

H072/02 Drama and prose post-1900

General Comments:

Candidates were, once again, well-prepared by centres for the tasks and there was evidence of lucid, original and mature responses to the texts. It is clear that the challenge presented by the two tasks in this component encourages students to stretch to their potential and the responses that candidates produced provided evidence of really supportive and engaging ways of teaching the range of texts on offer.

Examiners have noted that there is a tendency to answer the question the candidate wants to answer rather than the one set - this is especially true where candidates seem to have rigorously prepared for mock exams using practice/sample assessment materials. Candidates should be encouraged to prepare more broadly and develop confidence in focusing on the question prompts more directly, using the question to frame a way of thinking about the text which they can then respond to. Stronger planning in exam conditions would yield results that demonstrate a better AO1 focus on the task and candidates should be encouraged to develop agility in how they engage with a wide range of possible questions about their text.

More than one examiner noted a growing tendency to offer individual words in quotation marks where those words were not direct quotation e.g. 'Irwin becomes a "journalist".' Candidates should be clear about what does and does not constitute material which can be credited for AO2.

Section 1 – Drama

Many candidates are being given the opportunity to experience their text in performance either in the theatre or on screen and this method of teaching is to be applauded. Whilst seeing a text in performance is not a requisite for successful textual study, it is apparent that those candidates who can engage thoughtfully with the dramatic aspects of their text tend to communicate most successfully about the work that they have studied. They also tend to offer a way of thinking about the text which opens up the range of AO5 possibilities to them.

There are some candidates who do not see their text as a performance script at all and this will inevitably limit candidates' responses to questions which foreground dramatic elements and which ask candidates to respond to the 'role' of a set of characters.

Question 1(a) and 1(b) *Private Lives*

This text was studied successfully by a small number of candidates.

Question 1(a) invited candidates to weigh up the lightness of the topics against possible hints of darkness. Many saw the significance of the physical and verbal violence. Question 1(b) generated considerations of the difficulties of love and its challenges, hidden by flippancy and 'safe topics of conversation'. One candidate suggested that love will prevail and 'find a way to come out'; others proposed that Amanda and Elyot think and act alike even when separate.

Question 2(a) and 2(b) *A Streetcar Named Desire*

This text was, again, the most popular choice with question 2(a) on desire being by far the most popular question choice.

Many examiners have noted that candidates are struggling to come to terms with the complex historical background that the text presents them with. Misunderstandings and trite or too simplistic readings of historical context (AO3) often misshape and misdirect the interpretations

that are therefore being drawn of the text (AO5). The unusualness of New Orleans as a Southern cultural centre is usually grasped, but it is much harder to feed in material on the 'traditional Southern attitudes' which Blanche partly reflects and partly manipulates. Many candidates need a mental timeline reminding them that the Civil War ended in 1865 and the play belongs to the early post-war years. Southerners like Blanche have thus had eighty years to brood on their defeat and mythologise plantation life. Many candidates write as if the Civil War has only just ended, and some seem to think the South is still under a kind of Yankee occupation. The phrase 'ante-bellum' for pre-1865, commonly used in the US, has not always been understood and is sometimes converted to 'post-bellum', where the issue of which of three or more major wars might be intended quickly comes up. In using the term, candidates should be clear that they are referencing a period before the American Civil War. There is a much clearer sense of American recovery after the depression and of commercialisation at the time of the play.

Biographical context is also often less rather than more helpful to candidates. Undeveloped or brief references to Williams' mother and sister did not always offer insight to the text itself. There is a useful parallel to be drawn between the sister's breakdown and Blanche's hospitalisation at the end of the play but Williams' other works such as *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, or the daringly autobiographical *Suddenly Last Summer* are more apposite texts for an exploration of Williams' sister's predicament. Candidates are generally much more comfortable discussing Williams' homosexuality and wider contexts of gay rights in American society at the time. Ultimately though, links to biographical material, other than offering interesting landmarks or places of interest to point out along the way, do not tend to generate useful interpretations of the text in hand because they stop at the point of simple linkage.

Question 2(a) *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Sophisticated responses to this question looked at different forms of desire, not just sexual desire. Some candidates answered on 'strength' as such, rather than strength of desire and this was definitely one of those questions where candidates often shaped a premise that they wished to engage with rather than dealing with the given proposition. Candidates sometimes decided to reject the thesis of the question entirely and offer instead their ideas on what the play is really about. In effect, they wrote an essay on the question they wanted to answer rather than the one that was provided. The best idea is to deal with the proposition through argument and weave in and develop alternative readings, rather than jettisoning the proposition outright at the start.

The more successful answers tended to consider a range of characters. Where only one or two characters were addressed, such as just Blanche and Stanley or even just Blanche, this necessarily limited the argument that could be made in response to the question.

Good answers reflected on how the play got its title, and the steamy, cosmopolitan atmosphere of New Orleans, where desires are hard to suppress; weaker answers tended to interpret 'desires' too widely or vaguely. The best responses made use of stage directions, sound effects, music and film camerawork to stress the expressionist nature of the way desire is presented in 'plastic theatre'.

Question 2(b) *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Examiners saw some really good answers on this question, comparing Mitch and Stella to Blanche and Stanley, but really getting to grips with Stella and Mitch's function in the play. One excellent response wrote: "they are the only two characters not presented as grotesques of particular social groups with Stella's role as at times often narrator-esque mediator and Mitch's dual function as a 'macho' and 'superior' gentleman." Candidates were often able to compare Mitch and Stella through the lens of a particular facet of victimhood, (i.e., abuse by Stanley; gentle temperaments etc.). For weaker candidates, tethering the response to Stella and Mitch was sometimes a bit tricky – what often emerged was a simplistic structure going through each character in turn.

Question 3(a) and 3(b) *The Homecoming*

This text prompted some strong responses across both questions.

Question 3(a) *The Homecoming*

This question generated very interesting AO3 engagement with considerations of masculinity in post-war Britain. Many answers linked 'desire' with impotence, as if the traditional, aggressive desires of masculinity were increasingly being blocked by liberal ideals, especially with regard to women. The sexual revolution, class issues, pornography and pimping, the Kray twins and the East End they lorded, were all handled with restraint and authority, and candidates were also very well informed about the nature of Pinter's theatre and its portrayal of power relations.

Most took a focus on Max and Lenny separately and explored their power struggle or relationship. Others focused on male desires such as control, acceptance, knowledge, violence and sex – often seeing Max, Lenny, Joey, Sam and Teddy as somehow aligned with a different aspect of desire. Some saw Ruth as a man in a woman's disguise and Billington's view of the play as feminist was much discussed.

Whilst many, therefore, developed extremely mature responses to the text, few candidates really engaged with the 'powerful' prompt.

Question 3(b) *The Homecoming*

Candidates very frequently agreed that Max was indeed 'never really in control'. Many candidates were able to bring in all the other characters and the question, again, enabled robust response to context and quotation of many of the most entertaining lines in the play.

One candidate argued that 'Max's preponderance for reading yesterday's paper is a sign of his overall redundancy.' Max was also seen as ambivalent – old, helpless, faded, though some see his control over the young boys as violent and abusive. Others see his threats as humorous, not seriously attempting to exert anything. Candidates often used the struggle between Max and Lenny as their focal point, but many also brought in the Max/Ruth relationship leading to discussions on sexuality, gender, feminism and the whole basis of 'kitchen sink drama which Pinter is so evidently sending up'.

Question 4(a) *The History Boys*

Successful responses here brought in a wide range of the play's cast. Candidates were able to contrast the roles of Irwin and Hector in relation to knowledge and often offered Lintott as a balance to their opposing principles. There was really useful discussion about how the boys and teachers mutually teach each other and many were able to conclude that it is only Posner who ultimately follows Hector's lead. Rudge offered fruitful discussion demonstrating, as he does, an alternative measure of success which he achieves through sport and chance and embodying a knowledge which teachers such as Hector and Irwin lack. Indeed, many proposed that the boys are less naive than their teachers in many ways.

Weaker candidates only really seemed ready to offer a comparison between the teaching styles of Irwin, Hector and Lintott. Some candidates went through the boys one at a time and didn't really find enough to say.

Question 4(b) *The History Boys*

The question proposed an interesting angle on a slippery character. Almost all candidates discussed Irwin's lie about getting into Oxford and many were interested in whether Irwin lies to himself about his sexuality. Irwin's role to make boys 'polished' and stand out by default means that truth, to Irwin, is not the issue. His attitudes to essays – 'gobbets' such as Christ's foreskin and the holocaust - demonstrate his attitude to what historical truth really is. Interesting engagement was offered in response to his position as the play's framework and in Irwin as 'an essential element in the conflict which drives the play'.

Weaker students drifted from a focus on Irwin in relation to the question to bring in a consideration of other teachers on equal terms. Candidates really do need to practise ensuring that their discussion remains rooted in the proposition of the task in order to satisfy the AO1 requirement. Both questions on this text seemed to highlight weaknesses in less confident candidates' knowledge of anything other than Hector. Candidates cannot get by with only partial knowledge of the set text.

Question 5(a) and 5(b) *That Face*

As was the case last year, this was a less popular text although both questions generated really fruitful discussion. Interesting connections were made to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and to Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* in relation to Martha and many candidates know their text extremely well.

Question 6(a) *Jerusalem*

Jerusalem is a text which generates lively debate from candidates of all abilities and alert, often politically engaged, work. Question 6(a) invited arguments over whether Byron does in fact change at all or, as one candidate proposed 'is it our perceptions of him [that change] as more is revealed through his interaction with the different groups that arrive in King Johnny's caravan court?'. Byron's various roles were explored to excellent effect by many who offered a wide range of interpretations: Byron as representative of an old way of the English pastoral world or as a version or representative of Arthur/George/war heroes/rebels/Robin Hood/giant friend/'modern Jesus'. Most candidates commented on Byron's more suspect characteristics – the drug-taking/selling, the womanising, his actual relationships with Phaedra and Markey and many questioned, too, his real history versus the legend he, (and his band of merry men), creates. It is fair to say candidates are a little more shy of his more mythical qualities (i.e. the Byron blood, whatever is in the depths of his eyes that terrifies Dawn, the call to the Giant at the end).

Weaker candidates often reduced this discussion to a compendium of Byron moments, of which there are many. Few candidates across the ability range really tackled the 'slippery' prompt or engaged with whether this quality is the 'most interesting' thing about him.

Question 6(b) *Jerusalem*

This option privileged intelligent juxtaposition of nostalgia with cultural pride and the wide-ranging proposition in the question invited many candidates to demonstrate exquisite engagement. Strong candidates were able to make much of the English iconography of the play starting with the faded St George flag, Phaedra singing 'Jerusalem' and the pervasive background of the green and pleasant land, giving way to 'dark satanic mills'. Jingoistic patriotism, nostalgia and belief that 'things were better before' were intelligently explored and candidates are supremely well-prepared and well-informed in their consideration of wide-ranging contextual influences such as the Morris men and green worlds which were viewed as key to maintaining the tone of nostalgia. Byron's home with its antiques scattered about, taps into this world 'but crucially such relics are broken and no longer of any use'.

Byron's role in the protection and/or destruction of a world is variously seen as ogre/troll but also Green Man and Eco protector, 'not just trying to hold back time, but also industrial progress'. Many referenced the anti-climax of Flintock Fair's shabby offerings and astute candidates could explore Marky's disappointment as he symbolises the next generation to come.

This really was an enormously successful question with mature and thoughtful answers constructed from a wealth of material. The strength of AO3 seen here even stretched to a sophisticated sense of reception history that audiences in 2009 can't really look at the play in the same way as the 2017 post-Brexit audience.

Section 2 – Prose

Candidates often produce more thoughtful material on Section 2 because this section presents them with unseen material to engage with which can prompt surprising responses. Within the confines of the time allowed, the majority of candidates make sound connections between the unseen and their set text, comparing different attitudes or presentations or uses of language. At the top end of the mark range some candidates can actually find the exploration of the unseen extract illuminates and re-calibrates their understanding of the studied text. Those candidates who really mine the passage for material to shape a response to the question tend to do significantly better than those who lead the argument through pre-conceived notions of the set text.

However, this series did generate concerns about the approach some candidates are taking to the unseen passage. If little consideration is offered of the passage and connections are cursory and not fully exploited, then candidates are seriously reducing their focus on both AO1, concerning relevancy, and AO4, establishing links. Candidates, therefore, who only pay lip-service to the passage or who try to squeeze rather too much out of one or two quotations from the passage without presenting a solid understanding of the whole of the extract are disadvantaging themselves by trying to write a discursive essay rather than conducting a comparison/contrast exercise. This became a real discriminator in marking: candidates who take time to think carefully about the passage and who read it carefully in advance of putting pen to paper, make the passage integral to the structure of the answer and do better as a result.

Question 7 *The Great Gatsby*

Many candidates noticed how close the extract is to the novel in terms of place and date and the idea of the dark side of luxury was accessible to all candidates who wrote variously about waste, luxury being a substitute for happiness, emptiness, the decadence of party-going, destruction and crime. Candidates were able to make links readily across the texts, some even suggesting the same drinking set might show up at parties in both. Better answers not only juxtaposed debauched commodities in the two texts but picked up the hints of romance and nostalgia in Wharton's final lines, juxtaposing these with the American Dream and Gatsby's immortal longings. The corruption of the natural world was considered by more than one candidate: 'Daisy herself is associated with nature through the imagery of her name, suggesting that her sensibilities are from another era. However, her romance with Gatsby appears to be based on the consumerist and superficial self, rather than with the natural form.'

Many referenced the questioning tone of the passage: 'What was it all for, and what was left when it was over?' and this line was a useful link to Gatsby's death and 'his hopeless attempt to recreate the past by money alone'. There was a lot more potential in the passage, however, which was less often tapped: 'trampled' and 'forced' flowers; the grandeur of the house compared to Gatsby's; Nona's disgust related to some of Nick's reflections; her idyllic childhood memory linked to Gatsby's devotion to the unspoiled past.

Question 8 *The Bloody Chamber*

The Bierce passage offered perceptive candidates rich material for cross-reference to *The Bloody Chamber*. However, this is one of the texts that suffered from candidates wanting to unload pre-packed readings of the stories without starting from the premise of the question and the content of the passage first. Weaker responses, therefore, find candidates struggling to attach what they want to say about the set text to the unseen through awkward, and oftentimes tenuous, links. Comments were not always tailored to the beast theme and the predominance of readings of the Carter text as a feminist or a Gothic text first, before studying it as a work of literature in its own right, can disable candidates' ability to make AO1 achievement. Lack of focus on the passage also meant that some did not notice that the opening section is a dream.

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Better answers made much of the ‘dream within a dream’ atmosphere of the passage, and the otherness and yet strange familiarity of the panther’s eyes, often with links in to Erl-King. Arguments tended to debate the assumption that humans were somehow better or more privileged than beasts, and that beasts are not always dangerous. The best answers used three to four short stories; the least successful confined themselves to one, with a disappointing pattern that some students relied solely on ‘The Snow Child’, a trend which proved enormously limiting.

Question 9 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

The Forster passage seemed to engage most candidates. The best responses picked up on intriguing details such as ‘the age of litter’ and ‘the Book of the Machine’. Many pointed out that the Machine in Forster seems more enabling and supportive than Big Brother, but still has its sinister aspects and the menacing aspect of technology was a common theme. Real interest in the idea of control was demonstrated and strong links could be drawn between the comparative lack of sophistication of technology in the novel to the more sophisticated and womb-like feel of the machine-world in Forster. Excellent use was made of surveillance and conformity in both set text and passage.

Almost everyone made use of the moment where Vashti looks round ‘as if someone might be watching her’ and many also noted that reverence for Big Brother/the Machine has assumed the characteristics of a primitive religion.

As for last year, the early twentieth century totalitarian analogues of the novel were well-identified and well-used. Overall, context seems to be well understood and well applied for this text.

Question 10 *Mrs Dalloway*

A small number of entries for this text were seen this year. Candidates responded strongly to the powerful emotions in the unseen extract and there were some really thoughtful answers which discussed Woolf’s narrative technique alongside the fragmentary society of post World War 1 England. Septimus usually provided most of the framing from the set text and his experience was invariably successfully contrasted to that of the veteran in the passage.

Question 11 *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The passage offered candidates really engaging routes into the comparison. Strong answers responded to the feeling of loss and alienation that can accompany the desire to belong. Various types of assimilation were addressed but tended to focus on external elements such as contrasts between clothes/flesh; food/consumption and the pace of life in London/Lahore/New York. Ideologies were less fulsomely contrasted but many commented on attitudes to religion. One candidate suggested that ‘Wanting to belong means accepting things which your religion forbids, even though they are enjoyable things – this causes the confusion in the individual’s mind.’

Weaker responses often just documented Changez’s changing relationship with America and gave the sense more of a parallel study rather than one where the texts are truly linked and contrasted.

The range of AO3 context for this question was impressive, especially regarding the impact of 9/11 on American culture, and the subsequent War on Terror.

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