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Examiner's Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

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In English Literature (WET02)

Unit 2: Drama

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IAL English Literature, Unit 2: WET02, Series 1706

Introduction

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 literary texts.

There are two sections to the 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 plays. 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 directorial choices that engage with prior productions. 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.

The 1706 series is the first summer series since the adjustment to the distribution of assessment objectives and marks available for Section B. To summarise, the previous distribution of marks was 30 for Section A and 20 for Section B. The revised distribution is 25 marks for Section A, and 25 marks for Section B. The new weighting reflects the additional work required on Section B in terms of AO3: students must now contextualise the post-1900 drama.

Overall, the work done in this series represents a significant improvement on that seen in the 1606 and 1701 series. There were many fewer instances of brief answers, and contextualisations for the Section A texts were on the whole more relevant to the specifics of the questions asked than in the 1606 series. Overall however, AO5 achievement was, in this series, the least fully achieved of the four assessed AOs.

Markers reported that the questions had proved clear and inviting, giving candidates of all abilities the opportunity to display their knowledge and skills, and allowing the examiners to make fine discriminating judgements. The paper is a demanding one in that it targets four of the assessment objectives. High-scoring candidates were explicitly aware of this: more marks were mislaid through lack of attention to the grid than through insecure grasp of the texts.

Behn, Churchill and Hansberry attracted only 8 responses between them, but, as is often the case with minority texts, the work done was well-informed, able and enthusiastic. Responses to the more commonly chosen texts are detailed below.

SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

A handful of candidates attempted Question 3, none Question 4. Broad comparisons between Marlow and Tony were sketched - class, gustatory habits, attitudes to women, relationships with parents - but tended to lack detailed awareness of how comic effects are achieved. Similarly, candidates noted that Goldsmith was challenging Sentimental Comedy, but seldom how he did so. AO5 achievement was also comparatively suppressed on Question 3.

TWELFTH NIGHT

This was a popular choice, and the majority of candidates displayed enthusiasm as well as knowledge. In Question 5, the web of relationships was navigated confidently by almost all, the nature and implications of the social strata were recognised, and the apparent fluidity of gender often drew comment. There were pertinent challenges to the word 'love', particularly in the cases of Malvolio and Orsino. Some candidates extended their discussion to Sebastian and Antonio, which was refreshing and relevant. As usual, a key discriminator was the ability to see the play as a dramatic construct, and analyse its construction in terms of stagecraft and the generic features of comedy. Fewer candidates attempted Question 6, but again, grasp of issues and dramatic effect was generally secure. The opening scene obviously came in for much detailed discussion, and the most successful candidates ranged widely over the play in considering Orsino's egotism and self-indulgence. Some produced (suitably tentative but often convincing) evidence of homoeroticism. In both questions, context was handled more confidently than interpretations. As one marker noted, "examiners take great pains to find credit for AO5 when it is not immediately obvious. Perhaps teachers could be rather more emphatic, and students more receptive, in preparing for this particular AO."

DOCTOR FAUSTUS

Question 7 explicitly invited candidates to AO2, and most responded accordingly. The Seven Deadly Sins, the Good and Bad Angel and the Old Man were widely recognised as providing dramatic and entertaining embodiments of the conflict within Faustus. The basic conflict between power and repentance was grasped by all, but higher-scoring candidates exhibited a sense of genre and dramatic impact which was less apparent in the lower levels. This was particularly true of Question 8 which, though they chose it, seemed to take some candidates by surprise. While many recognised parallels between Robin and Faustus in terms of crudity and triviality, fewer were able to analyse the means used by Marlowe, or his collaborator, to construct comic relief. In both questions, there was extensive consideration of Luther and Calvin, sometimes at the expense of Marlowe. While centres have heard the calls made in previous examiner reports to provide more substantial contextualisation of *Doctor Faustus*, there were signs that some candidates had not made judicious selections from their extensive learning of contextual materials in service of an answer to the specific question asked.

OTHELLO

Candidates flocked to this text, with Question 9 proving especially popular. This question addresses a central issue, and the majority of candidates produced balanced and more or less judicious treatments.

Success tended to depend on the level of detail deployed, with high-scoring answers giving concrete examples of Iago's psychological insight, linguistic artistry and lightning grasp of any circumstance which may benefit him. The familiar mixture of moral repulsion and gaping admiration was everywhere in evidence. It was refreshing to see so many candidates challenging the accusation of foolishness against Othello. His martial accomplishments, they pointed out, his spiritual and poetic nobility in the earlier scenes, his power to earn the love of Desdemona, are not the hallmarks of a fool. Supported challenges of this kind impressed the examiners.

Oddly, legions of candidates cited Othello's demand for 'ocular proof', but none followed through to the next lines where he threatens Iago with 'naked wrath' should he fail to produce it. From this point on, Iago is playing for his life. The fact that he barely mentions it makes him all the more stunning a malefactor.

Candidates who felt they had to apportion some measure of blame to almost every character in the play invariably diluted their responses.

It would have been good to see more attempts at Question 10 - a flexible and interesting topic for discussion. The question validates 'time' as a setting, so that various contextual factors were relevant. There were interesting comments on how much of the play takes place at night, and of how Shakespeare seems to telescope time to increase dramatic effect. Geographical and cultural shifts were well understood - those who saw the distance between the sophistication of Venice and the barbarism of Cyprus as an embodiment of Othello's regression were addressing the key term 'symbolism'.

Over the centuries, the play has often brought the best out of critics. References to different interpretations were many, and more often than not explored with thoughtful engagement.

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

The play attracted a healthy number of candidates. Responses were usually informed by an authentic personal response, showing a mixture of pity for and exasperation with Willy, and a good understanding of parent-child relationships in comments on Biff and Happy.

Question 15 often prompted pertinent discussion of Miller's stagecraft, of how the shuttling through time and space within the tight confines of the set increases dramatic impact. More than one candidate claimed that the geographical reach from New Jersey to Texas to Alaska ended up evoking just one place - America - with its hallucinatory and doomed Dream on which there were acres of comment. Also impressive were those who saw the line between memory and fantasy as blurred and fluctuating, asking, for example, if we can really trust Willy's account of the boys' childhood and their adulation of their father.

The changing environment of the Loman house invited a good deal of relevant commentary: the monstrous encroaching buildings, Willy's yearning to plant seeds, the use of it as a microcosm for a way of life that has been bullied into submission.

Question 16 was handled confidently by the majority. Again, the American Dream and its stranglehold on the definition of success was much discussed, as was the pernicious effects Willy's life-lessons had on his sons. Miller's use of contrast as a structuring principle was recognised, though the response to the regular juxtapositions between

Willy and the successful characters varied from pity to contempt. The play is called *Death of a Salesman*, but Willy is also father, husband, brother, lover, and a number of successful responses anatomised his success or failure in a variety of roles with necessarily different criteria.

In both questions, different interpretations were often examined through films or productions, allowing candidates to enhance their credit in both AO5 and AO2.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Apart from Miller, Williams monopolised Section B. This popularity is fully deserved: it is a rich, compelling and accessible play about which virtually all candidates wrote with an authentic sense of personal engagement. Even those with the most rudimentary literary acumen wrote as though the study of the play had been a pleasurable and valuable experience.

Question 17 predictably dominated. Responses on the whole were thorough and focused, and so they should be: it is quite hard to think of anything Blanche says or does which isn't moulded by obsession with appearance. Almost no candidates restricted themselves to physical appearance; her need to hang on to her plantation status and desire to appear chaste were universally recognised. The incongruity of her arrival, her attempted seduction of Mitch, her dressing up as the play nears its climax, were all regularly and properly examined in varying degrees of detail. Outstanding candidates probed further, with one pointing out that her monologue on the deaths of the Dubois family paints her as a suffering martyr in contrast to Stella's lecherous traitor. Another claimed, credibly, that even Blanche's exit line as she is taken to the asylum is not without an element of self-dramatisation.

A smaller number turned to Question 18 on the role of alcohol in the play, and well-informed and confident they were. The broad strokes were all there - Blanche's drinking to escape reality, Stanley's to assert masculinity, Mitch's for Dutch courage. But the play reeks of booze, and more intrepid candidates branched out - the prostitute rolling the drunk, Stanley's beer bottle boiling over, the implications of Blanche's announced aversion to beer, the way Williams carefully distances Stella from her sister's and her husband's drinking. Even the Coke stain on Blanche's dress (emblematic of the new America) can be allowed significance.

WAITING FOR GODOT

The numbers of candidates for Beckett is much smaller than for Miller or Williams, but the standard of the answers was, as in previous series, very high. It was evident that the text had been taught with love and studied with a growing realisation of the myriad potential of theatre.

Question 19 offered its own structure, the tragic and comic elements in the play. The comedy was probably the more successfully dealt with - cross-talk, slapstick, black comedy - but the tragic predicament of Didi and Gogo was also recognised. Sophisticated candidates pointed out that because a play is tragic it does not preclude hope. Even at the end, they are still waiting, therefore still hoping. Most considerations of Pozzo and Lucky were detailed and addressed both key elements in the question.

Violence in the play, in response to Question 20, was treated with equal confidence. The apparently daily beatings, Pozzo's torture of Lucky, and Didi and Gogo's psychological pain were all adduced in support of Beckett's evocation of cruelty.

Context - the Theatre of the Absurd, the Resistance, existentialism - was on the whole grasped securely and integrated into a clear argument. It is very difficult to access the conventions of music hall, but some enterprising candidates referred to Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy and drew fascinating parallels between scenes from the films and passages from the play.

The majority of responses to *Godot* were impressive, pleasurable and illuminating. As one examiner commented, "It is splendid to see young people producing writing that is more humane, more lucid, and more excited about literature than much of what emerges from academia under the name of criticism."

Paper Summary

Based on performance on this paper, future candidates 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 direct your material 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.
- Enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.