

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H472

For first teaching in 2015

H472/01 Autumn 2020 series

Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.



Reports for the autumn 2020 series will provide a broad commentary about candidate performance, with the aim for them to be useful future teaching tools. As an exception for this series they will not contain any questions from the question paper nor examples of candidate responses.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

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Paper 1 series overview

Key point call out

H472/01 (Drama and Poetry pre-1900) is one of the components which make up OCR's A Level in English Literature. The examination requires candidates to write about a Shakespeare play of their choice (from a set list of six texts) firstly commenting on a 'context' passage and secondly responding to an essay question. In the second half of the examination candidates choose one of six questions and write an essay comparing two texts (one drama and one poetry) from a selection of ten works – in all – written before 1900. This is a closed text examination.

Candidates are likely to perform well on the paper if they keep in mind the dominant assessment objective for each part: AO2 [linguistic analysis] in Section 1(a); AO5 [different interpretations] in Section 2(b); AO3 [the significance and influence of contexts] in Section 2. They will also succeed if they bear in mind the importance of coherent, accurate expression (AO1 – which applies in all three parts of the paper).

<i>Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:</i>	<i>Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used the time available effectively • Were able to think flexibly in the examination • Paid attention to the requirements of the assessment objectives for each question • Made appropriate question choices • Answered the questions • Used quotation effectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempted to write too much in the time available • Resorted to lengthy narration of plot • 'Twisted' a question to write on a preferred topic • Offloaded large amounts of pre-prepared material • Allowed complex technical vocabulary to overwhelm the responses • Paid little attention to the appearance, legibility and technical accuracy of their responses.

Scripts seen this autumn reflected the fact that this was an unusual series for the component. It was rare to see scripts at the most extreme ends of the marking range. A large number of the scripts seen had a notably idiosyncratic quality to them, often with a good deal of personal response. An original approach sometimes succeeded when candidates answered the questions chosen and remembered the specific requirements for assessment. Many candidates were able to respond flexibly to the specific requirements of the questions set. Some responses had a rather spontaneous, unplanned quality to them. This sometimes paid off in terms of overall achievement. Overall, there was rather less tortured reference than usual to complex and obscure literary terminology (for its own sake). Candidates tended to use the time available effectively, although it was notable that a number of candidates only managed to attempt two of the three parts of the paper. As in previous series, some very long responses were seen; these did not always help the candidate. There was a strong sense that the presentation and accuracy of most typed work has improved (perhaps in the light of earlier comments made about these areas). There were quite a lot of references in this series to the Black Lives Matter movement and to the current global COVID-19 pandemic. All the comments made in this report should be read in the context of the fact that the entry for this component was very small indeed in comparison with annual summer norms.

Section 1 Part (a) overview

Key point call out

Some impressive responses were seen to Part (a) Shakespeare questions. It is also worth reminding centres once again of OCR's stated policy to select passages for consideration in Part (a) from the Alexander text of Shakespeare's works. This will have implications for the choice of edition (which is never an insignificant matter when preparing to study these plays) made for use in the classroom. A significant number of candidates in the current series seemed to find this part of the paper challenging (some leaving it out altogether). Reasons for this can only be speculative but might have something to do with some candidates' lack of familiarity with the selected passages if they had chosen not to re-read the text thoroughly since their last acquaintance with it in the classroom – possibly several months previously. Progress seems to have been made by candidates when discussing the terms 'prose', 'poetry', 'blank verse', etc. There was also impressive emphasis on dramatic effects in the chosen passages in this series. Some candidates still chose to comment inaccurately on "Shakespeare's use" of editorially imposed punctuation such as exclamation marks.

A few *Coriolanus* answers were seen although this was not a popular choice. Some candidates did choose to comment on developments in the character of Coriolanus apparent in this passage, and on the interplay of his personal and political lives, as well as on some of the unusually vivid imagery in the passage. Volumnia's sway over her son, as well the absence of Virgilia, were sometimes mentioned. The rhetorical tone of the flawed hero was also emphasised by some candidates.

Hamlet was by far the most popular choice for this part of the paper. Some candidates displayed lack of clarity about the linguistic structure of the passage (prose or verse?). The ambiguity of the tone, and the complexity of the relationships, between these characters was often emphasised. Many candidates chose to concentrate on the significance of Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man!" speech in the passage. There was emphasis on both the nihilistic and comic elements in the passage – and many candidates chose to employ the language of 'meta-theatre' in their discussions.

Measure for Measure was a fairly popular choice. Again, there was some lack of clarity in the use of the terms 'verse' and 'prose' in some responses. Most candidates recognised this passage as the conclusion of the play; many chose to comment on the dramatic impact of the passage in this context. The linguistic dominance of the Duke was often discussed in the context of the interjected comments of other characters, and also the complete silence of Isabella.

Only a very small number of candidates chose to answer on *Richard III*. Some reference was made to the element of performance and self-conscious theatricality (typical of this play) apparent in the passage.

The Tempest was a fairly popular choice. Some candidates relished the opportunity to discuss obvious dramatic effects in the passage, to comment on the range of characters, and to describe the particularly vivid language in evidence here (with its numerous effects). Some candidates chose to comment on the clear elements of comedy, and also on the effect of the sense of two varied 'halves', in the passage.

Twelfth Night was quite a popular choice. Some candidates seemed uncertain about the events of the plot at this stage in the play. Many responses chose to comment on the sense of "loose ends being tied up" at this stage in the drama, and about the sense of clarity emerging in the language of both Olivia and Malvolio after what they have been through. The Clown's contrasting prose utterances often proved to be a source of further comment.

Section 1 Part (b) overview

Key point call out

Some very impressive responses were also seen to Part (b) Shakespeare questions. Candidates often seemed to bear in mind the fact that there will always be some sort of link or connection between the content of the set passage in Part (a) and the Part (b) essay question on the same Shakespeare play. Many candidates are now familiar with the fact that the approach to this part of the paper can be quite different from that for the Shakespeare context question (with the need for a structured, developing argument in the case of the (b) essay). As ever, it was impressive to note that many candidates engaged with a wide range of critical and performance material in this part of the paper (often in a lively, personal way).

Candidates seemed well prepared to respond to the question on *Coriolanus* (although some candidates did not help themselves by providing only generalised character sketches of Coriolanus). Candidates cited a wide variety of moments from the play in discussion of the topic. Many candidates chose to agree with the view in the prompt quotation. The general sense was that, although Coriolanus is a flawed politician, he is not without political insight.

Hamlet was a very popular choice and a wide range of responses appeared. Many candidates chose to focus their response on the relationship between Hamlet and the friends he talks to in the Part (a) passage (which was perfectly acceptable) although others were keen to explore ideas of 'friendship' and 'loyalty' in much wider contexts. Horatio was a frequent focus in many responses. Loyalty between partners and lovers was a clear concern for some. The usual wide range of critical and performance material was cited – including some mention of the Stoppard play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

The *Measure for Measure* question seemed to be very popular with many candidates. A large number of different interpretations appeared (and these were frequently supported by references to critical views and to different performance versions of the concluding scene of the play as presented in the Part (a) passage). Some successful candidates chose to focus impressively on the use of the word 'moral' in the prompt quotation. The character of Lucio seems to appeal to many candidates, and a number of lively interpretations of his role in the play were incorporated into responses.

The *Richard III* option was not a popular question, but a small number of responses appeared – and these tended to agree with the proposal in the prompt quotation. Better responses tended to avoid the temptation to list and to narrate.

Candidates often seized the opportunity in the fairly popular *Tempest* question to address both magic and the weakness of characters as presented in the play. Some less successful responses tended to focus on one aspect or the other, without making the necessary implicit connection. Candidates presented a variety of views, and these were frequently backed up with reference to critical and (in particular) performance material. Prospero tended to feature as a central point of focus in many responses. Some candidates took the view that magic on the island in fact has the capacity to bring out the best in humanity.

Discussion of the conclusion of *Twelfth Night* was a fairly popular option. Some candidates chose merely to list the various characters in the text and to outline their position at the end of the play. Others adopted a more subtle approach and, with the aid of performance and critical evidence, presented a unifying view of the play's concluding message. Most responses proffered the view that the dominating tone of deception and confusion in the play is dispelled as it reaches its conclusion.

Section 2 overview

Key point call out

Candidates once again seem to have responded well to the advice to think ahead and plan in order to make the best question choice for their combination of texts (although examiners certainly have no preconceived notions about this). Once again it was evident that the selection of questions provided enabled candidates to write about every possible combination of set texts available - and from a number of different angles. There continues to be a hierarchy of popularity when it comes to the texts on the set lists. This was even more pronounced than usual in the current series. The Chaucer, Webster, Milton, Rossetti and Ibsen texts were very popular choices. Fewer generalisations about context (for example, "the Victorians") appeared than usual in this series. Some very long responses to this part of the paper were seen.

Some responses to the question about passionate words and the actions that accompany them were seen. Some candidates focused more on one element of the prompt quotation than the other; some impressive responses tried to synthesise both parts. There was a general view that the link between passionate words and foolish behaviour was strong – and it was possible to demonstrate this in a wide variety of text choice combinations. The question encouraged in some candidates discussion of both linguistic effects and character/thematic developments.

The 'wisdom' option proved to be a popular question. Candidates chose to explore wisdom (or the lack of it) in a wide variety of text combinations. The general view expressed tended to agree with the proposal in the prompt quotation. The (arguably) subjective nature of wisdom prompted some interesting discussion by some candidates. Contextual material chosen to support arguments in connection with this question could sometimes have been rather more precise or specific.

The effects of ambition provided a popular question, and candidates chose to apply it to a large number of text combinations. Ambition (of various kinds) was identified as a key element of many literary texts. Some candidates were able to contextualise ambition successfully, and in relative terms, in connection with the texts they had chosen to compare. The dangerous effects of 'over-reaching' (often seen in a religious context) provided a particular focus for some responses.

'Clashes of opinion' was the source of another question of some popularity. Candidates who had chosen a wide variety of text pairings found that they were able to apply the ideas proffered here to the characters and situations presented in their selected dramatic and poetic works. The key terms 'differences', 'clashes' and 'human societies' led candidates off in a number of different directions, and some carefully chosen contextual material illuminated the best responses at times. Personal views about the place of ambition also made an appearance.

The 'secrecy' option was not a popular question, although some good responses were seen. 'Secrets' and 'secrecy' were interpreted in a number of ways by candidates, and the terms were sometimes applied appropriately to a number of different text choices (and there was sometimes useful employment of relevant contextual material to support arguments).

Writers exploring complex issues provided a popular question – perhaps surprisingly so. Some candidates seemed to relish the opportunity to consider the place and role of literature (often in the context of their own personal experience). Only candidates who were able to apply these ideas to their chosen set texts, and to answer the question with relevance to suitable contexts, made the most of the opportunity to succeed fully. From an examiner's perspective it was a pleasure to see so many candidates engaging with key concepts of literary theory in order to address this pressing question at a time of national and global crisis.

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