

**A LEVEL**

**Examiners' report**

# **ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**H472**

For first teaching in 2015

**H472/02 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 answers.

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 2 series overview

This was an unusual series with a small number of candidates. Nevertheless, there was some interesting and lively work submitted, and examiners saw responses on all five topics for the paper. Some candidates were very well prepared and wrote accomplished essays with detailed relevant support; there were also some brief, poorly prepared responses. The following report will focus mainly on American Literature 1880-1940, the Gothic and Dystopia; the remaining topics (Women in Literature and the Immigrant Experience) attracted very few responses.

<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"> <li>• privileged textual analysis in the critical appreciation section of the paper</li> <li>• wrote evenly weighted responses to the two questions</li> <li>• offered consistently detailed responses with frequent references to primary and secondary material</li> <li>• focused closely on the set question.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allowed contextual material to dominate the critical appreciation</li> <li>• wrote at greater length on the comparative essay and more briefly on the critical appreciation</li> <li>• offered responses which were generalised and based on unsupported assertions</li> <li>• depended heavily on prepared material insufficiently adapted to the question's demands.</li> </ul>

## American Literature 1880 - 1940

The critical appreciation question for this topic proved to be accessible and most candidates understood that the events took place during the Great Depression of the 1930s. All candidates gathered that the passage is seen from Studs' point of view, but many missed the fact that, although the passage is written in the third person, Studs' vernacular often emerges during the narrative ('here was a guy who was plenty hard up...'). Answers often registered Studs' feelings of shame connected with appearing poor and disadvantaged, especially in front of a woman. Fewer discussed the remarkably upbeat and optimistic tone from the stranger with 'discoloured teeth' or related this to ideas about success in American Literature. Some candidates looked for clues in the passage to help discussion of set texts, and got their wires crossed for different reasons: they associated suffering during the Depression with the Okies from *The Grapes of Wrath* and therefore found the urban setting confusing; they were confused to find a 'flapper' appearing during the Depression because they associated flappers with *The Great Gatsby* and the boom of the Jazz Age.

### Key point call out

The set texts can usefully inform but should not interfere with interpretation of the critical appreciation passage; wider reading experience should help with this problem.

The comparative essays for the American Literature option were inevitably varied in quality. The most popular choice was the (c) option about greed and corruption; the better responses here ensured that they had a working definition of these key terms. Weaker responses often substituted any kind of disappointing or bad behaviour and fell back on prepared material which was not always ideally suited to this question.

## The Gothic

Candidates found plenty to discuss in the descriptions of the cemetery in the unseen extract and were usually adept at identifying Gothic tropes. Better responses moved on from this stage of trope-spotting to identifying the other key features of the passage, such as the character of the first person narrator with his reputedly 'frail nerves'; the apparent confidence of his companion, Warren, for whom the reader may feel some anxiety; the unexpected appearance of the trappings of modern life, the electric lantern and the portable telephone. Context proved to be a little tricky for some candidates: their instinct suggested that this was quite traditional Gothic but given the twentieth century date they wanted to find evidence of a more psychological treatment of the genre. Some candidates, as often happens with this topic, fell back on assertions of Gothic quality and seemed at times mainly concerned to test the passage for its Gothic credentials; better treatments of context found illuminating links to other texts they had read (especially *Dracula*), but ensured that they kept these brief and soon returned to the set extract.

**Key point call out**

Answers on the Gothic are sometimes inclined to fall into the trap of circularity: Gothic writing often has a dark setting, the setting here is dark so this is a typical Gothic extract. References to known Gothic texts supply a helpful reference point to avoid this circularity.

Choice of comparative essay was spread between the options, although many once again chose Question (c). Responses to the (a) option on placing ordinary characters under extraordinary pressure often suffered from a failure to consider what they understood to be 'ordinary'. The (b) question, that settings often reflect the mood of the characters, sometimes suffered from too vague a memory of the texts; although setting was always discussed, the 'moods of the characters' was an element often omitted. The (c) question, that 'Gothic fiction feeds on a pleasing sort of terror', caused difficulties for candidates who could not find a way of understanding how 'terror' can be 'pleasing'; the best responses, however, suggested that this is a genre which caters for the desire of readers to be frightened and to enjoy it, much as the horror movie does for many people still.

**Dystopia**

Candidates engaged very positively with the critical appreciation passage for this topic, many picking out the frequent use of questions in the narrative to communicate confusion and also demonstrating that the central figure, Andrew Gill, is very much an 'Everyman' figure, ordinary and flawed and pitched into a remarkable and threatening situation. Answers frequently compared him with Winston Smith from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially in view of his health problems and the sexual adventure which preoccupies him. The best responses made something of the VW bus which represents normality in a dangerous and rapidly changing world. Contextual material was variable in quality: a number of candidates successfully brought the Cold War into discussion which worked well for them as long as the response did not stray into sustained historical debate. Some were confused about historical events and dates and included a number of significant errors in their responses.

**Key point call out**

It's always helpful to remember that Literature should remain at the centre of responses, and that the best contextual discussion often consists of relating the passage briefly to other relevant literary texts; candidates are not expected to have detailed historical knowledge to support their reading of unseen material.

All the comparative essay questions on dystopia attracted responses this session. In the (a) option on bleak settings, success depended on being able to introduce examples of settings from the texts. The opening of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was popular in this regard, but some candidates struggled to generate examples elsewhere and were inclined to assert bleakness without demonstrating it. The (b) option on what most referred to as 'the new normal' generated some effective debate, with candidates suggesting that only some characters, Offred in particular, show significant adaptability; others, they argued, never stop striving for freedom. The question on elaborate systems of social class again required appropriate textual knowledge and in some cases illustration was very detailed and effective.

## Women in Literature

This topic was less popular than the first three but candidates were usually successful in their responses. Answers to the critical appreciation showed very good understanding of the passage and discussed the way in which much of it focuses on Basil's assessment of Alix; his tendency to watch and weigh up the women around him led to some thoughtful discussion of the 'male gaze'. The best responses showed how the point of view actually starts with Alix, her voice emerging through the narrative ('rather cross...'), and then moves on to Basil ('he would have liked a healthy, pretty, jolly sort of girl...'). Contextual discussion tended to make good use of other literary texts, in particular *Mrs Dalloway* with its post-World War One setting.

The comparative essays ranged from good to excellent. Almost all tackled the (b) option on independence of thought and action in *Mrs Dalloway*; connections and comparisons were drawn with a number of novels from the prescription including *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Bell Jar*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Answers were usually packed with detail, but the weaker ones were sometimes narrative-based; the best responses were distinguished by clear structure and controlled, intelligent argument.

## The Immigrant Experience

There were very few responses to this topic, the best of which were excellent. Some answers responded with especial sensitivity to the passage, noting its moving qualities and discussing how nostalgia is a key element of many texts dealing with the experience of immigration; candidates suggested that the emotional control of the central figure is testament to her history of suffering and endurance. The figure's reticence was seen in weaker answers as emerging from weaknesses in the writing.

There were some outstanding comparative essays, which were closely argued and fully illustrated with primary and secondary material. Useful comparisons were made by way of connection and comparison with *Brick Lane*, and in terms of context to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Weaker responses offered only generalised discussion in the comparative essay, with much less in the way of detail and quotation; there was some doubt as to the meaning of 'cultural origins'. The most popular essay topic was the (c) option on cultural origins.

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