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Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2021

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level
In English Literature (WET02)

Unit 02: Drama

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January 2021

Publications Code WET02_01_2101_ER

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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. Despite the challenging circumstances faced by many candidates, the Jan 2021 cohort produced work which demonstrated a depth of understanding of the texts studied and an ability to adapt this knowledge to suit a given question. It was especially pleasing to see a significant number of answers reach the top two levels – especially when taking into context the circumstances in which the qualification was taken and prepared for.

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

Section A:

QUESTIONS 3 & 4: SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

A relatively small number of candidates answered on Goldsmith's play and of those who did the majority chose Question 3 on the tension between modernity and traditional attitudes. Most candidates were able to offer relevant parts of the text and discuss whether these demonstrated a modern or traditional attitude. However, the majority of the answers were characterised by a more narrative than analytical style, often resulting in a list of relevant sections of the play rather than a response driven by a sense of argument.

QUESTIONS 5 and 6 TWELFTH NIGHT

Along with Othello, Twelfth Night proved to be the most popular text in Section A. Two very different questions (one on metaphor and one which focused on Sir Toby) led to an almost equal split with regards to candidates' answers. In the responses to the question on Sir Toby, it was pleasing to see that the majority of candidates discussed his character as a dramatic construct, with analysis of his function in the play being a focus in a number of the higher mark answers. Similarly, when responding to the question on the contribution metaphor makes to the play the majority of candidates were able to talk about the function of the language and how it is used to highlight key ideas in the drama. Less successful answers, across both questions, offered a list of different metaphors/events involving Sir Toby without a clear line of argument.

QUESTIONS 7 and 8: DOCTOR FAUSTUS

The majority of candidates who answered on Marlowe's drama responded to Question 7 where pride was the focus. The discriminator here was the demonstration of a well planned and discriminatory argument, rather than a list of the different examples of pride in the drama. Most candidates were able to identify the causes and consequences of pride in the text, and thus most answers did enough to move beyond Level 2 achievement. However, more effective answers, tending towards Level 4 or above, used these examples assiduously to develop an argument linked to contextual/theological factors such as the growth of humanism in a post-reformation landscape. A number of responses benefitted from useful discussion of popular/recent productions as candidates were more likely to talk about the drama as a piece of performance rather than a text to be read.

QUESTIONS 9 and 10: OTHELLO

As in previous series Othello proved to be a popular text with centres. Question 9 saw the most responses and offered candidates a lot to engage with when considering the controversial character of Iago. Most responses used the three differing views of Iago presented in the question as a structure on which to hang their argument. This approach was perfectly valid and it proved to be effective in the way that it allowed students to access AO5 implicitly by offering different interpretations of the character. A characteristic of those responses towards the top end often took this approach further, offering evaluative comment as to which one of these characteristics they felt more successfully defined the character of Iago. Almost all answers stayed close to the text, offering valid support for the differing viewpoints explored.

Section B:

QUESTIONS 11 and 12: TOP GIRLS

There was a very small number of responses to the Churchill play. These were characterised by effective embedding of context and some interesting discussion of some of the challenges of being a working woman in Thatcher's Britain and the effect of success/ambition on personal relationships. In a minority of responses this engagement of external influences led to answers which were dominated (rather than informed) by context - to the detriment, perhaps, of analysing the play as a piece of drama.

QUESTIONS 15 and 16: DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Question 16, on success and how it is measure in Miller's drama, proved to be the more popular choice of the two with candidates studying this popular choice of play. The majority of candidates were able to debate what success meant for different characters, with answers achieving Level 4 and 5 contextualising the concept with apt and relevant discussion of the American Dream. Less successful were those responses which 'bolted on' seemingly pre rehearsed/pre written facts, often including the definition of the aforementioned Dream and therefore adding little to the argument other than historical information. Pleasing to see was the reference to both established and more modern performances as a way to talk about the playwright's techniques and choices.

QUESTIONS 17 and 18: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Williams' play remains the most popular choice of text in Section B, with this series' responses split almost exactly between Question 17 (focusing on the presentation of Mitch) and 18 (a highly accessible question asking candidates to explore the continuing success of the play more than 70 years after its creation). Answers which were anchored in a specific stage or screen production, paying careful attention to Williams' use of techniques such as Plastic Theatre, tended to be the most successful as this helped to steer candidates away from a narrative driven approach which only described Mitch/the key issues of the play. Question 17 relied on candidates having a solid working knowledge of Mitch as a character in his own right (as well as a character who perhaps functions as a foil to Stanley's toxic masculinity) and therefore those who did not have this knowledge floundered after a relatively short amount of discussion. In contrast, Question 18 was comparatively wide in its potential source material, however this meant that it perhaps required more detailed planning to ensure that responses did not become just a discussion of all the different themes of the drama.

QUESTIONS 19 and 20: WAITING FOR GODOT

Beckett's play attracted a small cohort of students this year, with equal numbers attempting Question 19 (with boredom as the focus) and Question 20, which asked students to explore the unrealistic nature of the drama. In the responses to both questions it was especially pleasing to see candidates work hard to engage and explore the meaning and relevance of Beckett's staging and there was some useful discussion of the choices made by the directors of a number of productions of the drama.

Paper Summary

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

- Plan plan plan! Most notable in this series was the number of candidates who continued to write even when the most salient points had been discussed in detail. Demonstrating control over an argument (and therefore an answer) is often a discriminator of the higher levels as it highlights a well constructed/thought out response which uses judiciously chosen material to support and develop it.

- Avoid using pre prepared introductions. There were a significant number of responses where the introduction did nothing more than describe the contextual background of the text, leaving the 'real' answer to start sometimes more than 8 – 10 lines in. It is not unreasonable to think that any marker should be able to tell which question a candidate is answering by reading their opening paragraph.
- Don't 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. Look carefully at both the injunction and the assertion; you must always answer the injunction "in the light of" the assertion provided.
- Enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.

Thank you,
Principal Examiner
(IAL English Literature WET02_01)
January 2021

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