

Examiners' Report

Summer 2016

Pearson Edexcel IAL in English
Literature (WET02) Unit 2: Drama

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Introduction

WET02 students are expected to apply knowledge of literary techniques and features, producing crafted, analytical answers that are informed by wider critical reading and, in the case of Section A, an understanding of a variety of contextual factors that shape the production and reception of literary texts.

Section A, carrying 30 marks, requires the analysis of a studied drama text from pre-1900. There are 5 texts to choose from, and students select one of two questions on their chosen play. The personal response of the student to the question is expected to be supplemented by a demonstration of knowledge and understanding of a variety of critical interpretations of the text, and relevant contextual details. Depending on the specific focus of the question, critical interpretations might include reviews of productions in periodical publications (contemporary or modern), critical analysis by academic literary scholars, historical evidence of reader/viewer responses, and directorial choices that engage with prior productions. Relevant contexts might include socio-historical information, intellectual history, generic conventions, biographical details, and staging history.

Section B, carrying 20 marks, requires the analysis of a studied drama text published after 1900. Again, there are 5 texts to choose from. As per the published Specification for WET02, Section B answers are rewarded for demonstrating an understanding of a variety of critical interpretations of the play (AO5), but there is no reward for the application of contextual knowledge (AOs 3 and 4).

Section A

The most popular text selection in this Section was *Othello*. More than half of the June 2016 cohort opted for this text. The least popular choices (in terms of student numbers) were *The Rover* and *She Stoops to Conquer*. The remainder of the answers were distributed evenly between *Twelfth Night* and *Doctor Faustus*.

A range of approaches to answering the questions was seen. Lower Level answers tended to be largely or exclusively narrative rehearsals, never moving far beyond recounting the key events in the plot. More discriminating analysis of character and theme was evident in the middle and upper Levels. Most students were able to marshal some relevant contextual knowledge, though often this was accompanied by other, less relevant material. Students should be reminded that only contextual materials that assist in answering the specific question asked can be fully rewarded. Very useful work was done on historical attitudes to gender and power in answers on *The Rover*, *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*, though there was comparatively thin detail on eighteenth-century contexts for gender relations in answers on *She Stoops to Conquer*. Some *Twelfth Night* answers also demonstrated a secure understanding of Renaissance festive traditions, based implicitly and sometimes explicitly on literary theories of the Carnavalesque, to account for the strength of the women in the play, or to explore the irrepressible force of desire. Although some relevant

biographical evidence about Goldsmith and especially Marlowe was seen, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Doctor Faustus* produced, generally, the least impressive work in terms of historical contexts. For example, a number of students on *Doctor Faustus* showed little awareness of the sixteenth-century debates surrounding free will and predestination, and answers to the question which asked about Faustus' choices were hampered as a consequence. The best work on context tended to appear in answers on *Othello*. Many students were well prepared in terms of conventions of gendered behaviour, codes of military discipline, distinctions of social rank, and especially in terms of the period's values and attitudes towards racial difference, with some students presenting illuminating evidence from Elizabeth I's royal proclamations on the matter of African immigration and conduct books instructing women on appropriate behaviour at court.

The contextual evidence adduced tended to be largely socio-economic. There was very little awareness of reception history, in terms of directorial choices or contemporary or modern reviews. A small number of students referred to filmed versions of *Othello*, but very few students referred to a stage production they had witnessed. There are now opportunities online to view filmed stagings of several of the set plays for WET02, and it would be advisable where possible for students to encounter a production, in either a live or mediated setting.

While there was a good deal of successful work on AO3 and AO4 in Section A, AO5 was comparatively neglected. Unsurprisingly, given the wide availability of suitable material, the Shakespeare answers demonstrated the broadest range of AO5 evidence. Some students who did attempt to meet the AO5 criteria were rather indiscriminate in their choice of supporting evidence, stringing together a succession of quotations from critics, several of which were not relevant to the specific question asked. Relevance is vital for achieving a top band answer. Another vital aspect of a high Level response is showing that the variant critical interpretations have assisted the formation of one's own judgement. To achieve a Level 5 score, students must do more than regurgitate critical opinions; they must also be "evaluative", and in terms of AO5 specifically, a student is expected to apply "a sustained evaluation of different interpretations and alternative readings of texts. This is supported by sophisticated use of application of alternative interpretations to illuminate own critical position." Few students were able to show that they could use the information they had remembered to inform and illuminate their own personal response.

Most students made some attempt to engage with the AO1 and AO2 requirement to display knowledge and understanding of literary techniques and the writer's craft. Most students restricted their discussion to the most familiar aspects of technique and craft (metaphor, simile, symbolism, tragedy, comedy, soliloquy); relatively few were able to consistently deploy literary terminology with precision and relevance. Fewer still explored the language of stage drama specifically. Centres are advised to ensure students are adequately prepared to use relevant terminology in service of an answer to a specific question.

Section B

The most popular text selection in Section B was *A Streetcar Named Desire*. More than half of the June 2016 cohort opted for this text, with a smaller number choosing *Death of a Salesman* and *Waiting for Godot*. Very few answers were seen on *Top Girls* and *Raisin in the Sun*.

Some excellent work was seen, and the best answers successfully integrated personal and critical responses, attending fully to the requirements of the question. Most students had a thorough knowledge of the plot and key aspects of theme and characterisation, though relatively few were able to give a full sense of the dramatic qualities of the play, as a piece of staged theatre.

There was significant evidence of problems with time management. 20 of the 50 marks available are allocated to Section B, but many students produced disproportionately brief answers. There was in most answers some attempt to address the AO1 and AO2 requirements to use appropriate terminology for the study of literature, and to explore the author's craft, but few were able to move beyond the perfunctory. Students who were able to fulfil the AO5 requirement to consider a variety of possible interpretations of their chosen play tended to do this well, but many neglected this aspect of the task entirely, often it seemed due to lack of time.

Students who were pressured for time tended to neglect the more subtle demands of the question. For example, some lower Level responses to Question 15 resorted to itemising, for example, Willy's various dreams, and did not deal sufficiently with the requirement to explore the 'damaging consequences' for others of such dreams; similarly, for Question 17, some of the briefer answers worked through some distressing events in Blanche's life with little attention to evaluating, as the question demanded, the author's crafting of such moments and the genre of tragedy in which Williams was self-consciously working.

Paper Summary

Based on performance on this paper, future students are offered the following advice:

- Use a range of literary terminology to identify ways in which writers create meaning; discuss the effect of these techniques on the reader or audience.
- Remember that the texts you are studying are plays: demonstrate your knowledge of theatrical terminology and refer where possible and relevant to specific productions.
- Don't just copy out lots of contextual material or quotes from critics or reviewers or directors; make judicious selections from such sources to support what you are saying about the play, and tailor it to the precise terms of the question.
- Read the exact wording of the question carefully and answer *this* question, rather than one you practised before the exam.

- Allocate an appropriate amount of time between Section A (worth 30 marks) and Section B (worth 20 marks).
- Enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>

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