

AS LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H072

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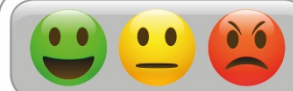
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Introduction

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

The Drama and Prose post-1900 component invites candidates to explore a set drama text as well as comparing and contrasting a set prose text to an unseen passage. Candidates have the opportunity to demonstrate the full breadth of their developing skills base across all of the English Literature assessment objectives.

Successful work in this component is characterised by fluent and frequent use of textual detail which ranges across the whole set text and/or extract. Terminology is employed judiciously, written expression rarely detracts from the coherence of the writing and ideas are interesting, if not sophisticated (AO1). In Section 1, strong candidates demonstrate a convincing sense of dramatic presentation (AO2), offering and exploring a wide range of interpretations (AO5) which may cite production and/or film adaptations (where relevant), or critical viewpoints. In Section 2 a range of interesting and developed connections to an unseen extract should be made with the set prose text (AO4). The extract may be employed to 'unlock' or reveal interesting views on the set text itself. The analysis offered in both Sections 1 & 2 should be underpinned by sound contextual understanding (AO3).

The 2018 Examiners' Report offered detailed guidance on the application of assessment objectives and how these are credited. Centres are encouraged to refer to this guidance to support the preparation of candidates for this component.

Section 1 overview

Candidates are generally knowledgeable about their texts and have been offered a breadth of contextual background as well as guidance on analytical exploration, evident in the responses to this task. As stated previously, many candidates do not see their Section A text as a performance script at all and this does limit AO2 potential given that this assessment objective invites candidates to explore the dramatic nature of the text.

Detailed notes on Section 1 and successful approaches to this task were offered in the 2018 report and centres are referred to this guidance to support candidates with this component.

Question 1 (a)

1 Noel Coward: *Private Lives*

Either

- (a) 'Coward said he had a "talent to amuse". The play provides plenty of amusement, but very little else.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *Private Lives*? [30]

Question 1 (b)

- (b) 'Elyot and Amanda behave as if youth will never end.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the roles of Elyot and Amanda in *Private Lives*. [30]

Very few responses were seen to this text option.

Question 2 (a)

2 Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Either

(a) 'A play that proves marriage has nothing to do with love.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *A Streetcar Named Desire*? [30]

Williams' play remains by far the most popular text on this component and it clearly offers candidates material with which they can readily engage. Responses were largely evenly spread across the two question options.

Question 2a offered an interesting prompt to candidates, although the invitation to tackle the proposition that Williams 'proves' marriage has nothing to do with love was largely ignored in favour of detailed and thorough-going – yet relatively narrow – explorations of Stanley and Stella's marriage. Stronger responses which ranged across the broader implications of Blanche's own relationships and marriage, of Eunice and Steve as foil to their downstairs neighbours and of Mitch as potential husband offered more insightful consideration of what the play has to say about marital relations.

Marriage was securely defined as an institution with some good material offered on the reasons people contemplate marriage during courtship, and the specific economic expectations which determine amatory commitments. AO5 interpretations were generally quite good, with most candidates reaching the conclusion that marriage was rarely bound up with issues of love.

The best responses looked at the romanticism of the nostalgic chivalry derived from the genteel Confederate era coming into conflict with the brutality of modern America. Some outstanding responses looked at the text in its Darwinian aspect and perceptive candidates were able to construct an interpretation of Eunice and Steve as a model for what Stella and Stanley have to look forward to some anniversaries hence.

Responses rooted in the contextual implications of the question were often excellent. One perceptive answer argued that:

"Key figures in the play, like Stanley, are 'sexual predators' (Sean Alff) and highlight how marriage is only a cultural emblem of relationships."

Another strong response maintained:

"The vulgarity and tyrannical nature of Stanley's character suggests that, for him, marriage is about power. [...] Stanley recognises he had to 'pull Stella down from her podium'; this metaphor creates imagery of Stanley as powerful, able to seduce an upper-class woman to marry him, despite being a 'different species.'

Question 2 (b)

(b) 'Stanley's dignity and sensitivity are important parts of his role.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the role of Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. [30]

The best answers to this question option worked in tandem with 'sensitivity' and 'dignity' to really weigh the scope of Stanley's actions; although most candidates were condemnatory, especially given his treatment of Blanche, there was still a sense of AO2 scrutiny of evidence which ensured that this judgement was reached through real debate. There were some very astute readings of these characterisations. For example, one candidate suggested:

"Stanley's sensitivity can be construed in an [entirely] negative and 'ferocious' light, depicting him to be a mere 'volcanic force of nature' that serves to paint him as the villain within the play in contrast to the saviour and tragic hero."

One impressive response concluded:

"Stanley Kowalski can be seen as dignified and sensitive; however, both of these things are not vital for a protagonistic view of him: his role in the play does not require sensitivity."

Stanley could be quite 'sensitive' in his treatment of Stella; he was also touchy about his complex ethnic heritage in relation to a 'dignified' self-image. AO3 was generally sound, but there were a lot of thin references to 'toxic masculinity' which signposted a judgement without demonstrating its validity through original thinking or recourse to evidence.

Weaker responses were clearly unable to see a way of reconciling the apparent contradiction between the nature of Stanley they were asked to consider in the question and the traditional reading of his character. These sometimes ignored the question to some extent and wrote an essay about Stanley's violence and domination.

Question 3 (a)

3 **Harold Pinter: *The Homecoming***

Either

(a) 'A play that defies our expectations at every turn.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *The Homecoming*? [30]

Very few centres offered this text option this year and the examiners did not record any examples of 3a responses.

Question 3 (b)

(b) 'A play about brothers fighting for, and keeping territory.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the roles of the brothers in *The Homecoming*. [30]

This proved a very interesting question for the small quantity of candidates studying this play, who invariably demonstrate incisive engagement with Pinter.

Territory was defined in a number of ways; as home turf, and, in one startling essay, 'as a small corner of London under threat from the middle classes'. Another excellent response demonstrating that it is an entirely valid response to engage with the task prompt by countering it, suggested that:

"...in fact the brothers are actually not fighting for territory, rather are desperate for it in order for them to establish a sense of manhood and superiority within the household."

AO2 was excellent, with some great insights into Pinter's dramaturgical craft. The idea of brotherhood was also well-explored, with some great material on Sam as a proxy mother.

Question 4 (a)

4 Alan Bennett: *The History Boys*

Either

(a) 'As the title suggests, *The History Boys* largely deals with masculine concerns.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *The History Boys*? [30]

Too many responses to this question option didn't take time to think about what the phrase "masculine concerns" might mean, although it was ambiguous enough to allow students to pin down their own definition. The proposition seemed surprisingly challenging to a candidature for whom conceptions of gender and identity are current concerns. Usually, the resulting argument was quite loose and even generic, largely focusing on homosexuality in the 1980s.

Lots rested on the title of the play alone, but some fine responses derived from thinking hard about "masculine concerns" in the play: competitiveness; authority-fixation; facts and knowledge; awkwardness of puberty; identity.

Question 4 (b)

- (b) 'A play about teachers who make a difference.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of the roles of the various teachers in *The History Boys*? [30]

This question generated largely successful responses with the prompt of 'various teachers' offering candidates a secure AO1 structure with which to explore the question, moving from teacher to teacher to debate the relative differences which had been made in the lives of the students.

Candidates were alert to the idea that 'not all differences are necessarily good differences.' Hector and Irwin's ambiguous influences invited debate with 'Totty' generally receiving universal praise and the Headmaster, unqualified opprobrium.

Weaker responses tended to be methodical workings through each teacher in turn, summarising their characters and, sometimes, impacts. Better responses thought more deeply about specific turning points in the play where the encounters with teachers impacted on the students in dramatic ways. The appreciation of the text as drama was often a sign of a response which went on to be impressive.

Question 5 (a)

5 Polly Stenham: *That Face*

Either

- (a) '*That Face* proves that for every bully there is a victim, for every master a slave.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *That Face*? [30]

Question 5 (b)

- (b) 'Of the characters in *That Face*, Mia is most likely to survive and succeed.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the role of Mia in *That Face*. [30]

No responses were seen to this text option.

Question 6 (a)

6 Jez Butterworth: *Jerusalem*

Either

(a) 'The play, *Jerusalem*, explores resentments about the way we live now.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of *Jerusalem*?

[30]

This was a thought-provoking question which generated fascinating debate. Many candidates who took on the question appeared to detect a hidden value-judgement in which they were expected to decry the current state of things and celebrate a nostalgic past. Much AO5 tended to unanimously agree that things were better in the post-war period because of 'community values' and 'a time before globalisation.'

Stronger responses found an ambivalence in Butterworth's play, both towards the value of nostalgia and the supposed permissiveness of modern life; these answers were very mature and sensitive in their handling of both AO2 and AO3. This kind of approach was characterised by one candidate:

"The world of *Jerusalem* seeps upon an old English lifestyle; bucolic in nature, and ill-fated in practice. Yet, this lifestyle is a desired idea of what England might have thrived as, [according to] the protagonist Johnny 'Rooster' Byron. The inaccuracy of the real old English lifestyle leads to Johnny choosing a fictionalised landscape and resenting those who posit force against his dreams."

Butterworth's play always inspires candidates and offers a huge range of cultural and contextual references for exploration. Some of these are now becoming hackneyed, however. The Dale Farm evictions were relatively current at the point of first teaching of this component but are taking on a significance beyond all proportion in the life of this as an A Level text. Centres should be alert to whether teaching schemes can sometimes be out-run by cultural debates that are not fixed in time. The protection of the greenwood has taken on fresh significance since first presentation of this component and society's treatment of traveller communities is far from defined by one incident in 2011.

Question 6 (b)

(b) 'Rooster is hardly a hero.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of the role of Rooster in *Jerusalem*?

[30]

This question prompted a wide range of responses with interpretations of Rooster often far from predictable. Weaker candidates listed the good in Rooster, then the bad, and weighed up at the end. Rooster was 'not a hero' because of his lax attitude to Marky, his association with teenagers and his role as a trespasser and drug user/distributor; he 'was a hero' because of his defence of Phaedra, his role as protector of the youth and his defiance in the face of an increasingly bureaucratic council.

Stronger discussions began with concepts about what could constitute "heroism" in a modern context and used that to measure moments in the drama where Rooster is tested. Better answers also tended to take a firm view on the character as exemplified by one candidate:

"Rooster is a remarkable David who fights against the 'puritan' Goliath of society and the homogenised, sterilised world it protects. In this epic 'chronical' (Laura Barton), we see Byron rally his troops to fight his own Waterloo, and we admire his heroic nature [...]. However, we question Rooster's predatory character as he is possibly portrayed as the fierce dragon, holding a maiden captive – mirroring St George. His dichotomous nature makes us fall in love with him as a Byronic hero, but also isolates him as a lawless antagonist resistant to change."

AO3 was always good, with a range of references to recent production history and the helpful insights of Mark Rylance that are readily available online.

Section 2 overview

The overview offered in the 2018 report contained sound guidance to centres on how candidates might tackle Section 2 and centres and candidates are invited to re-visit the key messages contained in that report. All those messages remain pertinent to this year's examination.

Students who are unsuccessful at Section 2, will most frequently either fail to engage to any significant degree with the actual question posed or with the extract offered for comparison. Candidates are very strongly advised that downloading wholesale material which they have previously worked on in reference to their set text, is unlikely to meet AO1 criteria for task focus, nor will such thinking be alert to the extract in hand. Comparison is still only thinly applied across all questions in this section.

Where candidates meet the task set head-on, responses never fail to generate engaged contextual exploration, demonstrating breadth of knowledge of a generic strand. The strongest work is often driven by surprising and thoughtful comparisons prompted by sensitive readings of the unseen extract.

Question 7

7 F Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

Discuss ways in which Fitzgerald presents the careless side of life in *The Great Gatsby*.

In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage, in which Michael Arlen's heroine, Iris, challenges Guy to a road race in the 1920s. **[30]**

The range of responses to this question was wide. Carelessness appeared in relation to the car chase; indifferent attitudes to money and excess; and carelessness for the welfare of the self and others through reckless behaviour. At times, knowledge of the set text was thin or unconvincing. The Luhmann film is beginning to influence candidates to a distracting degree, with many details offered which are not derived from the text. This necessarily impacts on AO1 and AO2 achievement.

AO4 links were quite thin in weaker responses which tended to begin with the extract and then not refer to it again, perhaps until the end of the response.

The best responses were consistently comparative. Stronger responses offered lucid weaving of assessment objectives in their responses with one writing that:

“The carelessness Iris shows is described with the road ‘fainting with joy’ as she is ‘infernally reckless’. The reference to ‘infernally’ and ‘fainting’ highlights how the careless side of life has gone into excess [...]; the road faints under the pressure; however, Iris still thinks it feels ‘joy’. This delusional nature is seen in *The Great Gatsby* [...] we see his parties are full of ‘purposeless splendour’, ‘yellow cocktail music’ and ‘floating rounds of cocktails’. The use of synaesthesia in ‘yellow’ shows the extent to which this careless nature has affected everyone, so much so that it has confused the senses, creating an illusion to which everyone is privy.”

Another alternative reading suggested that:

“The carelessness in *The Great Gatsby* is not exclusive to those with inherited wealth: in Gatsby's parties, attended mostly by the nouveau-riche, ‘laughter is spilled with prodigality’; the metaphor demonstrating that these people also have a careless attitude to money. Imagery similar to this is also used in the extract, when Iris' response to warnings from her friends to ‘let him pass’ is ‘the road's fainting with joy’. This personification of the road seems to take away some responsibility from Iris, demonstrating the she believes the road is the one to blame for the consequences of her carelessness.”

Question 8

8 Angela Carter: *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

Discuss ways in which Carter explores the male desire to dominate women in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

In your answer you should select material from the whole text and make connections and comparisons with the following passage, an extract from a short story in which a father tries to take control of his daughter's actions. **[30]**

Weaker responses on *The Bloody Chamber* were characterised by repetitious statements of male dominance over female characters and dissociated references to 'patriarchy' and 'second-wave feminism'. This text really suffers from simplistic understanding of AO3 context. Weaker responses also tended to offer few examples from the set text and to rely too heavily on the shortest story in the collection, 'The Snow Child.' There is also a sense that candidates do not attempt to see the text as a holistic entity and don't, therefore, explore any over-arching concerns that play out over the whole collection. Responses, therefore, tend to fall very readily into 'This is also seen in...' statements, listing and feature-spotting evidence rather than deepening and developing a viewpoint of the whole text.

Candidates who could engage with the specific and insidious features of 'domination', both in the extract and within *The Bloody Chamber*, did incredibly well; areas addressed include representations of coercive behaviour; confinement within physical space; and the troubling innuendo in the father-daughter dynamic. Use of the extract was almost always an indicator of overall quality of response – the best plundered it for links and used it consistently throughout.

"The representation of women in these two texts represents the male desire as women become objects of their fantasies. La Mare deliberately begins with description of Myfanwy's appearance and focuses on her 'hair, red as red gold'. By doing this, he highlights Owen's immediate concern for the superficialities of her appearance and parallels it with the desire for wealth ('gold'). Equally, the appearance of the 'girl of his desires' in 'The Snow Child' is purely superficial."

Question 9

9 George Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Discuss ways in which Orwell explores the use of punishment in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage from a recent dystopian novel in which a school for minor offenders becomes a place of repression and torture. [30]

All candidates were readily able to engage with conceptions of punishment and most made solid comparisons. Weaker responses can become plodding and generalised rather than focusing in on moments in the text and extract.

There were a number of brilliant AO5 approaches to punishment– one candidate remarked ‘the most effective type of punishment in a totalitarian state is when characters start to punish themselves for daring to question the regime’. Ideas explored included state punishment via torture and pain; emotional and psychological punishment; the punishment of creative use of language and free speech; and, interestingly, moments which defy punishment. AO3 was good when in capable hands.

“The narrator in Article Five details the extent to which fear of punishment inculcates the ‘urgency to flee’ from repression, but arguably delaying the inevitability of the punishment. The word ‘urgency’ instils a sense of panic, like that of Winston who is described [as] feel[ing] ‘panic’ before his rebellion in writing. Simmons continues a further environment of fear, [felt] between ‘girls’, stripped of identity and rendered down to the ‘seventeens’. Such ideas are paralleled within 1984, where Winston is reduced to merely ‘6079’[...]; the loss of identity and moral compass within the individual serves as an emotional form of punishment.”

Question 10

10 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

Discuss the ways in which Woolf explores how characters think in *Mrs Dalloway*.

In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage, in which a wealthy young woman walks about London in the 1920s. [30]

Candidates frequently struggled to frame their responses successfully, often regarding this question as a ‘catch-all’ to make a beguilingly large range of approaches stick - nostalgia, the past, emotion were all explored with little attention paid to the process of thought. AO2 was also uneven, with numerous references to techniques which the candidate may have remembered but which were not always proven with evidence, especially ‘stream of consciousness’ or ‘free indirect discourse’.

AO4 links were often much more secure, although, and the passage was understood reasonably well. AO3 which leans too heavily on biographical detail – particularly where this is assertive and assumptive about Woolf’s mental health and/or sexuality – is unhelpful. Candidates would often benefit from stronger grounding in historical, factual contextual understanding.

Question 11

11 Mohsin Hamid: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Discuss ways in which Mohsin Hamid explores the impact of global conflict in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage, in which a young woman comes to terms with the prospect of nuclear war with Russia in 1962. **[30]**

Few responses were seen to this text option.

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