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Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel IAL
In English Literature (WET0 02)
Unit 2: Drama

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Introduction

Centres are thanked for choosing Pearson Edexcel for their International A-Level English Literature provider.

WET02 demands the application of knowledge of literary techniques and features, to produce crafted, analytical answers that are informed by wider critical reading and a variety of contextual factors that shape the production and reception of two studied playscripts.

There are two sections to the two-hour, open-book examination paper, each carrying 25 marks. Section A requires the analysis of a studied drama text from pre-1900, Section B requires the analysis of a text from the post-1900 period. In each section, there are 5 texts to choose from, and candidates select one of two questions on their chosen play. The personal response of the candidate to the question is expected to be supplemented by a demonstration of knowledge and understanding of a variety of critical interpretations of the text (AO5), and relevant contextual details (AO3). Depending on the specific focus of the question, critical interpretations might include reviews of productions in books or periodical publications (contemporary or modern), critical analysis by academic literary scholars, historical evidence of reader/viewer responses, and the interpretative work done by directors of the plays, and the actors who perform in them. Answers which recognise ambiguity in texts, and recognise different potential interpretations, will also be rewarded in AO5, so long as the interpretations are relevant to the specific question focus. Relevant AO3 contexts might include socio-historical information, intellectual history, generic conventions, biographical details, and staging history.

General Overview of the WET03 Summer 2019 (1906) paper and performance

This has been a successful paper. There were no errors, no erratum notices and no changes made to the mark scheme. The number of candidate entries has continued to increase. The full range of marks was awarded. The 2019 cohort produced many fewer responses scored in Level 2 than their 2018 counterparts: more attention to the dramatic qualities of the texts has boosted AO2 performance, and AO3 and AO5 were more successfully integrated on this occasion also.

A summary of the performance on the most popular questions follows:

QUESTIONS 3 & 4: SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

As in previous series, this was a minority choice of text, but those who did opt for the Goldsmith play all answered Question 3, and displayed a pleasingly wide-ranging knowledge of the whole text. In recent series, sound textual knowledge of Goldsmith's play has increasingly been accompanied by pertinent contextual details, and this trend was again evident in 2019. However, AO5 achievement on this text continues to lag: candidates need to be familiar with a range of critical opinions on the play, to be exposed to reviews of productions, and best of all, though of course not always possible, see a staged production of the play. It is the case that other Section A texts are more frequently staged and more regularly filmed, but nonetheless the widely available 2008 film is rarely mentioned in responses.

QUESTIONS 5 & 6: TWELFTH NIGHT

Question 5 invited responses on audience reactions to Malvolio. This character is a magnetic figure, whether we judge him harshly or sympathetically, and elicited a real sense of engagement from all the candidates who attempted this question. Good contextual support for this question included historical facts about Puritanism, but better answers often included pertinent knowledge of the depiction of Puritans in theatrical tradition. More common were references to The Great Chain of Being, with Malvolio presented as variously an imposter and a Renaissance man in demonstrating the ambition to marry above his station. Fewer candidates observed that Maria, a superficially more attractive character, has, and succeeds in, exactly the same aspiration. Better answers were able to assess Malvolio's contribution to the comedy of the play, with one or two excellent comments that while we laugh at him he is not laughable, because we recognise in Malvolio's many failings - greed,

lust, self-fictionalising, the moulding of reality to fit his desires – feelings that we have also felt and recognised in ourselves at some time. His incarceration was naturally addressed, but often without that sense of his being a victim, for all his faults, of vindictive injustice. As many noted, he ends the play a lonely figure, and casts a cloud over the nuptials, complicating the play's ostensibly conventional resolution.

Rather fewer chose to answer Q6, on the literal and figurative uses of music in the play. Most of those that did, did so capably, citing songs as an essential tradition in festivity and a valuable tool of the playwright's in crafting an effective comedy. Feste's final song came in for much attention: often it was linked structurally to the 'food of love', and while it is probably too much to say, as some did, that the play swerves away from tragedy to culminate in comedy, most candidates were able to articulate a sense of its contribution to the complex resolution of the drama.

QUESTIONS 7 & 8: DOCTOR FAUSTUS

Marlowe's play attracted a small cohort of students this year, and most of them opted for Question 7. The discriminator here was a full engagement with the terms of the question. All candidates were able to identify the various heroic or villainous aspects of the eponymous character, and thus most answers did enough to move beyond Level 2 achievement; but better answers, tending towards Level 4 or above, could place the villainy in a suitably theological context, and link his heroism to the post-reformation landscape of humanism and the period's spirit of adventure, enterprise and mobility. Several responses to Question 7 were placed in Level 5, revealing a wealth of textual detail fulfilling AOs 1 and 2, with impressive interpretative supports for AO3 and AO5. There have been a number of landmark productions of Doctor Faustus recently, and answers which engaged with these in detail tended to be richer answers generally, due to a greater familiarity with the text as a play to be performed.

QUESTIONS 9 & 10: OTHELLO

Othello remains the most popular text in Section A, with over two-thirds of candidates writing on this play. Question 9, focused on passion and reason, proved an able discriminator. As one marker noted, "remarks were often couched in the interrogative: is it reasonable for Desdemona to accept her death with such equanimity? is it not the case that all Iago's motives are, in themselves, perfectly rational? what exactly is the nature of Othello's passion that it can so easily be

dislodged and destroyed and turned into its opposite? The question made candidates think.”

Most candidates rightly saw a mixture of passion and reason in all the main characters. There were strong analyses of language in charting Othello’s descent from rational composure before the Signiory to the rabid imprecations following Act III Scene iii. Many argued that Iago’s proclaimed motives are the result, rather than the instigators, of a hatred that is spontaneous and without rational foundation. Many also wrote in a rather bemused way of the contrast in Desdemona between a passion that drove her to a secret marriage and the rather pathetically rational defences with which she tries to combat her husband’s rage. Contextual support for this question tended to focus on the irrationality of racial prejudice, which was more relevant than the assortment of historical facts presented about the status of women and the Ottoman Empire. AO5 is achieved, by most candidates, by quotations from critics, of varying degrees of relevance to the question; surprisingly, few candidates discussed the presentation of reason and passion in stage or filmed productions. Those that did so tended to be more successful, perhaps because thinking about directorial decisions is more ‘hands-on’ than memorising quotes from literary critics. Of course the best answers deployed a variety of approaches to AO5, including their own personal reflections on alternative interpretations of the issue at hand.

Too many responses to Question 10 were hampered by a reluctance to engage fully with the terms of the question. Most candidates were confident in discussing the factors of age and race in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, and the responses, while predictable, were thorough and focused; but only the best candidates evaluated whether it was as significant as other forms of difference. Interesting detours from the main path included observations that both Iago’s bosses, Othello and Cassio, are to him foreigners. Others mounted a spirited and empathetic defence of Brabantio: he is relatively old and Desdemona has no siblings, which goes a long way towards explaining the ferocity of his reaction to the sudden loss of his daughter, irrespective of Othello’s race or age.

QUESTIONS 11 & 12: TOP GIRLS

This is the first series in which Churchill’s play has attracted a significant number of responses. Most answers were knowledgeable, focused and attuned to the author’s purposes. All ranged across the play in discussing Question 11’s focus on the marriages in the play, picking out Lady Nino and Dull Gret from the dinner party,

giving sympathetic and often admiring attention to Joyce, but often neglecting Win's affair with Howard and the effect on his marriage.

Question 12, on the three interview scenes, provided a neat and ready-made structure for discussion of values. Candidates who had also studied English Language benefited from knowledge of the relationship between language and power in conversation. In both questions the contextual factors of Thatcherism and Margaret Thatcher personally were used confidently to elucidate Churchill's methods and aims.

QUESTIONS 15 & 16: DEATH OF A SALESMAN

As always, Miller's play was a popular choice, and in many answers it was discussed with thorough knowledge and personal engagement. Relationships between brothers struck a chord, a nerve even, with the many candidates for whom siblings are a daily fact of life. The fluctuation in closeness and distance between Biff and Happy was considered in detail: many found the fleeting union in the dream of The Loman Brothers actually quite poignant in its impossibility; some compared the different ways they are both damaged by Willy's favouritism; some made the quite sophisticated point that, in their youth at least, we see relatively little sibling rivalry because what we are given is Willy's memories of them, inevitably selective, fallible and filtered through his own desires and disappointments. Most saw the graph of their relationship over time as two diverging arcs as they become emblematic of alternative American Dreams - Biff in the 'Great Outdoors' and Happy turning in the expanding world of business. Equally effective attention was given to Willy and Ben. All candidates recognised Miller's insistence on the distance between them, financially, geographically, and finally the unbridgeable gap between the living and the dead. A few candidates also incorporated Charley, and there was relevance here in that Willy says 'You remind me of my brother Ben', a parallel instance of failure gazing in bewilderment at success.

Question 16, on the play's original working title, was less popular but handled well. Answers often linked the title to Miller's assertion that there are no flashbacks in the play, that everything is happening in real time inside Willy's puzzled, tired and increasingly defeated mind. The question encouraged better candidates to attain high scores because there were many angles from which to deploy contextual support - historical, economic, and psychological, as well as theatrical. Candidates were also able to demonstrate Level 5 capabilities for AO2 and AO5 if they evaluated the relative merits of the titles: most made a good case for the suitability of the eventual title in that it explicitly prefigures the tragic nature of the play, since it

asserts Willy's status, without diminishing him, as one of millions of common men, and it insists on his existence as part of a socio-economic system which he barely understands and which is indifferent to him.

QUESTIONS 17 & 18: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

A Streetcar Named Desire remains the most popular text in Section B, with almost two-thirds of candidates writing on this play. A question on the uses of light and dark appeared straightforward, but proved a good discriminator for those who grappled with the full complexity of Williams' use of these motifs. The best responses surrendered to this complexity without trying to reduce Williams' use of it to diagrammatic simplicity. This complexity was encapsulated for many in the moth image: most candidates were able to articulate the significance of Blanche's refusal to be seen in unshaded light balanced against her instinctive movement towards what is attractive and fatal. Analysis of lightbulbs, locomotive headlights, the searchlight and the candle was mostly convincing, if routine; but there were also less obvious but equally telling key moments discussed, such as Stanley holding the liquor bottle up to the light, the importance of Williams' luxuriant descriptions of the sky above New Orleans, and Stella's love of the dark. Colour was obviously relevant, and there was much appreciation of the skilled and purposeful stagecraft of such a visual playwright.

Cruelty was the focus of Question 18, and there was no shortage of material for candidates to discuss: cruelty pervades the play, and all characters were found guilty of behaving cruelly. Even Allan was castigated, by some more adventurous candidates, for entering upon marriage as a form of therapy. All answers centred however upon Stanley's verbal and physical abuse of his wife and sister-in-law, accompanied in more expansive answers by analysis of Blanche's mockery of Mitch and her acidic denunciations of Stella for deserting Belle Reve for Stanley. Some found Blanche's treatment of Stanley cruelly condescending and made valiant attempts to drum up sympathy for him. More wide-ranging answers made much of Stella at the end of the play. The detail with which many anatomised the shocking and finely poised finale spoke of real appreciation of Stella's position, forced as she is into an act of cruelty she finds repellent because marriage, history and society have so circumscribed her moral power that she can do no other, and there were ample opportunities, often taken, to put the play into its social context here. Such discussion was often grounded in detailed comparisons between the stage ending and Kazan's in the film, which fulfilled the AO5 requirement well.

QUESTIONS 19 & 20: WAITING FOR GODOT

The majority of a fairly small contingent chose Question 19, on the existence and nature of Godot. The presence of his young emissary and the hazy memories of Didi and Gogo seem to validate his existence, but beyond that the candidates were content that neither audience nor characters know anything substantive about him. Nevertheless, many accused Beckett of being mischievously disingenuous in denying any religious stature to Godot, and some went further, asserting their right to see him as an eternally absent source of redemption and salvation if they so chose. The better responses did not linger over unprovable surmise, but saw his non-appearance as the most important thing, so that the play becomes an embodiment of waiting, which gives rise to much of the play's comic impact.

Very few candidates considered freedom and confinement, the focus of Question 20. The consensus seemed to be that Vladimir and Estragon are free to do whatever they wish, within material constraints, but confined, ironically, by their hope. The many opportunities for contextual support of this argument – political, economic, theatrical – were not generally taken.

Paper Summary

Performance of this paper has been very pleasing and some excellent responses have been seen. Many candidates have gained marks in the top two levels and centres should be congratulated in preparing their candidates so well.

Based on performance on this paper, centres and candidates are offered the following advice for their future success:

- address the assessment objectives and use mark schemes and past papers to guide teaching
- encourage candidates to use a range of literary terminology to identify ways in which writers create meaning; discuss the effect of these techniques have on the reader or audience
- context is not simply writing about history but can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, generic, theatrical, etc – that influence both the writer and the reader. Context should be integrated and linked to the ideas and points being made, rather than ‘bolted-on’ for the sake of it
- there are many ways of fulfilling AO5 – a variety of approaches makes for the richest examination answers, but reference to staged or filmed versions of plays is inevitably of considerable importance on WET02. Even if you can’t get to see a performance, think hard about different ways in which the play might be staged. You might even make your own film of some key scenes, and reflect carefully on costume, light, sound, proxemics etc.
- read the exact wording of the question carefully and answer this question, rather than one practised before the exam
- enjoy your reading and writing, and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.

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