

Moderators' Report/
Principal Moderator Feedback

January 2012

GCE English Literature (6ET02)
Explorations in Drama

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General overview

This unit is now well established and the vast majority of centres approach its demands with confidence and understanding, engaging fully with all four of the assessment objectives to be assessed.

There remain, however, some centres where candidates have chosen tasks that do not allow them fully to access all the relevant assessment objectives. In the Explorative Study, despite being raised as an issue in previous Moderator's Reports, this was mainly because candidates had not taken enough account of the demands of Assessment Objective 3. In the Creative Critical Response it was because a context (intended audience, purpose and form) was not established for their writing where the candidate's choice and manipulation of form and register are central to the assessment of AO1 on this piece. Similarly, some candidates fail to demonstrate any engagement with the critical reception of plays, resulting in low band marks for AO4.

Although most centres had put a great deal of effort into annotating the candidates' work, there were some who had clearly not recognised the importance of annotation in the moderating process. Some work was so well-annotated that the reasons for awarding the marks were very clear; the assessment by other centres was much less clear, and a minority had no comments at all, or had simply written the numbers of assessment objectives in the margins of the candidates' work. Often the comments on candidates' work were clearly intended for the candidate rather than a moderator.

Regarding summative comments on candidates' work, one moderator wrote:

...some centres have devised a sheet to go at the end of the comparative, divided up into 4 boxes for the individual AOs and these are good but really no better than just putting a comment alongside each AO at the end of the essay. I had some centres where they had just photocopied the band descriptors, highlighted the one they thought applied and put a mark alongside - a particularly notable example had underlined all Band 4 for A03, underlined one bit of Band 5 and written 'touches of' and then given it 26!

Many centres have impressively robust systems for internal moderation. Occasionally, however, changes are made to marks with no explanation given as to why. There can also be confusing markings on the coursework: "...sometimes there are so many figures around that the centre loses track too - I had several with different marks on the essay from the front sheet or a different mark on the OPTEMS from that on the folder."

Centres are reminded about the requirement to submit the highest and lowest marked work of the centre, whether or not these are indicated by an asterisk on the OPTEMS form. There were a number of delays this series as moderators had to pursue missing work with centres.

Explorative Study

Centres continue to make the most of the wide choice of possible texts on this unit. This series saw studies of *The Jew of Malta*, *The Changeling*, *The Country Wife*, *Volpone*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *The White Devil* as well as wide variety of Shakespeare. *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Dr Faustus* were the most popular secondary texts. There was some very accomplished work but, as with previous series, the choice of task is very important. Sometimes tasks seem to encourage candidates simply to describe and recount rather than explore and evaluate texts. A number of candidates also get bogged down in historical and social context at the expense of analysing the texts. This often happens when the candidate has been given a vast topic such as 'Women in...' or 'the tragic heroes' and so on. Candidates would be well advised to select a topic that narrows down their focus so that they can explore the plays in the light of all four of the assessment objectives.

Assessment Objective 3 is heavily weighted on this unit. In order to achieve top band marks two main criteria have to be met: there need to be sustained, critical comparisons made between the plays and you have to engage with, and analyse, interpretations of the plays by other readers. It is not enough simply to quote critics or describe an interpretation by a play's director – you must show that you've understood their arguments and that you are able to form your own critical position in response.

Here are some extracts from an Explorative Study which is comparing the treatment of the theme of justice in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*:

The Duke in Measure for Measure has let the law slip:

'We have strict statutes and most biting laws,

The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds

Which for this fourteen years we have let slip...'

he tells the Friar in Act I. The point is that Vienna has become corrupt through weak leadership. The laws are firm but they have 'headstrong weeds' in between them. The Duke is using the word 'weeds' to refer to the law-breakers because they use gaps in the laws to undermine him. However, the comment highlights the Duke's weakness, his lack of authority and his lack of resolve to eradicate the problem - the 'weeds.' Shakespeare is making it clear that the problem would not have come about if the Duke had exerted his authority from the start of his reign.

Similarly, Overdo in Bartholomew Fair believes his piepowders court is not effective in maintaining justice in the cloth fair, so he goes undercover to explore the fair's criminal activity. He overhears Leatherhead threaten Trash by saying, 'I'll talk with you anon, and take you down, too, afore Justice Overdo' This pleases Overdo who fails to note that Leatherhead is being ironic. Overdo in the play is a symbol of distant, uncompassionate and ineffectual justice.

His misplaced self-belief is a weakness. In this he is like the Duke who is seen as a lenient ruler with too much self-confidence. Overdo believes he can sort out all the 'enormities' at the Fair but ends up becoming one himself.

This candidate makes clear comparisons between the two plays early on in his study. He then goes on to sustain these comparisons, shaping an argument where he explores the differences in the presentation of two of the main characters:

Overdo thinks he has a monopoly on the truth and thinks that preaching and efficacious language is enough to keep people on the straight and narrow. Yet we see he is deluded when defending Edgworth who is the 'cutpurse.' He calls him a 'civil young man' but the audience knows he is in fact the leader of the enormities who robs Cokes. Overdo boasts, "they may have seen many a fool in the habit of a Justice; but never... a Justice in the habit of a fool. Overdo thinks he will make significant changes but his play on language simply reflects the foolishness of his own disguise.

Unlike the Duke, Overdo does not think about what he is doing, but rather goes undercover without much of a plan, believing his oratorical skills will allow him to assert his mastery. Whereas the Duke cunningly uses Angelo as a scapegoat for his own deficiencies as a leader. You could say he is making an intelligent decision as opposed to Overdo who lacks intelligence in administering justice instead placing himself in a vulnerable position among the very cutpurses and bawds he wishes to denounce. The Duke on the other hand understands that, 'T'would be my tyranny to strike and gall them...' and plans to let Angelo take the fall: 'I have on Angelo imposed the office...' His intelligent planning allows him to fix Vienna's laws whilst still maintaining his relationship with the people.

Notice how the candidate sustains close comparisons between the two plays and also how he uses details from the text to support his points. A bit later in the essay, the candidate shows how he has read around the plays to explore interpretations of them by other readers – i.e. he fulfills the second criterion of AO3:

Unlike the Duke, Overdo fails to administer justice in the final scene, instead making a fool of himself. This points to the underlying theme of the play: Paul Cantor argues that 'the characters who stand up for religious and political principles in Bartholomew Fair turn out to be divisive forces in the play, while the seemingly lawless participants in the fair work to bring about a kind of civil harmony'. Cantor's argument makes sense if you see the three troublemakers – Overdo, Wasp and Busy – as representing law, education and the church. The symbolism suggests that Jonson is

making a point about justice and how it is often exploited by the privileged sections of society.

G.M. Pinciss goes further and argues that Overdo represents the Church of England, Busy represents the Puritans and Wasp represent the Catholics. However, this is perhaps too specific and unhelpful in examining Jonson's broader criticism of naïve and pompous governing figures in London at the time. In a burgeoning mercantile city, self-service seems to be the defining characteristic of this class, who turn a blind eye to their own faults in order to appear more virtuous in the face of heightened criminal activity and materialism.

The candidate does more than simply quote a critic; he goes on either to use a critical view to further his own argument or to disagree and offer an alternative point of view based on his own understanding of the text.

Critical Creative Response

There was some over-marking by centres on this piece where candidates had failed to sustain an appropriate register and style. This was often the case where the task set did not specify a context and simply asked for 'A review.' In order to achieve a top band mark on AO1 candidate must demonstrate clear awareness of register and audience and write persuasively in the chosen critical form (e.g."..A consistent problem throughout the production was the hollow chemistry between Isabella and Angelo. Liam Brennan's lacklustre Anglo failed to convince us that he was a controlling leader or a menacing villain...").

There was also over-marking on AO4 where candidates failed to engage with the critical context in which the play is received – i.e. they did not go beyond their own personal response to the play. In order to achieve a top band mark on AO4, candidates have to demonstrate perceptive understanding of the effects of contextual factors on an audience (e.g."your reviewer's observation of Patrick Stewart's portrayal of Claudius as 'bland' is unfair. Perhaps here one should distinguish between 'bland' and 'formal'...")

A consistent complaint from moderators is that centres are not making clear the nature of the task set for this piece of coursework. This makes it very difficult to assess use of register and persuasive writing:

Generally centres seem to have got the idea here although there are still those who do not spell out the context and audience in sufficient detail. Can the centres be encouraged to concentrate on the description of the task and on including it as the title of the piece rather than just putting it on the front cover? Often there is nothing on the piece to tell the moderator what they are trying to do and that is so crucial.

Many candidates still do reviews. The best of these take account of other audiences and are appropriately framed for their target context and audience. There were also some lively radio discussions and interviews for magazines which work very well. The 'blog' seems to be gaining in popularity; at its best it can be good but it needs a tight framework or it can become an 'anything goes'. Here is a good example of an interview format where the candidate has exercised tight control and focussed fully on the texts (in this case Shakespeare's play and Zeffirelli's film of *Hamlet*) whilst at the same time showing good understanding of general critical reception of both.

TASK: Write an extract from a script of an interview at a Sixth Form conference with Franco Zeffirelli where he is asked about his dramatization of Ophelia.

Student 1: Shakespearian critics have often described Ophelia's role in the play as primarily 'iconographic'. How does your own construction of Ophelia reflect this emblematic significance?

Zeffirelli: For many audiences, and certainly for me, Ophelia has essentially been one of two things: she is above all a metaphor, a device used to reveal the growing corruption of Claudius's court. However, I also tend to see her in a specifically feminine light. I perceive her madness to come not only from the abuses of a court that abandons principle for statecraft, but also it's the product of the female body and female nature.

My decision to dress Ophelia initially in virginal white was to suggest her purity, innocence and apparent freedom from the corrupt Elsinore court. The colour is also suggestive of vacancy and I felt that it conveyed her passive compliance with her father's wishes and also her powerlessness within this twelfth century patriarchal society. However, as the film progresses I needed to reflect Shakespeare's adaptation of Ophelia after her father's murder. She changes into something less reputable, having been robbed by the court of her innocence and driven to madness. No longer a chaste young woman, she tolerates Hamlet's obscene conversation, and I wanted to sharply define her growing insanity in a way that would continue to convey her femininity and sexuality.

So the once clean white robes are now tarnished with dirt and earth. She is directed to enter, distracted, decked with garlands of wild flowers, her hair dishevelled, loose and knotted with straw – all typical Elizabethan theatrical constructions of female madness. The soiling of her clothes is a visible mirroring of the way the plotting and intrigue of the court has perforated every element of the state and so has polluted Ophelia. The bare feet are symbols too of her madness – another recognized trope to depict the sick court.

With regard to the flowers and the straw, these are intended to suggest a conflict between natural blossoming and whorish contamination.

Student 2: We read Elaine Showalter's argument, in class, that by giving away her wild flowers. Ophelia is metaphorically 'deflowering' herself. Did you want to create a similar image in the film?

Zeffirelli: Absolutely.

Student 1: You describe Ophelia's entrance as 'distracted.' The audience notice lots of other changes in her demeanour. Do these change symbolize something more than simply her superficial madness?

Zeffirelli: Naturally. In Ophelia's state of mental anguish her speech needs to change. Shakespeare decks it heavily with metaphor – it takes on a heavily synthetic quality. She also sings these melancholy, yet bawdy, ballads – another reflection of the destructive quality of Elsinore. All of this leads to Ophelia's – very feminine – death by drowning. Of course the scene isn't explicit in Shakespeare's text but I considered it vital. I included a shot just of her robes submerged in the river. I wanted to establish firmly that Ophelia was a victim of the court's corruption. That was what destroyed her, leaving a vacuum where there was once a person...

Note how this imaginary interview is firmly rooted in the text, both of the film and of Shakespeare's play. There is a clear understanding of how the film and play are received by different audiences and how the original text can be interpreted in different ways.

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