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Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

J352
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Version 1

Contents

Introduction

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

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report. A full copy of the question paper can be downloaded from OCR.

Paper J352/02 series overview

Examiners once again enjoyed the range and commitment of responses by candidates to this paper. Teachers are to be congratulated on a greater understanding of the demands of this still relatively new specification. The approach to marking has once again emphasised positive reward for achievement against the Assessment Objectives wherever possible. The independent exercise of literary critical skills is rewarded, rather than a parade of textual or contextual knowledge or a listing of terminology for its own sake. While there was some evidence that increased familiarisation with texts would be beneficial, there was little doubt that candidates understood the tasks they were required to do, and the requirement to construct an informed personal response to them.

There were far fewer rubric infringements and incomplete scripts. However, some candidates misnumbered their responses, a significant number omitted the part b) poetry response and a few candidates attempted more answers than permitted (in these circumstances only the higher-marked response counts). Nevertheless, there were many Level 5 and Level 6 responses which demonstrated a mature critical style. It was also notable that most candidates achieved more even attainment between the different sections and between different parts of Section A, although performance in part b) in Section A was often relatively disappointing, to be targeted as an area for improvement. The nature of the questions and mark scheme allow reward for personal engagement, even when critical and analytical skills are less developed. Examiners will reward a valid response, rather than insist on accuracy and correctness: this is especially true in relation to unseen texts.

The structure of the paper and the skills credited in this paper are almost identical to those in Paper 1, although the texts are different. The marking approach and annotations used are the same, and the Principal Examiners mark across both papers to help reinforce parity of standards. Candidates were well prepared for the Section A part a) comparative poetry task in this paper and many wrote focussed, engaged responses of some length. The choice of a single poem for part b) makes the approach to the set poetry anthology more focussed. Attainment in the Shakespeare section allowed candidates to demonstrate confidence in their handling of context and appreciation of dramatic effectiveness.

The majority of candidates are now very familiar with the structure of the papers and the new form of assessment and coped remarkably well with 2 hour papers, the need to quote from memory and the evaluative nature of the tasks. There were some who struggled to write effectively about their texts especially where extracts are not reprinted in the paper, and there was a new tendency this year to make up quotations instead of using learned ones, and sometimes even to attempt comment on the language of an invented quotation. Candidates need to be aware that examiners know these texts very well indeed, and can tell a genuine response to the writer's language from a made up one.

The mark scheme continues to work effectively in distinguishing different levels of attainment. Most candidates were at some point in the paper able to develop reasonable personal responses to the texts and tasks, with some effective explanation of language, form and structure. Many demonstrated some critical style through analytical comment or clarity of understanding, supported by appropriate textual detail. An impressive number of responses were convincing in argument, perceptive in response to the texts, and sensitive to language, context and interpretative complexity.

Centres and teachers are to be congratulated very warmly on their hard work in preparing candidates, and candidates themselves on the evident rigour of their preparation. Many examiners' feedback was very positive about the fresh thinking and individual arguments produced by the candidates, and the intelligence of their skills in cross-referencing texts.

Section A overview

In part a) of this section, candidates are required to compare a poem from their studied poetry anthology cluster to a related unseen poem. The weighting of the marks in this section emphasises AO2, the analysis of language, form and structure using the terminology of the subject, but also places a strong emphasis on AO1, which combines understanding, integrated textual reference and personal response.

Linking the 'unseen' element of the paper thematically and stylistically to a studied poem allowed candidates to show their comparative and analytical skills without the scale of the task overwhelming them. These part a) responses were often the longest in the paper. The crossover with the analytical, evaluative and comparative skills also taught in preparation for the English Language paper was evident in the approach to language and structure, and to comparison of linked texts. As last year, examiners were impressed by how well these skills are taught, although this was sometimes at the expense of depth of knowledge of the poems themselves. This was exposed especially in part b) of the poetry question and there is still work to do to ensure that candidates really know the anthology poems well, and have an overview of their meaning, rather than a lexicon of poetic effects.

The 'Conflict' cluster proved even more popular than last year, but 'Love and Relationships' also received plenty of attention. A smaller, but still significant, number of candidates chose the thematically challenging poems in the 'Youth and Age' cluster. The poems in this cluster are demanding in terms of both subject matter and techniques, but it was pleasing to see how many candidates had risen to that challenge and how skilfully they had been prepared by their centres to take a slightly more experimental approach to poetry. Similarly, in the other clusters more familiar GCSE texts sit alongside some interesting new material, and it was good to see strong responses to Helen Maria Williams and to Mary Lamb, and appreciation that romantic poetry extends beyond the 'big six'.

In this year's paper, for each themed cluster, the unseen poem was chosen as an accessible foil to the poem selected from the anthology. Somewhat surprisingly, many candidates struggled to produce comprehensive or cohesive readings of the taught poems. However, comparative arguments were more successful and better sustained than last year, and most found plenty in the imagery of the unseen texts which they could explore in some detail. It is clear that many skills of poetry analysis are well-taught and candidates approach unseen poems with some confidence about what to explore, even when they are not fully understood. Nevertheless, it is surprising that AO1 should be weak when candidates are writing about a studied poem, and implies that greater depth of knowledge and understanding of all the poems in the anthology should be a priority for teachers. The OCR digital poetry anthology, which can be accessed easily and for free from the OCR subject webpage, gives particularly helpful guidance about how to explore the meanings of the poems.

We do not advocate a particular approach to 'scaffolding' and organising comparative responses because we do not want to see uniformity. Some candidates consider one poem, either taught or unseen, in some detail first before beginning to compare to the second poem, and this can work well, ensuring the first text is understood as a whole before isolating points of comparison and contrast. Nevertheless, the mark scheme particularly rewards sustained and interwoven comparison, so such responses might best begin with an introductory overview comparing similarities of theme, ideas, attitudes and style before looking in detail at what makes poems individual and different. Most candidates appreciated that comparison involves both similarities and differences and compared the texts throughout their response. This task requires some planning and a reasonable overview of the meaning of each poem before beginning to write, and it is useful to begin by exploring the common theme, and different treatments of it, before analysing language and structure. Less successful answers tried to compare rhyme schemes or constructed doubtful arguments about structure, such as the frequent assertion that the Thomas and Rossetti ('Love and Relationships' question) were incomplete sonnets, before looking at meaning.

In planning responses, many candidates made use of the bullet points to organise their answers. The bullet points are there to ensure that candidates address the Assessment Objectives and their relative weighting in this question. In part a) AO2 is more heavily weighted than AO1, so there are two bullets points on tone and language, and one on ideas and attitudes. While the bullets are helpful in suggesting that an overview of meaning and tone is helpful before looking into details of expression, they are not intended to provide a prescriptive essay plan. Strong responses integrated comment on language and its effects on the reader with the tone and impact of the writing. Most successful comments on structure were integrated within comment on language and meaning.

Structure in poetry is a way of organising meaning and not an end in itself. There is a frequent misconception that many candidates perhaps carry forward from their language work that it is necessary to have a separate paragraph on structure. Far too much emphasis is placed on punctuation without looking at its relationship to meaning, on counting stanzas, and syllables and listing rhymes, or assertions about the effect of enjambment to increase or decrease pace or 'make the poem flow'. Caesura, medial and terminal, abounded, most of which were actually just commas.

The employment of subject terminology is neither a separate assessment objective, nor a way of gaining extra marks: the strand in the mark scheme refers to the effective or competent 'use' of subject terminology as a tool of analysis and interpretation. There is an increasing tendency to believe that examiners are impressed by the use, usually inaccurately and without comment on effect, of Greek or Latin terminology in order to 'explain' English literature. Almost all instances of repetition are called 'anaphora' whether or not they occur at the beginning of a line of poetry; 'polyptoton', 'hyperbaton', 'graphology', 'asyndeton', 'polysyndeton' were all used liberally, rarely to any effect. 'Juxtapose' usually meant a simple contrast, while all questions were assumed to be 'rhetorical' - and a few were. Every contradiction was an 'oxymoron'. 'Semantic fields' abounded, and often led to listing rather than analysis. If such terminology is taught, it needs to be more securely understood.

In response to form and structure, there were a lot of assertions about the choice of 'open' or 'closed' form, which were seldom accurate or purposive, and many thought that any poem not in rhyming couplets was 'free verse'. Similarly, any equation of human feelings to the natural world was a 'pathetic fallacy', however accurate and purposive, and any comparison of animal, vegetable, mineral or object to a human being was a 'personification'. 'Anthropomorphism' was less popular this year than his cousin 'zoomorphism'. Sonnets appear to be understood as always about love, and therefore any poem which is or even looks like part of a sonnet must address the theme of love. That has not been the case since the 17th century: the sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth address many different subjects. Candidates would benefit from a more nuanced approach to the relationship between form and content.

Linguistic terminology also abounded. Some of this was not really appropriate subject terminology for literature, and candidates need to be aware that there are no extra marks for naming parts of speech (often incorrectly) or spotting premodifiers, adverbial phrases, fronted adverbials etc. without comment on their effect on the reader in the context of the text. More effective analysis focused on terminology and analytical skills more appropriate to the subject and to GCSE, such as the use of symbols, extended metaphors, other forms of imagery, tonal and rhythmic shifts and direct address to the reader. A greater understanding of irony would also be welcome.

There were far fewer instances of candidates wasting time in response to the poetry questions by writing about biographical, social or historical context, although there were a few, possibly in an attempt to pad answers out. AO3 is not assessed in this section, and historical context should only be mentioned if intrinsic to a poem's meaning. Even here, this can be a distraction: it is not helpful to read Edward Thomas as a typical First World War poet, Wilfred Owen was not a pacifist, and 'In Flanders Field' is not an attack on First World War generals. Candidates tend to assume that all poets are writing autobiographically, so Thomas Hardy was frequently understood to be writing about his frontline experiences in the Boer War (or indeed First World War), and William Blake was sometimes understood

to be confessing his own unresolved conflicts and career as a poisoner. 'The Man He Killed' is a very good text for teaching the act of poetic ventriloquism, and how poets can voice the experiences of others, as well as their own. It would be useful to teach candidates more about viewpoint and different perspectives in poetry, as well as narrative.

Most candidates had little difficulty in linking the poems effectively, and in making some comparisons of language, form and expression. There were very few who did not understand the comparative nature of this task, or that part (b) asks them to write about a single poem. However, some answers to part (a) were excessively long. Candidates who spent too long on part (a) often wrote very short answers to part (b) or to Section B. More awareness of the relative weighting of marks would be helpful for candidates, and this should be stressed in feedback after mock examinations.

Some candidates did not seem aware that in Section A part a) and part b) carry equal marks, and that the Shakespeare response in Section B carries as many marks as the two parts of Section A combined. Although candidates can answer questions in any order and many tackle Section B first, the poetry questions are best answered consecutively, as part b) is thematically related to part a). However, the wording of each task is slightly different (e.g. 'presents what people fight and die for'/ 'questions the things people fight for'), and some candidates appeared unaware of this. This is intended to help candidates, by guiding them to more specific comparisons in part a) and allowing a wider range of possible choices for part b).

A number of candidates made unwise choices of taught poems in part b) of Section A: it is important to choose a poem appropriate to the theme and question, and not simply to write about your favourite. Some forgot to compare in part a), or only wrote about a single poem, severely limiting their marks. A few attempted in part b) to compare anthology poems to the poems printed in part a), and some tried to write about more than one poem, or conflated different anthology poems in part b). They are only credited for their response to one poem, which should be detailed and accurate. While there were happily very few instances this year of candidates writing about poems from different clusters in part a) and part b), there were a few candidates – and more than last year – who wrote about poems that are not in the OCR anthology. While it is good to know that centres are encouraging wider reading of other texts for the unseen comparative element of the question, such answers cannot be credited at all.

These mistakes might be minimised by treating Section A as two parts of the same question, both in mock examinations and in timed practice, and by ensuring that candidates have a good understanding of the anthology poems from their studied cluster both individually and through thematic echoes and connections. In part b) of this section, candidates are required to choose another poem from their studied cluster to explore in response to the question set. The question is related to part a) but is usually wider in scope. Once again examiners reported seeing responses to part b) on almost every poem in the anthology, and among the delights of marking the paper were the individuality of answers and how well candidates expressed their personal response to the full range of poems from different historical periods. In this part of the question, AO1 and AO2 are equally weighted, as it was not expected that candidates would be able to write in detail about language when tackling a 'closed' text. However, stronger responses often surprised examiners not only by the depth and accuracy of quotation but also the ability to link structure to overall meaning and engage with details of language and imagery. Able candidates sometimes tackled the longer poems, such as 'Boat Stealing', 'Out, Out –' or texts as complex as 'Partition', 'Spring and Fall' and 'Love After Love' with sensitivity and flair. It is important that all candidates realise that they must address AO2 in response to this question, and that they cannot do so without learning quotations.

Some candidates certainly gained marks by their excellent preparation for this part of the paper. Nevertheless Section A part b) remains, rather disappointingly, the least successful section of the examination and would benefit from greater attention. Candidates need to know their poems better, and need to memorise more quotations from them. They also should develop supporting comment to apply to

those quotations, keeping a strong focus on how language and structure relate to meaning. A vivid and memorable collection of poems has been chosen for the anthology. If candidates develop a 'quotation bank' for each poem in their anthology cluster based on powerful and effective expression, alongside a brief thematic overview clearly stating the overall meaning of the poem, they will be well-prepared.

Question 1(a)

1 Love and Relationships

Read the two poems below and then answer both part a) and part b).

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on part a) and 30 minutes on part b).

a) Compare how the speakers in these poems express different ways in which love can be painful.

You should consider:
- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Most candidates were able to structure an effective comparison to ways in which both poems express the pain of love. It was surprising how many struggled with the studied anthology poem. The poem's comparison of 'true love' to 'less love' was too rarely understood: Thomas argues powerfully that it is better to have loved powerfully and painfully than to be trapped in the 'frozen drizzle perpetual' of an unloving relationship. The biographical context of this very late poem is disputed and irrelevant, but it should be clear from the text that the poem is about 'parting' and not necessarily about the end of a relationship; although the parting 'blackens a bright morrow', the heavens 'wait to be seen' so the argument of the first part of the poem is considerably more optimistic than its tone suggests. 'Mirage' is a less complex text, and candidates found it very accessible, often writing more confidently about it than the taught text. They appreciated that, like the Thomas poem, it depends on extended metaphor, this time of love as a 'dream', and the theme of 'hope' was effectively compared and contrasted in both. Rossetti's use of repetition and the assonance of 'harp' and 'heart' were often commented on, with some insight into the effectiveness of the imagery of 'silenced harp' and 'weeping willow'. Not many linked the first to the poet's own halting lyrical voice, and too many thought the second an example of personification. Nevertheless there was effective commentary on rhythm and enjambment in both poems, the sound effects of 'wrung' and 'snapt' and the equally melancholic imagery of the second half of Thomas's poem, 'removed eternally from the sun's law'.

Question 1(b)

b) Explore in detail how **one** other poem from your anthology presents relationships which lead to suffering.

[20]

Candidates this year selected from a narrower range of poems which express the suffering relationships can cause. Favourites were: 'A Broken Appointment', 'Long Distance II', 'A Song', 'Warming her Pearls' and 'Dusting the Phone'. Quite a number chose 'In Paris With You' although this required a rather partial reading of the poem, and some opted for 'Love After Love': the Walcott also requires some ingenuity of argument, as, like the Fenton, it actually expresses recovery after an unhappy relationship and is full of happier and more contented imagery. There appears to be a common reading of the Fenton that it expresses bitterness about the past, rather than enjoyment of the present moment: teenagers clearly believe it is unthinkable not to enjoy the clichés of Paris (the 'city of love') with your beloved, rather than to enjoy more intimate pleasures in a seedy hotel room. There are issues of tone to address here. More positively, in the 21st century, it was encouraging to see that candidates appreciate that love poetry is gender neutral, and that the beloved could be male or female. There were similarly sensitive responses to the Duffy and Kay poems. This year saw much better understanding of the Harrison sonnet, with sensitive readings of the sestet as well as the octave, although few understood the link between the poet ringing the 'disconnected number' and the poem's title, perhaps because the idea of a 'long distance' or trunk call is antiquated in the age of mobile devices.

There were some odd readings of the Hardy poem: some thought it was addressed to a prostitute and a few were distracted into semi-digested biography. Some sensitively addressed the poem's self-pitying notes and were critical of its gender stereotypes. However, the relationship between the speaker and the passing of time needs more sustained consideration. A few candidates, perhaps drawing on last year's paper, wrote about 'Morning Song' and possibly began to realise that it is difficult to connect that poem with this task. In contrast, the strong imagery of 'Warming Her Pearls' made for especially cogent and sustained analysis, drawing out the pain the maid derives from both proximity to, and distance from, her mistress. 'Dusting the Phone' was also well understood. Good answers to 'A Song' focused on the nautical imagery, as well as the misunderstanding between love and wealth, some even reading it contextually as an allegory of Empire. There were some effective responses to 'Fin de Fete' and 'Love and Friendship' which highlighted how imagery illustrates the pains of love.

Question 2(a)

2 Conflict

Read the two poems below and then answer both part a) and part b).

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on part a) and 30 minutes on part b).

a) Compare how these poems present what people fight and die for.

You should consider:
- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

This was by far the most popular question and generally worked well as a comparison, although not all realised how much the poems differ in their attitude to patriotism. It was perhaps inevitable that some candidates, drawing on knowledge of other First World War poems, read 'In Flanders Field' as an anti-war statement, as they were not aware of its date or background although such a reading needs to almost ignore the clear surface meaning of the final stanza 'Take up our quarrel with the foe'. There was a lot of reference to the symbolic significance of the 'poppies' as candidates were not expected to know that the symbolism of the poppy postdates this poem, and is indeed a direct result of it. While candidates could be forgiven for reading the poem as more bitter and ironic than McCrae intended, it was more surprising to read so many unironic readings of 'Flag', as this is a studied text, and recordings of Agard reading it are easy to access. Some candidates, in the era of Trump and Brexit, clearly struggle with the notion of any criticism of blind patriotism and unthinking sacrifice to a 'piece of cloth' and want to read the poem against the grain or misunderstand its tone. While there was a lot of analysis of the choice of verbs in the first line ('Fluttering', 'unfurling' etc. – although these were often mistaken for adjectives) there was less appreciation of the complex imagery of each third line. A deeper understanding of this poem can be taught simply by pointing out the ambiguous nature of the cliché 'brings a nation to its knees'. Many candidates commented effectively on this poem's question and answer structure, use of voice and tone and memorable imagery.

Close reading of imagery allowed for comparison with McCrae's poem, although its tone is contrasting. Most wrote effectively about the images of the poppies and the rows of crosses; some thought the larks 'still bravely singing' were a metaphor for the soldiers still fighting, and quite a number were unaware that the larks were birds. Those who understood the poem well appreciated, in the second stanza, that it is voiced by the dead, and analysed the image of the torch, in the third stanza, some comparing it with the Olympic torch, and comprehended that the fight with 'the foe' was ongoing. Good responses contrasted this patriotic and combative image with Agard's final stanza; they picked up the veiled threat in the phrase 'if ye break faith…We shall not sleep'. This is a good example of how meaning can only be fully understood when candidates read the whole sentence, moving through the enjambment to get to the main clause. Grammar and technical terminology can help candidates to appreciate poetry when used to support clarity of understanding, instead of feature-spotting.

Question 2(b)

b) Explore in detail how one other poem from your anthology questions the things people fight for.

[20]

Popular choices were 'The Man He Killed', 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' and 'A Poison Tree', although candidates who chose the Blake often struggled to connect it with the task of questioning things people fight for. This was easier to address for those who wrote about Douglas's '*Vergissmeinnicht*', but most who chose this text had difficulty in moving beyond a few striking images. Understanding of the situation in the whole poem, describing the poet returning to the scene of battle three weeks later, and observing the body and effects of the enemy combatant and realising that he too was a human, although they saw him 'almost with content', needs more emphasis for future candidates. There was evidence of strong understanding in responses to 'Where Are They Now', 'Partition' and 'Honour Killing', although the latter two also needed quite complex arguments to connect them to the task. Some pointed out that the speaker in the latter is fighting for her right to question the things people fight for. Some, probably correctly given the poem's inspiration, felt that she has already paid the ultimate price for doing so. There were some very good answers to 'Lament' focusing on the environmental price for conflict; there are good resources on this poem, not least the poet's own website, which provide essential background for full understanding. These texts also have memorable images which candidates enjoyed recalling and dissecting. Once again, few who wrote on 'Punishment' had a clear grasp of the poem's background, although they could write with pity about the image of the tortured girl. Many of those who chose Byron struggled to connect with the title, but those who did wrote memorably about how the poem questions not just the arrogance of the 'Assyrian' but also the brutal nature of the salvation brought by the 'Angel' of the Lord, which showed appropriate understanding of the poet himself and the poem's 1815 context.

While it is important to stress that context is not assessed in responses to this question, it can help candidates to understand the poems better, and appreciate the nature of the poet's response to conflict. There were only a few answers to 'Boat Stealing' but they did link the poet's moral questioning to the causes and consequences of conflict in interesting ways. At their best, responses to this question and these anthology poems cited above show critical thinking skills, reflection and evaluation of different attitudes to conflict and its resolution. Better answers to Owen understood the pathos of the sestet, as well as the sounds of conflict in the octave. Few had a good understanding of the church imagery sustained throughout the poem: most thought an anthem was a patriotic hymn, and did not pick up the Anglican allusions of 'anthem', 'passing-bells', 'orisons', 'choirs', 'candles' and 'pall'. Hardy's poem, however, was well understood, and those who looked more closely at it appreciated the way the poem communicates the voice of the ordinary soldier.

Question 3(a)

3 Youth and Age

Read the two poems below and then answer both part a) and part b).

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on part a) and 30 minutes on part b).

a) Compare how these poems present babies and their parents' feelings for them.

You should consider:
- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

The candidates who study this selection are almost without exception very well prepared. Most understood that Plath's poem describes an unborn child 'feet to the stars' and enjoyed the lively imagery of the 'high riser', 'snug as a bud' and 'Jumpy as a Mexican bean', although some found sadder and more alienated imagery in the comparison with a dodo or the similes 'gilled like a fish 'mute as a turnip'. Most candidates assumed that D. H. Lawrence was a mother rather than a father, but this was understandable as there is no indication of gender in the unseen poem itself, and it did not cause any difficulties in constructing an effective comparison. Most contrasted Plath's excitement with Lawrence's concern ('Like a burden she hangs on me') and compared Plath's similes, assonance and consonant sounds with Lawrence's bee similes, tactile imagery and sense of 'a heaviness and a weariness'. A few were too quick to assume the child was dead or dying, but most understood that she was asleep and hanging on the life of her parent, and were able to contrast the anticipation of Plath's nine months (from the Fourth/ Of July to All Fools' Day') with Lawrence's sense of the weight of responsibility.

Differences between poems are more illuminating than comparisons, and as for the 'Conflict' comparison question candidates generally wrote more interesting and convincing answers when they saw what made each poem distinct instead of trying to make them too similar. Some candidates were over-hasty in diagnosing post-natal depression or condemning irresponsible or unloving mothers: it would be better to focus on words and images rather than rush to amateur psychology when reading poetry, and that is especially true when writing about Sylvia Plath, or the powerful and complex emotions of parenthood.

Question 3(b)

b) Explore in detail one other poem from your anthology that presents a response to children or babies.

[20]

Popular choices in response to this question included 'Red Roses' and 'Love'. There were also plenty of responses to 'Midnight on the Great Western', 'Holy Thursday' and 'Baby Song'. The question was certainly broad enough to write about a good range of texts, and there were some excellent answers on 'Spring and Fall', 'Out, Out –' and 'My First Weeks' and 'Cold Knap Lake' showing depth of understanding of these complex and demanding poems. As last year, candidates wrote with sensitivity and feeling about the very challenging relationship between Tommy and the Blue Lady in 'Red Roses', expressing horror at his misunderstanding of his own abuse but often understanding the affection he still feels for his mother, and sometimes appreciating her own difficulties. Such thoughtful engagement with a disturbing but very contemporary topic demonstrates good teaching and effective learning. Many drew out sophisticated perceptions from Tommy's innocent language and the poet's similes. There was also better engagement with how Gunn's 'Baby Song' gives voice to a child, and with the complexity of feelings of love, unpreparedness and awe in Kate Clanchy's 'Love'. Readings of Thomas Hardy were more sophisticated here, with appreciation of the experienced and knowing observer, contrasted with the innocent child with a 'third-class' ticket stuck in his hat band, and aware of the uncertainty of the isolated boy's future. Similar contrasts of innocence and experience were effective in commentary on Hopkins and Blake, suggesting the thematic links in this cluster are well understood. Stronger responses also showed understanding of the task, more focused on the responses of adults than the unhappiness of children.

Section B overview

Examiners were particularly pleased to note that Shakespeare's plays are clearly taught as drama, and candidates understand not just characterisation but also scenic form and genre. There were some highly effective comments on staging and use of dramatic techniques such as soliloquy, while tragic form and the conventions of comedy were also well understood. Some candidates made purposeful reference to individual productions and different interpretations of characters. Most responded to Shakespeare's vivid expression by quoting extensively and often accurately. Effective commentary on Shakespeare's poetry and imagery was rarer, and candidates might be advised to make more use of the printed extract if opting for the extract-based question, in order to address AO2.

Candidates can choose either an extract-based question leading to a whole-text based response or a discursive question on the whole-text. In this series, the discursive questions were much more infrequently attempted than last year. This may have been because they were based around slightly more peripheral characters (although such questions do not have to have a character focus) or it may have been a reflection of how central the chosen extracts were, and how easily they gave candidates a springboard to address key characters, moments and issues from the play. Almost all understood the need to move well beyond the extract itself, some by making wide reference to the characters and themes in the extract and question in other parts of the play and some by a very detailed analysis of another chosen moment. Both approaches, and anything in between, can be equally valid.

While it is possible to address AO2 largely through reference to the extract, wider knowledge of the rest of the play is essential and should be referenced through specific quotation. Candidates should therefore have a quotation bank, referenced by character and key issues, and good knowledge of key moments in the play in sequence. Sometimes candidates revealed gaps in their knowledge by not being aware of the exact place of the extract in the sequence of the drama, or by thinking characters are aware of things only the audience know (for example, in the printed extract Macbeth is making a firm decision not to kill Duncan, and Lady Macbeth only changes his mind afterwards; the dagger soliloquy comes before the death of Duncan, not afterwards. Lord Capulet does not know that Juliet and Romeo have met, let alone married, until after both are dead). Some candidates struggled to adapt pre-learned material about Juliet's relationship with Lady Capulet, or about Lady Macbeth, to questions respectively on Lord Capulet and Macbeth. It is a pity that fewer this year considered the discursive questions, as they represent a good opportunity for well-organised candidates to give an overview of the whole play with their own selection of details.

Most candidates were aware of the need to address each strand of the question in order to deal fully with all the Assessment Objectives. Not everything learned will be relevant in an examination, and some selection and organisation of material is important. This continues to apply to the requirement to address AO3. Context was much better handled this year, with much greater integration of context within the response. The most effective approach was to see context as shaping audience's reactions, although London audiences were assumed to be far more bound by convention than would have been the case for youthful 17th century theatregoers. A generation young enough to witness the execution of their King for treason just 40 years later would be unlikely to be composed solely of unquestioning believers in the Divine Right of Kings, nor would rational post-Reformation Protestants have necessarily accepted the interference of friars, witches and supernatural phenomena, or thought that all Jews were devils and that it was normal to marry off your 13 year-old daughter against her will for political convenience. Drama is made out of conflict, and an appreciation of the Renaissance as a time of conflict and argument, rather than ideological conformity would be a more exciting context for appreciation of Shakespeare's drama. Context is rewarded when it informs response to, or evaluation of the text. It is therefore important to ensure that context is relevant and well-integrated within an argument. Most candidates now understand this, and contextual paragraphs with little connection to text or topic are thankfully rare. Candidates understand that this is a Literature examination, not a History paper.

The most popular Shakespeare play remains 'Macbeth', a short way ahead of 'Romeo and Juliet'. 'The Merchant of Venice' worked very well indeed at this level, but there were far fewer responses than previously. 'Much Ado About Nothing' was less popular still but clearly studied by a good body of well-prepared and enthused candidates, well aware of the conventions of genre within which Shakespeare is working. Understanding of tragic form was often supported by the full Aristotelian panoply of hamartia, peripeteia and anagnorisis. Sometimes this was highly effective, although better if not over-schematic. Hamartia does not mean 'tragic flaw', Aristotle is writing descriptively not prescriptively and Shakespeare is very unlikely to have had him at the forefront of his mind, being a man of 'small Latin and less Greek'. Some candidates are keen to return to the world of 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' and 'Who is most to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?' More convincing responses to drama focus on action and audience reaction, and appreciate Shakespeare's theatre as a crucible for dynamic experimentation. Good answers included an evaluative approach to both the question and possible responses to characters, language, action and ideas.

This is also the only part of the question paper where AO4 (vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation) is addressed. Very few candidates did not receive some reward for this assessment objective. This was usually because such candidates used no punctuation at all. Most achieved intermediate performance, writing with considerable range and accuracy to show general control. A smaller number achieved the consistency and effectiveness required for the highest mark. To achieve a high mark, spelling and vocabulary choices are probably less important than effective use of punctuation to achieve clear, concise argument. Short sentences are effective too. Clarity of communication should be the target. Handwriting is not assessed in this examination. Nevertheless, examiners are keen to see legible and carefully written responses. Quality of writing is much more important than quantity: candidates often rush towards the end of an examination, and try to pack in too much. They need to sustain clarity and grammatical accuracy throughout their answers to achieve a high AO4 mark. It would be better to write less and leave some time for checking.

Examiners were delighted with the range of responses, the detailed knowledge of Shakespeare's plays and the communication of engagement and personal response. Most candidates appreciate that these plays can still have an impact on audiences today as well as in Shakespeare's Globe.

Question 4

4 Explore the different ways Shakespeare portrays the relationship between Juliet and her father. Refer to this extract from Act 1 Scene 2 and elsewhere in the play.

[40]*

This was a very popular question indeed. Most candidates showed very good knowledge of the confrontation between Juliet and Lord Capulet in Act 3 Scene 5 and used this very successfully as a contrast with the set scene, where Capulet shows a paternal care for Juliet which goes beyond contextual expectations in an age of arranged marriages for very young girls among patricians of the Capulets' class. Most candidates understood the context of the marriage negotiations with Paris very well indeed, although there was a little confusion about the reasons for Capulet's volte face. This surely has less to do with mourning over Tybalt, as Capulet claims, than a desire to reingratiate the Capulets with the Prince, by marrying Juliet to a close relative, and the need to provide a new male potential head of the family. Those alert to the mafia-like machinations of the Capulets had better appreciation of how little Capulet's assurances might be taken at face value. A few candidates thought Capulet's anger at Juliet's obstinacy in Act 3 was because he has found out about her relationship with Romeo, which he does not until the end of the play. Those who also looked at Capulet's grief at both Juliet's faked suicide and after her real death, and how quickly he forgives the secret marriage were able to write more nuanced responses to the relationship. Many wrote about how he says 'my fingers itch', and most

understood that the context for domestic violence was very different in Shakespeare's time, although some, possibly influenced by the Luhrmann film, thought that he actually was violent. In Shakespeare's original text, he is a more comic character in many scenes. Some referred to Juliet begging him 'on her knees' in Act 3 and wrote feelingly about this act of submission, although the stage direction some mentioned is not in the First Folio or Alexander text.

There was good understanding of the context of the relationship between Capulet and Paris as well as the courtship conventions of the Renaissance, although some rightly protested that Capulet's language ('a stranger in the world' and 'ripe to be a bride') suggests he does not really know Juliet well, and still treats her more like an object or piece of fruit than a young woman with ideas of her own. There were some successful comparisons with Lady Capulet and contrasts with the Nurse. Many wrote about 'hang thee young baggage' in the later scene, which allowed AO2 comment as pertinent as that on the imagery of Capulet's comments to Paris in the extract. Some questioned the credibility of Capulet's comments and suspected this was just a show for Paris, while others, equally legitimately, argued that he has some feeling for 'the hopeful lady of my earth'. A few were so impressed by the context that they condemned Juliet for her disobedience and lack of gratitude to her father, or felt that Shakespeare's audience must have taken that view. Once again, it would be good to stress that we don't know what Shakespeare's audience 'must have' felt, and that plays are made out of conflict and debate and intended to prompt lively discussion. Those who wrote discursively and evaluatively, with plenty of textual evidence and comment on language did very well in response to this task.

Question 5

5 How far does Shakespeare present Friar Lawrence's support for Romeo and Juliet as helpful? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]*

This discursive question proved considerably less popular than the extract-based question on the same text. These type of questions encourage an evaluative approach to the way in which characters develop and how an audience's perception of them changes in the course of the drama. This question tested AO1 effectively and candidates who attempted it showed good knowledge of Friar Lawrence's interventions when counselling both Romeo, in Acts 2 and 3, and Juliet in Act 4. They were aware of his guidance about the secret marriage, and how he had dissuaded both the young lovers from suicide and self-harm. There were varying views about the success of his interventions, and some were very critical of his behaviour in the tomb in Act 5 and a few found his self-exculpation in the final scene of the play unconvincing. Some found his plans reckless, although most appreciated that it was his desire to resolve the 'rancour' between the households. AO2 comment included appreciation of his aphoristic comments to Romeo: 'these violent delights have violent ends' and 'they stumble that run fast', and the ways in which he applies analogies drawn from the natural world to human behaviour – although one or two candidates wondered why a Friar should know so much about drugs. AO3 was not always so evident or secure here: the role of a Friar as a confessor, and indeed as a herbalist, was not well understood, nor why he would be bound to keep Romeo and Juliet's confidences a secret, while few understood that a Protestant Elizabethan audience might share their criticisms of a Catholic Friar, or that in his final speech he actually submits himself to 'the rigour of severest law' and that none condemn him for his actions. Good answers pointed out that he has strong reflections of his own on the nature of fate and tragedy which are well-attuned with the play's central themes.

Question 6

6 Explore the ways in which Shakespeare portrays hatred and prejudice. Refer to this extract from Act 4 Scene 1 and elsewhere in the play.

[40]*

This extract was very popular and allowed characters to address central themes and characters in 'The Merchant of Venice'. Every response had some understanding of Shylock's experience of hatred and prejudice; these could mostly draw on some evidence from elsewhere in the play, as well as Antonio's speech in the extract. Stronger responses also analysed evidence of prejudice in Bassanio's language, and of hatred in Shylock's own speeches here and elsewhere. Candidates therefore had little difficulty in constructing evaluative and balanced responses, while the ways in which both sides invoked religion to justify their hatreds gave good opportunities to explore AO3, and compare different attitudes to racial and religious hatred in Shakespeare's society and in ours, relating this very effectively to the potential responses of different theatre audiences. Some extended this quite skilfully to consider whether mercy is really extended to Shylock as a result of the trial scene which follows this one, and none found it difficult to link this scene to other relevant scenes, with the Act 1 encounter between Shylock and Antonio and Shylock's speech in Act 3 Scene 1 proving especially popular. Most addressed AO2 through commentary on imagery, while some also noticed that both sides use Biblical allusion to justify their prejudices. Some saw Shakespeare's ability to provide Shylock with sympathetic lines as a challenge to his audience's prejudices, while others saw him as pandering to these for comic effect, some citing the treatment by Portia of the Prince of Morocco, or Lorenzo's teasing of Jessica, and the forced conversion of her father as further evidence of prejudice. Others could balance this with comment on Shylock's relentless focus on hatred ('I hate him for he is a Christian') and revenge, a few noticing that even his own community appear doubtful about his wisdom in pursuing his 'forfeit'.

Question 7

7 In what ways does Shakespeare present the women of the play as more resourceful than the men? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas. **[40]***

This question was considerably less popular than the extract-based question but attracted some strong responses, which explored central issues in the play in an interesting way. Some candidates remembered that the question invites consideration of Jessica and Nerissa, as well as Portia, and many commented on how the conventions of the day meant that not only do the women have to disguise themselves as men in order to achieve their ends, but in the Shakespearean theatre they would have been portrayed by boys. Some focused on Portia's verbal manipulation of the casket scene, most on her behaviour in court and many on the ring test and its comic conclusion. Some questioned whether Jessica's theft of Leah's ring and Shylock's ducats is resourceful or immoral, although it might be pointed out that she is only claiming what would have been her due as a dowry, and that the rumour she sold the ring for a monkey is as unreliable as most other fake news 'heard on the Rialto' in this play. Candidates who chose to do this question had very good knowledge of the play, and appreciated that it is only the women who can break the bonds of obligation which threaten its men. Some noticed that the play subverts gender roles more often than it confirms them.

Question 8

8 Explore how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's doubts and fears. Refer to this extract from Act 1 Scene 7 and elsewhere in the play.

[40]*

This was the most popular question in the whole of this Section of the paper. The task's focus on Macbeth's hopes and fears allowed a very wide range of AO1 reference, with many candidates writing about the appearance of Banquo's Ghost, the apparitions and witches as manifestations as well as causes of Macbeth's fears. Others were determined to use material they'd prepared on Lady Macbeth and some did this effectively by linking the extract to what they liked to call her 'emasculation' of Macbeth in the next part of this scene, showing good knowledge of details of language as well as dramatic structure. Less successful answers were confused about the sequence of events, with a few thinking the dagger soliloquy came after rather than before the death of Duncan, and one or two confusing Duncan with Banquo, a character who always seems a favourite among candidates. Candidates might be better prepared if they wrote out a chart with a clear sequence in order to understand the drama's progression. Stronger answers included some consideration of whether Macbeth's doubts and fears lessen or increase as the play progresses. Many referenced his fears after Duncan's death, and the depth of his regret as confirmed the doubts expressed in this scene. Some explored his growing paranoia as a cause of the deaths of Banquo and the family of Macduff. Others made reference to Macbeth's false confidence as a result of his second encounter with the witches, and fearless approach to his final encounter with Macduff in order to suggest that his fears and doubts gradually diminish.

There is a tendency, reinforced by context-led notions about Jacobean gender stereotyping, to see Macbeth as weak for having doubts and fears. A Shakespearean audience would have been more likely to sympathise with his rational objections to upsetting the natural order, and the divine process of royal succession by the 'assassination' of Duncan. It is Macbeth's doubts and fears that make him human, rather than a monster. Another trend is to regard Macbeth as descending into madness. Such amateur psychology is inappropriate to this subject: Macbeth is impressively and frighteningly rational about the consequences of his decisions, both in this soliloquy and others, not least in the final Act. What is more alarming to an audience is his inability to listen to his own conscience. Some compared Macbeth's doubts here to the fearless slaughter reported in the play's second scene, not all appreciating the difference between acts of warfare and acts of treachery. Stronger candidates pointed out the irony of Macbeth betraying a King who had honoured him for loyalty.

AO2 was usually well handled in response to the extract itself and sometimes in wider reference to the play. There were some misconceptions. It was not always understood that when Macbeth says he could 'jump the life to come' he is in fact showing he is not afraid of the afterlife: his concern is much more that by killing the King he is teaching others to do the same to him. Some pointed out that this is exactly what happens, and appreciated the greater ironies in the way the play treats fate. Many noticed that Macbeth uses euphemisms to avoid speaking of killing or murder. Many enjoyed the religious allusions to the 'poison'd chalice', 'angels' and 'damnation' and were able to place them within their context, also deftly addressing AO3. There was some confusion of 'kingsman' and 'kinsmen', and consequently some misunderstanding of Duncan's 'double trust' in Macbeth. Macbeth owes the King loyalty as head of his family as well as the nation. Some confused the personification of pity (and this really is personification) with Duncan himself, thinking the latter was compared to 'a naked new-born babe'. Candidates should practice paying close attention to details of Shakespeare's imagery. Strong responses picked up the reference to 'blast', 'sightless couriers of the air' and 'drown the wind' and linked this to imagery of natural disaster elsewhere in the play to show how the murder of the King will distort the natural order. There were many strong responses to Macbeth's 'vaulting ambition' (many called this Macbeth's

hamartia), with the best appreciating the metaphor drawn from horse jumping and showing understanding of what it means to o'erleap yourself and fall.

The best treatment of AO3 is to integrate it with comment on language and dramatic structure. Those who explored imagery and dramatic irony in the kind of detail outlined above could weave context into their response. This was more effective than separate paragraphs on the Divine Right of Kings or the Gunpowder Plot, however relevant both of these are, or explanations of the Great Chain of Being and the Elizabethan World Picture which suggest the ghost of E. M. W. Tillyard, resuscitated by various internet and published sources, still haunts the banquet of Shakespearean criticism.

Question 9

9 In what ways is Macduff an important character in the play? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]*

This question was far less popular than Question 8 but those who attempted it realised that Macduff's importance outweighs the relatively small number of scenes in which he appears or is referred to, and that he appears to be a man of few words. The strongest responses tended to see him as a deliberate foil for Macbeth, demonstrating the principle of loyalty as effectively as Macbeth does that of treachery. By doing so, they made effective reference to AO3 as well as AO1. This also allowed analysis of Macduff's horrified reaction to the 'most sacrilegious murder', and his patriotic elegy for Scotland in Act 4. Some, perhaps alerted by the fact that he asks Ross about the fate of Scotland before that of his own family, questioned whether he was right to put his patriotism above the safety of his own family, but most were aware of how this slaughter of the innocents would have confirmed Macbeth's tyranny in the eyes of a Jacobean audience whose savage justice system had moral code. Several responses made reference to Macduff openly weeping at their fate, and contrasted this powerfully with Macbeth's inability to mourn the death of his wife, to suggest that Macduff has a more modern sense of what it means to 'feel it as a man' than the childless Malcolm and Macbeth. Responses with this degree of subtlety show the virtues of approaching the Assessment Objectives holistically and not separately. Most answers showed excellent understanding that Macduff's dramatic and contextual role as 'foil' for Macbeth makes him the most appropriate man to kill him, and many explored the prophecies of the apparitions in order to link this to the role of fate in the play as a whole.

Question 10

10 Explore the ways in which Shakespeare creates humour from Benedick's attitude to women. Refer to this extract from Act 1 Scene 1 and elsewhere in the play.

[40]*

Relatively few centres currently study 'Much Ado About Nothing', but candidates who wrote about this play did so well. They also showed understanding of the lively presentation of relationships between men and women, and the dramatic conventions within which Shakespearean comedy operates. Candidates enjoyed dissecting Benedick's hyperbole, with some amusing explanations of the ribaldry of 'hang my bugle in an invisible baldric'. Some appreciated that this is a man boasting to another man, and most wrote about the irony of how soon Benedick will contradict himself, with the best able to quote from his allusion to this speech in the final scene. AO3 can be successfully addressed in response to 'Much Ado' by showing appreciation of gender conventions in Shakespeare's society and how these are a source of comedy, and almost lead to tragedy, in this play. The question had a clear focus on technique, and many wrote with some perception or insight into the lively prose in the printed extract, concentrating on vivid analogies and verbal exaggeration. Some commented on what the language, especially when expressing fear of cuckoldry, revealed about the deeper insecurities within Benedick himself and Elizabethan masculinity at large. Others noted the dramatic structure of romantic comedy and that the audience can see that Benedick and Beatrice are inevitably going to end up together. The gulling scene was the most popular choice for comparison. It was encouraging to see how well candidates can comment on Shakespeare's humour and its deeper implications.

Question 11

11 To what extent does Don Pedro use his power wisely? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]*

There were very few responses to this task, but they did show some range. The best provided a balanced evaluation of Don Pedro's benevolent uses of power (in his initial encouragement of the relationship of Hero and Claudio and his key role in the gulling of Benedick and Beatrice) against his credulous response to Don John's insinuations and support of Claudio's accusations at the wedding. He makes amends for this by his role in the final reconciliations, allowing a sympathetic conclusion. Others felt he is not a strong character, is too easily swayed by the slanders against Hero, and shares patriarchal prejudices about women. Few commented on how Beatrice gently turns him down, and that his cheerful acceptance of her refusal challenges some notions about how deeply embedded Renaissance attitudes to hierarchy and female submission really were.

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