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Examiners' Report June 2010

GCE English Literature 6ET02

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6ET02: Explorations in Drama

General overview

For many centres, this unit has now become well-embedded and moderators continue to be impressed by the work of candidates and their teachers around drama texts. There were many accomplished folders which demonstrated the candidates' ability to let texts illuminate one another and to integrate other interpretations most effectively, whilst clearly presenting their own supported and analytical arguments. Centres also seem to be more confident in setting and assessing their students' submissions.

There are a few centres, however, where candidates under-perform on some key assessment objectives in this unit. In the Explorative Study AO3 is most heavily weighted, offering 45% of the total marks. There are two parts to the objective: candidates have to 'explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts' and their work has to be 'informed by interpretations of other readers'. It is therefore important that candidates are well-prepared to make sustained, interesting links between texts and also that they are exposed to a range of other readers' interpretations (e.g. critical essays, film versions etc.) so that they can make explicit reference to, and engage with, these in their essays.

Another area where some candidates could improve performance is in choosing appropriate tasks for the Creative Critical Response. Often there is no clear indication given of what the "creative" element of the task was. Candidates tend to write their own reviews of parts of a production, but the context is not always clear - neither audience nor situation is clarified - and it is therefore hard to award marks for the candidate's awareness of register and audience and for writing using an appropriate style and structure (AO1). Sometimes the CCR pieces read like short literary essays. Similarly, there seems to be little acknowledgment of the demands of AO4. Candidates can make perceptive comments about texts but there is often limited interpretation of texts 'within their contexts,' nor a clear awareness of how they are received by audiences. Centres need to set tasks that are explicit in their demands for register and form and they need to give candidates a critical 'hook' on which to base their piece. A straight review of a play or video does not meet these requirements.

Explorative Study

A01

To what extent do contemporary constructions of femininity lead to the deaths of the Duchess and Desdemona?

The 'Duchess of Malfi' and 'Othello' present the struggle of antithetical notions of femininity against a backdrop of social restlessness. The confinement of femininity into what Valerie Traub has referred to as, 'the reductive, erotic positions of maid, wife, widow, whore,' conflated female sexuality with identity in the early 1600's. However, both Desdemona and the Duchess experience a sense of 'divided duties' which causes them to resist masculine control. Their refusal to submit to a chosen role therefore stretches contemporary requirements of women to a degree which poses a threat to masculine identity and, even, society itself. This threat to the social order, it could be argued, thus renders their deaths inevitable.



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Examiner Comments

Even from this brief opening paragraph, it is quite clear where the essay is going. The candidate clearly articulates the argument in the opening paragraph of the essay. A sense of organisation and clarity of thought are evident ('On the other hand...'). There is a genuine sense of debate ('it could be argued...') and confident, accurate expression. There is also early engagement with interpretations by other readers ('Valerie Traub...'). The terminology used is appropriate ('antithetical notions' etc) and points made are substantiated with pertinent examples from the text ('divided duties' are Desdemona's words from Act I Scene 3). This is a high band response on A01.

Compare Marlowe's presentation of the practice of magic in *Doctor Faustus* with that of Shakespeare in *The Tempest*.

The protagonists of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and Shakespeare's The Tempest are directly comparable in their practices of magic. These quintessentially Renaissance figures share a rapturous desire for study and thus reflect the Jacobean yearning for innovative knowledge. This for both figures, as Hebron points out, 'leas naturally to occult learning.' The scholars' language immediately demonstrates their passion for magic, Faustus's "'Tis magic, magic, that hath ravish'd me" echoing Prospero's comment that he was, "rapt in secret studies". The origins of their magic are part of their dramatic characterisation as Renaissance men of learning. Both men can be compared to Elizabethan polymaths such as John Dee who, as Mangan states, was a man "at the height of his mental powers." Like Faustus, Dee is reported to have investigated the spirit world and, his history tells us, was the owner of England's greatest library at the time, thus linking him to both magicians.

**ResultsPlus****Examiner Tip**

The challenge in this coursework piece is to balance all four assessment objectives in your essay.

The opening paragraph above is a good example of how a candidate can, early on, set this in motion. For example, the candidate makes early links between the plays (AO3 strand 1) and is clearly engaging with interpretations by other readers (AO3 strand 2). The candidate begins to look at how language shapes meaning by examining the protagonists' references to magic in their speech (AO2) and there is obvious understanding of the social and historical contexts in which the texts were produced (AO4). Finally, there is a clear sense of argument, using appropriate terminology (AO1).

A02

Othello and *The Winter's Tale* both explore aspects of jealousy. Examine how Shakespeare makes the presentation of this dramatically effective.

'...The final scene revolves around the resurrection of Hermione after sixteen years of, supposedly, being dead. The scene is daring and exciting as she appears to come back from being a statue; it is the ultimate 'coup de theatre.' Tension is built up as Paulina plays for time: 'O, patience! / The statue is but newly fixed, the colour's / Not dry.' It is a tough scene to work into a play (particularly for a 21st Century audience well-acquainted with the technical wizardry of contemporary cinema) and so it has to be fitted in smoothly to have the shocking effect Shakespeare intended to bring the play to a close... The almost complete silence on stage of Hermione and Leontes after this revelation conveys very effectively the overwhelming consequences of jealousy.'

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Examiner Comments

This is a good example of a candidate who has engaged fully with the text as a piece of drama and who has interesting things to say about the writer's use of structural effects. This approach would merit a high band on A02.

To what extent should Othello and Dr Faustus be considered as quintessential Renaissance characters?

...this also universalises the playwrights' messages by humanising the two characters. Shakespeare's use of pathetic fallacy during the storm in Act 1 ('high-wrought flood') although interpreted as a good thing by the characters, would probably have signalled future disaster to his audience. The use of natural forces emphasising the inevitability of the tragic ending. Similarly, Marlowe sets up a sense early on of impending doom, linking Faustus to Icarus: 'his waxen wings did mount above his reach'. The mythological reference reinforcing the idea that human over-reaching is not something new...'

**ResultsPlus****Examiner Tip**

Too often candidates include lengthy, irrelevant sections in their essays where they comment at length on language or structural features that are not integral to the argument of their essay. Try to ensure that any analysis of the writer's craft - this needs to be tackled to achieve marks on AO2 - is part of your overall argument and also try to continue to link texts when you comment on their language and structure - this will enrich your performance on AO3. Above is an example of a well-integrated comment, referring to both plays, on how playwrights use language and structure to convey meaning.

A03

Compare and contrast the ways in which Shakespeare presents the moral justification for bloodshed in *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*.

...The most noticeable way that Shakespeare expresses a political opinion on bloodshed is the effects of the two major morally questionable decisions in the plays: to kill Caesar and to go to war. Whereas in Henry V the outcome of the war is favourable to the English audience, demonstrated by Exeter's exclamation, "'tis wonderful!", the outcome of Brutus's decision to kill Caesar is worse, culminating in Brutus's and Cassius's suicides after losing the war. "I owe no tears / To this dead man than you shall see me pay", depicts Brutus's loss and grief, presenting a warning against bloodshed by showing its consequences. However, in Henry V Shakespeare is bound by censorship and jingoism to present England as superior and powerful. Where Julius Caesar is a moral admonition, Henry V is a nationalistic, morale-raising play. For that reason, as McEvoy says, "it can really inspire." This is why, McEvoy continues, Olivier's film version was "dedicated to the assault troops who were themselves about to cross the channel to France as welcome liberators." It is clear why this was done: the play is full of patriotism - 'mark the abounding valour in our English' - and the English win against all the odds.

This contrast in moral message lies in the setting of the plays. Henry V was set in England and, to appeal to an English audience, Shakespeare had to show English greatness. Julius Caesar is set in Rome, so his message is unaffected by audience bias. However, in Henry V the final chorus explains that war was futile since Henry V lost to France anyway. Shakespeare seems to include this to show that war is pointless. This structural device allows the course of history to present the argument, so no censorship is breached. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's message that bloodshed is wrong is presented more strongly in Julius Caesar. At the end of the play, the strong hints that Octavius might be a tyrannical leader suggest once again that bloodshed has led to great evil. Shakespeare is deliberately structuring his plays to demonstrate the dangers of war...

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Examiner Comments

There is adept handling of both texts here. The candidate sustains a sophisticated comparison between the plays, all the while developing his general argument. Clearly, this candidate has fulfilled the high band requirement of AO3 (part one) and has fully 'explored connections and comparisons between texts'. The second part of AO3, that candidates should, for the highest band, 'analyse interpretations of texts by other readers in a critical and sustained argument' is also fulfilled, with the candidate using McEvoy's argument to strengthen and develop his own and also examining another interpretation of the play by Olivier in his film version.

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Examiner Tip

This assessment objective is the most heavily weighted on this unit. Of the 80 marks available for your coursework overall, 36 of the marks are awarded for AO3. It is therefore very important that you fulfil both elements of the objective: link and compare the texts and show that you have considered interpretation by other readers - e.g. by wider reading of critical commentary or by examining other versions of the texts such as films. Notice how the candidate above refers alternately to details from both texts. A clear and sustained comparison is being made. This is usually more successful than writing at length on one play followed by another lengthy piece on the other. Notice also that the candidate has not included a lengthy quote from a critic: instead a relevant point made by another reader is quoted and the argument is used as a springboard for the candidate's own arguments.

A04**Comparing representations of women in *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy***

*...Although Gertrude and the Duchess share some similarities, they are also very different. Despite the fact that Gertrude has limited dialogue in comparison to the other characters in the play, she is given a voice and her character is developed. A modern audience can probably sympathize with her position and could understand her decision to remarry and not give up her life for Hamlet. In contrast, however, the Duchess is one dimensional, firmly linked to the image of 'lust' in the tradition of the mediaeval morality play where abstract nouns were personified as feminine and therefore represented by women. Similarly, Elizabeth I was associated with 'virtue' - the 'virgin queen' - and this greatly influenced Shakespeare and contemporary literary symbolism around women. The portrayal Duchess is so extreme - from a modern perspective - almost to the point of ridiculousness, as the 'lither lady' with no redeeming qualities. Middleton is perhaps examining society's attitude towards the older, sexually active woman. Certainly her role in the play makes Gratian's faults appear minimal in comparison. When the text is read in this way we can begin to appreciate Daileader's view that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is actually a feminist *Hamlet*...*

**ResultsPlus****Examiner Comments**

The key elements of the highest band on Assessment Objective 4 are 'detailed' 'perceptive' and 'insightful.' In this answer the candidate has made perceptive comments about the effects on the plays of a range of contextual factors - e.g. genre ('mediaeval morality play'); perspectives of different audiences over time; gender issues ('society's attitude towards...woman') and has linked these points very successfully with her comparison between the two plays. This is a fully integrated analysis of context.

**ResultsPlus****Examiner Tip**

Try to avoid making sweeping generalisations about context. Make sure that you do your research properly and that you are confident in your understanding of social and historical influences on the writer, the text and the audience. Always link any comment about context to your overall argument: don't have lengthy, random paragraphs giving historical or bibliographical information that is not relevant to your comparison of the texts.

Creative Critical Response

A01

You are an actor playing the part of Malvolio in a modern production of *Twelfth Night*. You disagree with the director's interpretation of the character as a 'supercilious killjoy'. Write him a letter.

Dear Edward,

I know Malvolio's character has been seen as 'humourless and unlikeable' by Bill Alexander and others but I think the text itself demands him to be seen as more complex than that... Maria calls him a 'kind of Puritan' - now I don't know if you've read the Arden edition preface, but Elam there points out that even in Elizabethan times, this was an ambiguous term of abuse...

...these 'lighter people' as Malvolio sees them, have humiliated him. It's as if he's trying to get them to take him seriously again. We don't have to like him to feel sympathy. Did you see Shuttleworth's review of Doran's production? He said that the dark room scene provoked 'genuine unease' and I think that's what we should be aiming for..

..remember it's not only Malvolio who suffers - Antonio and Andrew are rejected, Viola and Sebastian grieve...

I hope this convinces you! I'm really looking forward to working with you.

Kind regards,

Henry



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Examiner Comments

There's an authentic voice here and the register is entirely appropriate for such a letter. The candidate has managed to incorporate lots of persuasive, critical points whilst sustaining an engaging tone.

A04

Write a conversation in script form between two A Level students in response to the Burton and Coghill film of *Doctor Faustus*.

Student A: What did you make of it?

Student B: I enjoyed it, although Faustus's 'hellish fall' wasn't fully deserved; surely there's nothing wrong with a bit of conjuring?

Student A: Yes. I agree, as might a 60's audience, but remember the film's based on a play written for a sixteenth century audience who would have been completely mortified by what Faustus does and would have agreed with the Epilogue that he had practised 'more than heavenly power permits'.

Student B: The film effectively showed that distaste for magic right from the beginning when we see Valdes and Cornelius dressed so decadently - completely disreputable figures.

Student A: Yes. At the time even people practising advanced science like Galileo were frowned upon. Can you imagine people now like Hawkins being accused of magic? Crazy! What did you think of all the paraphernalia in Faustus's study?

Student B: You mean the telescope and the astronomical instruments? Typical stuff for a Renaissance scholar - spot on for the period. But I thought the statue of St Sebastian was creepy and over the top. Still, that was 60's films for you - a bit tacky and macabre!...



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This is a confident, lively critical response. There's a seamless movement between the 1600's, modern reception and the 1960's film. The task has allowed the candidate to access the very highest marks on A04 by asking her to consider the play's critical contexts.



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Examiner Tip

To achieve high marks on both assessment objectives the task for the Creative Critical piece needs to be very specific in terms of the proposed form, purpose and audience - e.g. where is the piece to appear? who is going to be reading it? and so on. It means that the examiner is able to see how you have used register and style to suit your purpose. It's also important to show that you understand how the work is received by different audiences - e.g. The Guardian's theatre critic might well take a different view from the director of a new film version etc.

Grade Boundaries

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E	N	U
Raw boundary mark	80	70	61	52	44	36	28	0
Uniform boundary mark	80	64	56	48	40	32	24	0

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