

Examiners' Report

January 2013

International GCSE English Literature
(4ET0)

Paper 2

Level 1/Level 2 Certificate in English
Literature
(KET0)

Paper 2

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Publications Code UG034469

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Introduction

There are two sections in the exam paper, equally weighted. In Section A, candidates have a choice between the unseen poem and prose extract. In Section B, they can choose Question 3 which has two named poems, and Question 4 in which one poem is named, and the candidate chooses a suitable poem to discuss with it.

In both sections there were a substantial number of very short answers which could hardly begin to address the bullet points, and which still used a considerable proportion of the already brief answer paraphrasing the poem or poems.

The ability to examine the writer's methods and to connect this to the ideas and feelings in the poem was what produced higher level answers.

Section A

Careful close reading of the unseen poem or extract was key here, though a surprising number of candidates seemed to read quickly and superficially which meant they often showed their lack of understanding of the pieces, misreading even the basic scenarios. Time spent on careful reading before rushing into writing is time worth spending.

Question 1

The most successful candidates writing about the unseen poem in question 1 were able to give a critical response to the content, language and ideas of the poem; the least successful responses were unable to show a full understanding of the content of the poem, which therefore posed problems when they tried to provide a critical analysis of the ideas and choice of language.

Higher level responses were able to explore the emotional shift in the poem from the stereotype of an 'old woman' to the more complex responses exploring the resilience of the old woman character. It was heartening to read responses which explored the themes of poverty and injustice in ways which were rooted in textual examples, rather than broader approaches which tended not to be supported by textual evidence. Some students stuck to exploring one or two points, often laboring them and leaving their responses undeveloped.

Most were able to comment on the use of 'you', and although few could actually accurately name this as second person, there was some valid comment on the possible effects. Many referred to the verse form, but often in terms of identification, with many finding it difficult to relate the form and structure to the meaning of the poem. There were a few complete misinterpretations where some candidates commented that the old woman

was just looking to have a nice day out and needed to find somebody to take her. However, on the whole most scripts showed an awareness of the impoverished conditions that the old woman suffered and her desperation for help; most used this as a starting point to show how sympathy was created.

Many responses attempted to explore the phrases 'tags along', 'hobbles', 'bullet holes' and 'shatterproof crone.' The last of these proved to be a discriminator, with some candidates able to move away from purely feeling sorry for the old woman and look beyond this to discuss the conflicting emotions between the old begging woman and the speaker. Some higher level candidates commented on the images of the hills and the temple, developing their ideas by relating this to the woman's life and not just her aged appearance. What served to discriminate between candidates was an understanding of the shift at the end of the poem. One candidate wrote: "The fact that she is 'shatterproof' suggests that whatever has made her so poor and empty has actually made her stronger". In addition some candidates identified how the tone in the poem changes from frustration to shame using both structure and language features to support their ideas.

Question 2

Most candidates were able to comment effectively on at least some aspects of Santiago's character including poverty, conscientiousness, his independence, ambition and love of learning and reading. There were supported comments on his care of the sheep, though not every candidate inferred ideas about his character from this. Many of them focused on description rather than analysing language.

The ways in which candidates explored Santiago's dream helped to discriminate between responses. There were some very mature and perceptive interpretations of Coelho's depiction of the dream, with candidates drawing out symbolic connections between the half-destroyed roof and glimpse of the stars and Santiago's characterisation. Lower level responses tended to focus primarily on Santiago's loneliness. Some candidates did explore biblical interpretations relating to Santiago as a Jesus figure, his 'flock' and the thicker book as the bible. Where these were rooted in textual references, with attention to the writer's craft, such interpretations were awarded appropriately. More successful responses were able to explore the layers of meaning in this short extract, from ideas of loneliness, to Santiago's bond with the animals, and his relationship to the natural world. Discussions of structure and form were less well realised. Some candidates did comment on the opening short sentence, while others attempted to over analyse paragraph length, losing connection between form and ideas. Some candidates commented on the simplicity and sparseness of the language, linking it to Santiago's way of life.

Section B

In both questions students have to write about two poems. They do not need to compare both poems though it is quite acceptable for them to do so. Some candidates found comparison and contrast quite difficult, and fared better if they focused first on one poem, then the other. The questions themselves link the poems by theme, and it might be helpful for candidates to concentrate on exemplification via the two poems, but without necessarily making contrasts or comparisons throughout, as some tried to do.

The choice of the second poem in Question 4 was important, in that it needed to provide sufficient relevant material. Some choices were difficult to support, and proved unhelpful to the candidate.

The instruction 'Support your answer with examples from the poems' is given in both questions, and it is important for candidates to choose their examples carefully, to use a range rather than labouring one or two, and to comment on presentation and not just content.

Question 3

Most candidates were able to offer some comments on both poems with most of these focusing on the notion of racism in *Telephone Conversation* and hypocrisy in society in *Once Upon a Time*.

There was a good deal of comment on the 'racism' of 'Telephone Conversation': in fact many responses came across as more sociological than literary. Candidates tended to be indignant and aghast at the landlady's responses, with valid references to the essential coarseness and ignorance of the woman, contrasted to the more subtle and intelligent voice of the speaker, but this could be at the expense of dealing with the poet's techniques and poetic purposes. Centres might be advised to move away from over emphasising the social, cultural and historical context and focus on the ways in which the poet sets up the dramatic relationship between the speaker and landlady.

Almost all candidates who answered this question supported their ideas of racism through the use of the capitalised quotation "ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?" Some scripts discussed how the African speaker is polite and tries to use humour, such as "brunette" and "blond", while other candidates went a little further suggesting that the use of his humour and wit was a striking contrast to the landlady's ignorance. Comments based on structure noted the form of the poem as one long stanza and stated that this may be used to reflect the composition of an actual conversation.

There were some basic misunderstandings, with, for example, a significant number of candidates not realising that the description of the landlady in lines 8 to 9 is what the speaker imagines the landlady to be like, based on

her voice, not the poet's own description. A number of candidates referred to the 'bartender' because they did not understand the word 'landlady' in that context. Several candidates showed very little grasp of the reasons for the conversation, misunderstanding what the speaker was actually trying to do.

For the second poem most showed that they understood the speaker's remorse for the way he has allowed society to change him; they were also aware that he wanted to return to a time of innocence. However examiners felt that there was not enough deeper exploration of some of the language choices: candidates used examples such as "snake's bare fangs", supporting ideas of false smiles but not attempting to suggest the symbolic meaning of danger or threat. Those who commented on structure in this poem seemed to focus on the repetition of "show me..." and explored the effects of this quite convincingly. Only a small number of candidates recognised the concept of the "fairy tale" with a limited number effectively linking this to the notion of a cautionary tale and the idea of fantasy.

Question 4

'War Photographer' appeared to cause more difficulties than any other poem that candidates wrote about. Although virtually all, not surprisingly given the title, were aware that the poem concerned a photographer whose job was to take photographs in time of war, the language and imagery proved quite a challenge to many. Images such as 'spools of suffering', 'all flesh is grass', a half-formed ghost' and 'a hundred agonies in black and white' all, along with others, caused problems of interpretation. Conversely, the density and complexity of the imagery enabled the most able students to shine and produce some excellent work. There were also comments suggesting that the images and feelings in the poem developed along with the photographs, a concept that many candidates understood and could support to varying degrees. A small number of candidates did not grasp the basic scenario, and thought that the photographer in the poem was a soldier.

Some candidates spent a lot of time exploring the named poem 'War Photographer' but responded only briefly to the second poem. The choice of a second poem also presented difficulties. Whilst the majority opted for 'Mother in a Refugee Camp' followed at some distance by 'Prayer Before Birth', other choices were more difficult to sustain. 'Poem at Thirty-Nine' and 'Remember' were popular but did not provide a great deal of material for comment. A not insignificant number chose to discuss 'Hide and Seek' on the pretext that the child was hiding from soldiers. One candidate thought that both 'War Photographer' and 'Remember' were about soldiers. Some candidates who selected poems that were not clearly appropriate made a few relevant comments based on pain and suffering but the majority failed to link their ideas to the question effectively and simply tried to note down everything that they understood about them. However, many of the candidates who answered this question by making comparisons between the two poems did it successfully by linking the themes and language choices

and giving an overall evaluation of how pain and suffering was presented in each poem.

Conclusion

Where candidates were least successful in their responses, literary devices were either identified without explanation or were simply listed in what appeared to be a checklist of observations; it would be more effective for candidates to pick out a smaller number of techniques and analyse them in detail, rather than trying to identify as many devices as possible. 'Feature-spotting' is no substitute for genuine analysis. The ability to examine the writer's methods and to connect this to the ideas and feelings in the poems was what produced higher level answers.

The handling of form and structure was often disappointing in that there was much mention of stanzas, rhyme schemes, caesuras and enjambment, but frequently there was minimal or unconvincing explanation of how these contributed to the thought and feelings in the poem, and little attempt to assess the possible effects on the reader.

A surprising number of candidates appeared to have little understanding of the poems they had studied, not even comprehending the basic situation and the voice of the poem.

Many candidates resorted to paraphrase, for both unseen and previously studied work. They need to consider all the bullet points in Section A, and respond to the prompts which focus on presentation.

The distinguishing feature of the strongest responses was their sophisticated and sensitive analysis of technique, often showing a mature understanding of the poets' effects and of how these had been achieved.

There was some remarkably accomplished work produced in these exam conditions, and credit should be given to those who achieved this, writing fluently and lucidly under time constraints.

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Order Code UG034469 January 2013

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