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Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

J352

For first teaching in 2015

J352/02 Autumn 2020 series

Version 1

Introduction

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

> **i** 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.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from OCR.

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Paper 2 series overview

The very small size of the November cohort limits the range of commentary which is possible: only one candidate tackled Question 3, and none attempted Questions 9, 10 or 11. However, most candidates knew their texts and the expectation of the tasks, there were several very strong scripts, and a good cluster of scripts demonstrated a convincing critical style. There were very few scripts below Good Pass level. Most candidates showed knowledge and understanding of their set texts and the ability to apply critical reading skills to unseen texts. There was good use of supporting quotation, and plenty of evidence of analysis of language and structure. Weaker scripts showed limited knowledge of their set texts and muddled poems from the Anthology cluster. Weaker responses to Shakespeare did not move beyond the printed extract and showed very limited engagement with language and context.

Candidates and those who prepared them are to be congratulated on their determination and resilience in tackling this examination in challenging circumstances.

?	**Misconception**	Candidates should be are aware that: • context is not rewarded in Section A • comparison is essential in Section A part a • comparison is not rewarded in Section A part b • poems chosen from part b must be from the studied cluster from the OCR Anthology • context should be integrated within argument in Section B • Section B answers should be carefully checked for accurate spelling, punctuation and use of language.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:	*Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:*
• Made a sustained comparison of the unseen and set poem in Section A part a) • Linked observations about language and structure to meaning in well-integrated responses to poetry • Looked at one poem in detail in Section A part b) relating its methods and concerns to the overarching theme • Supported arguments with quotation and comment on the effects of the poet's choices of language and imagery • Addressed AO2 in Shakespeare through thoughtful examination of the language of the extract • Considered how relevant context influences the interpretation of the Shakespeare play.	• Addressed the poems separately with only a few more obvious links in Section A part a) • Confused poems or provided a purely narrative account of a poem without a critical argument in response to Section A part b) • Did not support comment on the poem with analysis of language or imagery in Section A part b) • Wrote a narrative response to the extract in Section B without demonstrated knowledge of the rest of the play, or the dramatic context of the extract itself • Forgot to include exploration of language, structure and dramatic form in Section B • Drifted into a narrative account in response to the discursive question in Section B • Forgot to include consideration of context or included irrelevant historical assertions in Section B.

Section A overview

Part a)

Part a) of Section A tests the key skills of comparison and response to unseen literature. In the OCR specifications candidates are encouraged to compare texts and perspectives on the same topic in both English Language papers and Paper 1 of English Literature, and there was plenty of evidence from candidates' answers that skills of comparison and evaluation are strongly embedded. Discourse markers clearly signpost comparison, and details selected from each text and placed alongside one another can illustrate different writers' methods.

Candidates are expected to demonstrate good knowledge and understanding of the set poem, and so it was surprising how often commentary on the unseen poem was more convincing than observations about the set text. Candidates should have been aware that the young poet in Wordsworth's 'Prelude' feels guilty about the theft of the boat ('an act of stealth/And troubled pleasure'), that the speaker in 'A Song' is disturbed by the fact that her lover is at sea ('in search of gain/From shore to shore he flies') and that the girl who is 'thrashed for almost drowning' in 'Cold Knap Lake' has been brought back to life by the speaker's mother. It is not necessary to look beyond the evidence within the poem itself to work this out. Creative reinterpretations and explorations of comparisons between set poem and the unseen are encouraged, but should be grounded in good basic understanding. It is worth ensuring candidates can present a concise overview of each set poem, supported by relevant quotation.

Candidates are now less dependent on the bullet points, and realise that the key command is to compare. Many candidates sustained comparison throughout their answers, with effective commentary on the threatening portrayal of nature in both Dickinson and Wordsworth, troubled relationships and misunderstandings between lovers in Hardy and Helen Maria Williams, and parental anger and troubling memories in Clarke and D. H. Lawrence. The key was the ability to analyse details of language or choice of imagery very closely and connect to the overarching themes of the poems. There was some effective comparison and contrast of method. Forms of poetry perhaps need more embedding, as appreciation of Wordsworth's blank verse metre, Dickenson's rhymes, the different ways in which Williams and Hardy use quatrains and the impact of irregular rhyme in both Clarke and Lawrence was rarer.

Key discriminators between weaker and stronger responses within the mark scheme are: clarity of understanding, 'critical style' and quality of analysis. Clarity requires a convincing overview of the whole text and the relationship of details to the whole. Critical style means some appreciation of why the poem wrote the poem and its intended effect. Analysis is the expectation that candidates will move beyond merely identifying parts of speech or features of language but will comment on their effect on the reader, and contribution to the meaning of the whole poem.

Part b)

This task requires choice of a suitable poem to address the task, a plan which will allow candidates to say something about the structure and development of the whole poem, demonstrating understanding, and exploration of particular details which they can quote from memory. Popular poems in this session included 'The Man He Killed', 'Partition', 'A Poison Tree', 'Flag', 'A Broken Appointment', 'Love and Friendship' and 'Red Roses'. 'In Paris With You' was perhaps an example of a poem not well chosen to suit the task, as the relationship it describes may possibly be affected by being on the 'on the rebound' but seems refreshingly honest and unproblematic. Candidates could usefully practise the skill of choosing poems that fit topics within the Anthology cluster and constructing arguments that show their overall grasp of the poem, illustrated by apt quotation and comment on techniques.

Most who wrote about 'The Man He Killed' did so very effectively by writing about how the speaker's language betrays his powerlessness. A good response to 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' explored

both the powerlessness of the Hebrews in the face of the Assyrian attack and the Assyrian's own helplessness before 'The Angel of Death'. Explanation of extended metaphors and interpretation of their effect on readers of 'A Poison Tree' and 'Love and Friendship' allowed these candidates to address both Assessment Objectives at once. Short, succinct quotations should be memorised which illustrate both a point about the meaning of the poem, and an example of how it works.

	OCR support	For more creative approaches to teaching and learning about the OCR Anthology poems, see the OCR Digital Poetry Anthology.

Section B overview

In Section B, candidates are offered a choice of an extract-based question leading to a whole-text response to the whole play, or a discursive question on the whole text. Both question types were attempted by candidates in this session, but most of this small cohort answered on 'Romeo and Juliet', 'The Merchant of Venice' or 'Macbeth'.

All Assessment Objectives are addressed in this task, so understanding of how context informs the response of audiences to Shakespeare's plays and careful spelling, punctuation and sentence construction are integral to good responses. Most candidates knew their chosen play well, and had something to say about principal characters and their response to them. Fewer really considered the play as drama, or focused on how audiences might respond to particular words or images. Characters tended to be treated as if they were real people. This often led to some interesting psychological readings but there was limited appreciation of audience expectations within the conventions of tragedy and comedy. Those who appreciated the workings of fate in both tragedies, or the role of outsiders in romance and comedy were able to show a more intelligent appreciation of both the play and its context.

The relationship between Romeo and Friar Lawrence is a dynamic one. Most candidates attempting Question 4 were able to make a link to Friar Lawrence's first appearance, as late as Act 2 Scene 3, but this meant that a few thought the relationship was still as bantering and light-hearted in this scene, after the murder of Tybalt. Good answers noted that Friar Lawrence is uncharacteristically unable to assert himself in this scene, and this may foreshadow ways in which the tragedy moves beyond his skills and control later in the play. Close reading of the drama of the extract was likely to yield stronger answers.

Most candidates agreed with the proposition in Question 5, although there was a reasonably strong response arguing that Juliet remains a victim throughout the play. Good answers needed to show that she becomes more articulate as the tragedy develops, although her scope for agency remains severely limited. Many chose to write about her relationship with her parents, which certainly demonstrates her changing character, but interesting responses also addressed her soliloquies, and understanding of her dilemma.

There were few responses to Question 6. The topic is a broad one, as friendship and marriage, and possible tensions between them, are central to the play. This did allow candidates to make a wide choice of material from the wider play, and to look more closely at the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio, or the marriage of Portia and Bassanio. The extract itself has plenty of interesting material worth exploring: Bassanio reveals the nature of his debt to Antonio and that it goes beyond money, while Portia's generosity is more than financial: she agrees that Bassanio must go to his friend on their wedding day. The scene concludes with the interesting comment that Bassanio is 'dear bought' showing how both friendship and marriage in this play are compromised by commercial transactions.

Question 7 was as expected the more popular task on 'The Merchant of Venice' and it is hoped that candidates will increasingly feel confident in tackling discursive questions as well the passage-based. In doing so, it is important that they demonstrate good knowledge not just of particular extracts from the play, but also their sequence (one candidate located Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes' speech in the Trial Scene). It can be harder to demonstrate effective AO2 analysis of language in a discursive essay, as the candidates' attention is often on their (often interesting and individual) arguments. However, evaluation of imagery, rhetoric and their effect on a theatre audience can helpfully address both AO2 and AO3. Similarly, understanding of comic conventions might limit sympathy for Shylock, as his hostility to the fun of the young people in the play and the happiness of his daughter makes him a stock villain in buffo tradition, however sympathetic or not audiences might find Shakespeare's portrayal of his Judaism.

Question 8 similarly asked about a popular character among candidates and a central topic. Good answers compared the presentation of Macbeth's insecurity here, with another scene in the play, with

Act 1 Scene 7 especially popular. Others connected his envy of the dead Duncan in this passage with his reaction to the murder in Act 2. Good responses placed the extract in its dramatic context: Macbeth is expressing his fears about Banquo and has given orders for his murder, but Lady Macbeth does not know this. Macbeth's 'initiate fear' is therefore already turning into the psychopathology of a serial killer. Some candidates saw 'full of scorpions is my mind' as a sign that Macbeth is going mad, but it is more disturbingly that he can now plan murders with apparent rationality. There is a lot of interesting material in the passage about the 'terrible dreams' of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and good responses pointed out that their mutual insecurity comes out of their inability to be honest. Macbeth's final injunction to 'make our faces vizards to our hearts' echoes Lady Macbeth's 'look like th' innocent flower/ But be the serpent under't' and shows that false faces hide false hearts.

There were no responses to the other questions in this session, but all raise central topics for the set plays and are worth considering as mock or timed essay questions.

Key teaching and learning points – comments on improving performance

Section A

Candidates should remember that the command word in part a) is 'compare' and look closely at similarities and differences between the poems.

Understanding of literary conventions is important in the study of pre-1900 poems. Although AO2 is dominant in part a), clear understanding of the set text is expected for responses at Level 4 and above. Candidates should clearly state their interpretation of the poem in two or three sentences before moving on to explore how the poet's methods convey her or his ideas. Answers should be concise and well-organised, as they only carry 25% of the marks for this paper.

Part b) remains undervalued and yet should be a quick gain for candidates as the essay carries 25% of the marks for this paper. It requires good knowledge and overall understanding of the set poems, and the ability to support interpretations with appreciation of how language and imagery work in that poem. Candidates should practise linking poems to over-arching themes within the cluster.
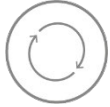
Section B

Shakespeare responses attract half the marks for this paper, so the essay needs to be substantial and show knowledge of the whole play. Candidates should practice making full use of the passage provided, not just as a springboard for a wider discussion of characters and themes, but also as an opportunity for close AO2 analysis of language and dramatic effectiveness. AO2 also needs more attention in discursive essay questions.

One way to avoid an unbalanced approach to the Assessment Objectives is to consider the impact of language and imagery on a theatre audience in Shakespeare's society. This can address AO2 and AO3 at once. Context is best addressed in analysis of meaning: why would Shakespeare's audience have responded differently to certainly kinds of language, attitude or behaviour from audience's today? It is not necessary to provide separate paragraphs on context, but different attitudes to fate and free will, religion, magic, monarchy, women, family, relationships and outsiders certainly affected audience responses to the plays.

Discursive essays can be good ways to address wider themes in the play, and allow candidates to make their own selection of supporting detail. They are most successful when candidates choose two or three scenes to look at closely in response to the task.

Guidance on using this paper as a mock

The skills of comparison of a set poem with an unseen poem, choosing a set poem to link to the theme of the paper and making effective use of selected scenes from the play to explore the topics in the passage-based and discursive Shakespeare tasks are all good to practice and will test the extent of candidates' knowledge and their ability to apply their skills.

	AfL	In 'walking talking mocks': • place the emphasis on effective timing and planning, strong opening sentences and clear conclusions • encourage candidates to write essay plans addressing the Assessment Objectives and illustrated with quotations • make sure they understand the importance of showing they have answered the question.

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