt, and were often able to cite evidence for this belief, and Stella's language as mainly honest spontaneous communication. However, many candidates took the reading that Blanche has a point in that Stella abandoned the sinking ship of Belle Reve, letting Blanche down as she will continue to do throughout the play. This is seen in the following straightforward Level 4 exemplar.

There are endless possibilities and endless readings and that is why this is the most popular text on this specification.

Exemplar 3

This consequently, the loss of Belle Reve creates friction between the two ~~sister~~ sisters as Blanche grows more ~~angry~~ frustrated. Her exclamation's become shorter, "You're ^{a coward} fine to ask me now it went!" and "You're a fine one to sit there accusing me of it!" This shows that Blanche has not forgiven Stella for ~~moving~~ ^{emphasized by italics} away and marrying Stanley. This foreshadows that Stella will pick Stanley again, which she does at the end as Blanche is taken away.

Question 10

10 Brian Friel: *Translations*

Explore how Friel presents ideas about language and identity 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]

There could not be a more central question for this text and no candidate could study the play without exploring it. The chosen extract is perfect for the question and the huge majority of responses did justice to the question and extract. It was not widely popular as a text, though there were a small number of centres who studied this. There were too few responses to characterise approaches generally, but there were some truly excellent comparisons of how language differed from character to character in order to reveal personal and cultural identities. Some very good responses traced the argument between the characters to show how the extract synthesises the debate in the play as a whole.

Question 11

11 Timberlake Wertenbaker: *Our Country's Good*

Explore how Wertenbaker presents Ketch 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]

No responses were seen for this text.

Question 12

12 Jez Butterworth: *Jerusalem*

Explore how Butterworth presents Lee and Davey 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]

There were fewer entries for this text this year. The question is straightforward and the extract is an engaging vignette. It may not be one of the core scenes in the play, but many candidates were able to connect it to themes such as the sense of belonging, identity, the camaraderie of the Green World and the sense of the community breaking apart towards the end of the play. Butterworth gets to the heart of some of the ways in which working class men talk to each other especially the use of foul-mouthed bluster as a camouflage for tenderness and affection.

Stichomythia was rightly referenced by candidates as a deliberate tool to create pace and laughter, giving actors scope for displaying their comic timing. There is so much to explore in the extract and candidates often had great fun with it, especially the way that apparent hostility or resentment in the language melts into warmth with such suddenness. The close of the extract was popular, with candidates identifying the tone of 'Merrie England' and raucous harmoniousness celebrating the 'Beat' that unites the characters in unbridled appetite for a country and community for a bittersweet 'One last time' together.

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