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Examiners' Report January 2010

GCE English Literature 6ET02

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General Comments

The third series of this unit saw some very interesting and scholarly analysis of drama texts and plenty confident critical work by candidates. Centres are clearly now fully engaging with the specification for the coursework folder and its potential for encouraging candidates' best work. The challenges of this unit – all four assessment objectives are assessed – continue to be met enthusiastically by the majority of candidates.

There are still some centres where candidates have chosen tasks which did not allow them fully to access all the relevant assessment objectives. In the Explorative Study this was mainly because they had not taken enough account of the demands of Assessment Objective 3. In the Creative Critical Response it was because a context (intended audience, purpose and form) was not established for their writing where the candidate's choice and manipulation of form and register are central to the assessment of this piece.

Although the vast majority of centres had put a great deal of effort into annotating the candidates' work, there were some who had clearly not recognised the importance of annotation in the moderating process. Some work was so well-annotated that the reasons for awarding the marks were very clear; the assessment by other centres was much less clear, and a minority had no comments at all, or had simply written the numbers of assessment objectives in the margins of the candidates' work. Often the comments on candidates' work were clearly intended for the candidate rather than a moderator.

Explorative Study

Whilst familiar texts – such as *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Dr Faustus* and *The Duchess of Malfi* – continue to be popular for the Explorative Study, many centres are successfully combining less familiar texts, ranging across the 1300 to 1800 period, such as *Everyman*, *The Rover*, *The Changeling*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Country Wife*, with a variety of Shakespeare plays.

Assessment Objective 3 is the most heavily-weighted on the Explorative Study but some centres have not yet fully engaged with this. Although most candidates made links between texts central to their study, there were a number who dealt with texts almost entirely separately, with a lengthy section on one play followed by another (often shorter section) on the other, with a few minimalist connections made. Other candidates made very little reference to the second play making it hard for them to sustain a meaningful comparison between the two. Task-setting continues to be central here and candidates need to be supported in developing strategies for linking texts.

More common was a tendency to ignore, or pay lip-service to, the second part of AO3, the 'informed by interpretations of other readers' part; it may be that because it follows the 'connections and comparisons' in the assessment criteria a significant number of candidates think that it is less important. Many candidates included lots of quotes from critics but failed entirely to engage with these or to use them as the basis of further argument.

A significant number of candidates in this series had failed to include a bibliography with their work. Perhaps not surprisingly, this tended to coincide with a lack of engagement with the views of other readers. Candidates must be encouraged to read around the central texts and to acknowledge clearly their sources.

Creative Critical Response

Many candidates continued to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Creative Critical Response for them to be experimental in style and write in different formats. There were lots of lively and engaging pieces, often demonstrating very skilful manipulation of form and a confident critical approach. Topics ranged from a director's diary extract discussing a modern interpretation of *The Duchess of Malfi* to a letter to Coleridge responding to his damning criticism of *Measure for Measure*.

A few centres still do not set contextual boundaries for candidates and as a result their responses failed to demonstrate the candidates' skills in handling register and manipulating form. Once again, the least effective pieces were lengthy reviews of performances with no specified target readership and no critical 'hook' with which to engage.

Comments on Coursework

Explorative Study

AO1

Compare the extent to which language is power in *Twelfth Night* and *The Country Wife*

Language, when used selfishly, can become disempowering. Orsino, Olivia and Malvolio demonstrate this by using elaborate language for self-gratification and to feel a sense of power which they do not actually possess. Horner's use of reductive language is used to boast his sexual power over women, yet it still leaves him impotent. On the other hand, when language is used altruistically, it can be a tool of empowerment, illustrated in these plays by Viola and Lucy's ability to see beyond affectations and use direct language to help cure others of their selfishness...

Olivia uses her language to express her highly passionate feelings which have been repressed so long. Cesario is the first convenient focus for these feelings as she falls in love with his 'spirit' focussing her ecstatic language on him, confessing 'by the roses of spring ...[she] love[s] thee so'. Nevertheless, Olivia is powerless because she is blinded from Viola's irony by her utter infatuation. For example, Viola's ironic claim to be 'a gentleman' completely passes Olivia by...

However, Horner differs from Orsino as there is not a shred of passion or romance behind his crude use of language (the 'china' pun on sex, for example). This difference highlights a contrast between Elizabethan and Restoration attitudes with Wycherley's morally bankrupt characters displaying a heartlessness not seen in Shakespeare's comedies...



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Examiner Comments

This candidate clearly articulates the argument in the opening sentences of the essay. A sense of organisation and clarity of thought are evident ('On the other hand...') There is a confidence in tone and accuracy of expression. The terminology used is appropriate ('reductive language'; 'direct language'; 'ironic claim'; 'pun' etc) and points made are substantiated with pertinent examples from the text. This is a high band response on AO1.



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Examiner Tip

Try early on in your essay to bring all the assessment objectives into play. For instance, this candidate makes early reference to effects of language in the plays ('focussing her ecstatic language on him...') - AO2. There is also a clear comparison being established between the two drama texts ('However Horner differs from Orsino...') - AO3. Finally the candidate shows a confident familiarity with the historical contexts in which the plays were produced ('...highlights a contrast between Elizabethan and Restoration attitudes...') - AO4.

AO2

Explore the use of decadence in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Webster's *The White Devil*.

... Both plays owe elements to decadent Senecan tragedy (the macabre head of Ragozine; Isabella's ghost; the corpse-strewn stage in *The White Devil* etc.) and they feature extravagantly decadent Senecan imagery. Jewel imagery is prominent: Bracciano instructs Isabella to 'wear my jewel lower'. The nun Isabella describes how she'd wear 'keen whips ... as rubies' rather than yield up her body to shame (Hawkins comments that her words are 'charged with an erotic power that might well invoke a gleam in the eye of the most depraved Marquis'). Both playwrights charge their language with passion and power, using apocalyptic, exaggerated imagery - Vittoria's hysterical claim that at the Resurrection people shall rise from their graves 'like mandrakes shall rise shrieking' is typical. Webster's language ('turtle's feathers'; 'amorous whirlwind' and 'natural sweets of the spring violet') evokes decadent, lavish images, creating a world of extravagance and luxury...



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Examiner Comments

This is a very good example of detailed analysis of language and structure, showing excellent understanding of how writers manipulate these to make meaning. The candidate embeds fully comments about language and imagery into the main body of his argument. References to the text are entirely pertinent, but are brief enough to sustain the vigour of the argument.

AO3

Compare and contrast Shakespeare's presentation of kings, dukes and princes as actual or potential rulers in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*.

... Like Claudius, Antonio in *The Tempest* usurps his brother, Prospero, as Duke of Milan. He then goes further down the Machiavellian route to kingship by manipulating his friend Sebastian into attempting to kill his brother to become King of Naples. To a modern audience, Antonio conjures up a cartoon-like metonym of power when he tells Sebastian, 'my strong imagination sees a crown dropping upon thy head.' As in *Hamlet* Shakespeare almost mocks this Machiavellian deceitfulness. Antonio's image seems ridiculous... Sebastian challenges Antonio about usurping Prospero: 'but for your conscience?' Antonio replies sarcastically, 'Where lies that?' Unlike Claudius, Antonio feels no remorse or guilt. Shakespeare uses him as a symbol for how the world can never be rid of evil. These different portrayals of Machiavellianism can be explained in artistic terms. *The Tempest* is a comedy written in an ideal mode, with an indefinite setting, satirising Antonio as the Machiavellian ruler; *Hamlet* is a tragedy, set in Denmark and Claudius is a psychologically complex character – perhaps a prototype for Macbeth.

... Gardiner argues that Claudius is an 'efficient ruler' who does not allow 'guilt to influence the execution of his policy' * which is seen in the way he successfully averts war with Norway. This argument could also apply to Antonio, presented by Shakespeare as a strong ruler 'with all perogative.' However, Shakespeare further implies that Machiavellian rule has a contagious quality, it is not merely 'efficient': Claudius, like Antonio, uses his authority to manipulate Laertes into attempting to kill Hamlet...

... In contrast to Antonio, Old Hamlet was a mediaeval king, rooted to the chivalric code. He can be seen as an absolute ruler, duelling with Old Fortinbras to protect his divine right. Soldiers of the King's guard use an archaic martial lexis when talking about him - ;'moiety'; 'gaged' ; 'assail'; 'fortified' – suggesting that his style of rule is outmoded, reflecting the political realities of Shakespeare's time. Old Hamlet appears only as a ghost, implying that absolute rule was seen as a cultural and political 'ghost' in Elizabethan times...



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Examiner Comments

There is evidence of genuine engagement with both texts here. The candidate sustains a productive comparison between the texts, skilfully weaving the comparison into the 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 Gardiner's argument to strengthen and develop his own vies of the plays.



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Examiner Tip

Notice how this candidate 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 pertinent point made by another reader is cited and the argument is used as a springboard for the candidate's own interpretations.

AO4

Despite the comedy in the ways in which the worlds of the plays are presented, the playwrights force even a modern audience to attend deeply to serious matters. To what extent is this the case in *Twelfth Night* and *The Way of the World*?

*...The original audience for the comedy of manners, however, was less hostile to women. In *The Way of the World*, Congreve gives a quantity of power to Lady Wishfort (who can control her niece via her inheritance in such a way as, hopefully, to fulfil her own desires) that to Shakespeare would have been unimaginable. Congreve's more educated audience would also have been receptive to the duplicitous language used between characters like Fainall and Mrs Fainall ('my dear' and 'my soul' masking their contempt). In Congreve's play marriage has been reduced to economics: there is no necessity for love, just a mutual desire for money. This is why Mrs Marwood is so concerned that her affair with Fainall has elicited 'injuries' both in 'my fame and fortune'. Her language here focuses on the financial, with terms such as 'bankrupt' revealing her unspiritual preoccupations (Congreve as a lawyer would have been accustomed to twisting words for effect in court)...*

...duplicity in marriage, on the other hand, is unheard of. In Shakespearian comedy marriage was used to signify stability...by the end of the play most of the 'dangerous' characters have been pacified – especially the women (Viola with Orsino, Maria with Sir Toby) ...



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Examiner Comments

A high-quality response to this assessment objective. 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 ('comedy of manners'); society (Congreve's more educated audience/'marriage was used to signify stability'); gender issues ('a quantity of power to Lady Wishfort'/'dangerous...especially the women') and has linked these points very successfully with the essay's overall argument – comparing how the two plays present their 'worlds' - and with the detail of the texts themselves. This is a fully integrated analysis of context.



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Examiner Tip

It is really important that you properly integrate knowledge of context into your argument and link any points made to the plays themselves. Candidates who produce lengthy, 'stand-alone' paragraphs giving a potted history of the playwright or extended descriptions of contemporary society will not only be wasting words but will usually fail to access the highest bands on AO4 which require you to 'demonstrate perceptive understanding' of, rather than simply describe, contextual factors.

Creative Critical Response

AO1

View a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* for which there are reviews. Write your own review for a broadsheet newspaper in which you respond to the views of other critics.

A wake-up call for any Shakespeare lover tired of tiptoeing renditions of The Merchant of Venice, Michael Radford's screenplay not only addresses the race issue – it spits in its face. Radford opens the play with scenes of hatred on the Rialto: we watch as Jeremy Iron's Antonio 'voids [his] rheum upon' Al Pacino's Shylock, the red caps of the Jews horribly evocative of the yellow stars of 1940's Germany. The camera takes every opportunity to dive through the Venetian throng and leave us swimming in the pained eyes of Shylock. There can be no doubt where our sympathies are intended to lie.

Perhaps our modern, post-holocaust perspective leads us to see Shylock as more broken than bloodthirsty. However, even a Shakespearian audience hoping to experience 'the extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew' – as the play's original advertising announced – could not have failed to embrace Radford's take on Shylock. Although Pacino fights for his pound of flesh with hackles raised and teeth bared – Irons's naked chest heaving in anticipation of the knife – we see the Jew as a wounded man, not the rabid monster Shakespeare's early posters promised. So successful is Pacino's Shylock in sustaining audience sympathy that it takes Radford's suggestion of Antonio's unrequited love for Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) to convince us of Antonio's worth at all.

Does this mean The Merchant of Venice can only nowadays be successful with a package deal of obligatory gay lovers and a race riot? Is this 'politically correct' film simply spoon-feeding Shakespeare to a society that cannot stomach anything else?

No. The beauty of the play is its ambiguity, the fine line Shakespeare treads between hero and villain, villain and victim. Even with all the measures Radford has taken to encourage audience sympathy with the Jew, the film never smothers Shakespeare's original. You could still be sharing your popcorn with someone who has an entirely different response to Shylock. You might feel Shylock's obsession with the pound of flesh embodies the pain of a daughterless man, but if you'd gone to the cinema with The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw he would argue that the bond is 'petty and spiteful.' Fast-food fight anyone?

So, if stunning traditional costumes, a superb Venetian backdrop and spine-tingling acting aren't enough to entice you to see Radford's beautiful adaptation of one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays, perhaps an excuse for some popcorn-related anti-social behaviour will do the trick?



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Examiner Comments

This review is written in an entirely convincing style. The candidate has skilfully used the features of a newspaper arts review- the direct conversational tone ('You might feel...'); stylistic devices such as alliteration ('more broken than bloodthirsty...'); rhetorical questions ('Does this mean that...?'); urbane humour ('Fast –food fight anyone?') – whilst demonstrating a clear awareness of audience throughout. Top band for AO1.


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Examiner Tip

Note that this review is only 400 words long and yet it manages very successfully to capture the style of newspaper criticism and to demonstrate a clear awareness of audience and register. Think very carefully about your chosen style for the critical piece and don't waste words: make them all count. Often shorter pieces have much greater stylistic impact.

AO4

Write an article for a Sixth Form magazine exploring the appeal for a 21st Century audience of the RSC's Greg Doran production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Much of the focus of Doran's production was on modern appeal and, in some ways, it succeeded. However, in others it was so fixated on being modern that it forgot to be Shakespearian. Drysdale's Hermia was no doubt designed to suggest the 'empowered female' and yet she seemed not so much feisty as aggressive and spoilt. As The Independent's Michael Coveney put it, 'The dynamics were all wrong. Too much acting.' Shakespeare's Hermia is never that belligerent and this is perhaps case of modern values being painted over the original text. On the other hand, Walter's Helena appealed much more convincingly as the underdog. She is 'the girl who never gets the boys' according to The Guardian's Lyn Gardner, and her performance was cleverly judged to arouse the audience's sympathies, not quite as the ugly duckling but rather as an average girl overshadowed by her bolshie friend.

Doran's fairies were scarily modern, consciously designed to overthrow, once and for all, the Victorian stereotype. Whilst it was refreshing to see that the play's alpha male was not a white, Anglo-Saxon, de Jersey's Oberon was similarly plagued by the overacting that dogged Hermia. Shouting his soliloquies while swishing his cloak like a pantomime villain did not appeal and his histrionics in the row with Titania were, frankly, embarrassing. The Independent's Kate Bassett sees this as the 'vulnerability of men' yet I prefer an Oberon who is strong – yes, vindictive – but nevertheless in control of himself. The other punky fairies reflected our intrusive, celebrity-obsessed society by rifling through Hermia's underwear – an aspect that worked quite well – but their peculiarly macabre chanting and voodoo-like doll action meant that it was difficult to understand much of what happened in the wood because they kept mimicking other characters' lines and waving their decapitated Barbies in the air.

Through the suggestive play within the play, Doran was probably trying to appeal to contemporary tastes for visual humour and sex-related comedy, but to be honest, the sheer volume of innuendo made it awkward and unimpressive. Although it harked back to bawdy Elizabethan slapstick, the unfortunate decision to place Snout's 'chink' in his groin failed, for me, to be more than cursorily amusing. Nor did it seem to impress the lovers: as Coveney noted, 'It seemed symptomatic of the show that the marriage party is almost entirely oblivious to the effortful cavorting of the mechanicals.'

In one aspect, however, Doran's modern take was more successful. Francis O'Connor's minimalist staging reflected the real themes of the play in a way that the acting did not. The backdrop of a floor-to-ceiling mirror was perfect for a modern audience who need some help to suspend their disbelief. It served to multiply the fairies and enlarge the wood, helping create an atmosphere of magic and madness. With the prominent moon overhanging the set, reminding the audience of a world where, according to Sarah Hemmings of The Financial Times, 'the moon holds sway', O'Connor rescued a play that other wise tried too hard.

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Examiner Comments

A confident, thoughtful interpretation of this production in its context. The candidate has both texts (Shakespeare's and the film version) firmly in her sights all the way through ('Shakespeare's Hermia is never that belligerent' / 'Shouting his soliloquies while swishing his cloak like a pantomime villain'). There is clear awareness of how of the production texts is influenced by context – 'designed to overthrow...the Victorian stereotype' / 'reflected an intrusive, celebrity obsessed society...' – and how audience responses can vary over time – 'bawdy Elizabethan slapstick..' / 'trying to appeal to contemporary tastes for...' / 'need help to suspend their disbelief...'. The candidate shows a sound understanding of the play's critical reception and uses this to present an effectively persuasive response of her own.

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Examiner Tip

It is much easier to access high marks on both assessment objectives if the task for the Creative Critical piece is very clear in terms of the proposed form, purpose and audience. It means that the examiner is able to see how you have used register and style to suit your purpose. Also, don't forget that the task description is not included in the folder's word count – it can be as long as you wish and in some cases a bit of background information in the task can save you taking up space in your final piece. You might, for example, choose to write a transcript of a radio discussion: use the task description to explain who is speaking to whom and what about etc. so that your coursework piece can be an extract of the discussion where you concentrate on critical interpretation of the work rather than on the background to the discussion.

Grade Boundaries

Paper No.	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E	N
6ET02	80	70	61	52	44	36	28

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