

## H072/02 Drama and prose post-1900

### General Comments:

Overall, candidates had been well prepared and understood the demands of the exam. Section 1 was a task which will have felt relatively familiar to centres; Section 2 presented a fresh task, offering candidates the opportunity to explore unseen material. On the whole, students rose well to this challenge.

Candidates understood the new Assessment Objectives and the majority applied this understanding appropriately in their responses. Most also demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the set texts and of critical and contextual material. The most common weakness in answers was a tendency to write too much too quickly: one examiner reported that ‘almost all candidates had more than enough time to complete the tasks assigned and this sometimes led to diffuseness of style, to rather list-like construction, to unnecessary proliferation of illustrative detail and to repetition’. Many candidates would have done better to produce shorter answers which were more succinct and clearly focused on the question.

The handling of context in particular needs care. Centres had clearly encouraged candidates to engage fully with contextual considerations and many answers demonstrated formidable breadth of reading. However, essays which foregrounded contextual considerations at the expense of offering a literary response proved unsuccessful. Context is part of the requirement of both sections but contextual knowledge should underpin and inform the candidate’s response rather than lead it. Some candidates were particularly prone to over-use of authors’ biographies, and historical context was often inaccurate and muddled (for example, a number of candidates suggested that there were still slaves in the Deep South in the 1940s). Candidates should ensure that contextual insights help to illuminate the text; in many cases, literary contexts – such as other works by writers studied or consideration of genre – proved more helpful than the more commonly supplied biographical and historical material.

There were, however, many excellent responses which showed what can be done with original thinking in response to questions posed; this approach always generated stronger discussion than answers which depended on well-rehearsed material which was not adjusted fully to the demands of the question. Examiners were especially impressed with those answers which engaged with and rose to the demands of the unseen material in Section 2, producing pleasing variety and freshness of response.

### Comments on Individual Questions:

#### Section 1 Drama

Most candidates handled this part of the exam effectively and seemed confident with their approach. Stronger answers thought of the plays, at least partly, in terms of performance and discussed dramatic effects.

#### Question No. 1(a) and 1(b) *Private Lives*

This text was studied successfully by a small number of candidates. Some sound exploration of Elyot and Amanda and their superficial façade was offered. Weaker answers sometimes restricted their contextual discussion to the issue of women’s roles, offering a simplistic understanding that in an unspecified previous era, ‘women had no voice’. Better responses often used the theatre as context, frequently referencing the original production of the play in which Elyot and Amanda were played by Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence; Coward’s own remarks about his play also provided valuable AO5 insights.

**Question No. 2(a) and 2(b) *A Streetcar Named Desire***

This text was the most popular choice of centres. AO3 was often problematic, partly because many thought the Civil War was a recent event and therefore had emotionally affected the characters, while a sizeable minority thought the play was set in the 1920s (also a favourite alternative placing of the Civil War). The 'Old South' was sometimes juxtaposed with an invented 'New North', and a few called the Southern States 'South America'. There was much use of biographical context. When dealing with the play's repressed (or concealed?) homosexuality this was often very good ('Stanley is what Tennessee Williams was afraid of, but what he really wanted to be'), but less so when dealing with the playwright's mother, sister, or the Williams family's mental health in general; very few of these references led to a deeper understanding of Blanche.

Many candidates chose to consider option (a), Williams' exploration of masculinity. Simple responses often focused on Stanley only, considering his animalism and primal connection to Stella and the threat he feels from Blanche. Such responses were sometimes characterised by relatively immature responses to sexuality and to context and this question was often hindered rather than helped by reference to biographical details of Williams himself and his family. More developed responses brought in Mitch, Allen Gray and Steve and used these characters, as well as Stanley, to offer insight into how the dramatic presentation of masculinity is shaped. Such candidates often reached an understanding that masculinity is not fixed or linear and is fluid for all the characters, including Stanley himself.

The (b) question on Blanche was by far the most popular question on the paper. Most students offered a consideration of Blanche in relation to the proposition about facing the truth rather than merely writing a general essay about her character. Many candidates highlighted the lies Blanche tells about her past, her prostitution, her age and her former lovers and could identify the dramatic presentation of the mask she constructs to deceive herself and others. One candidate argued that she needs darkness within the play to belie her own disappointing reality; further that her 'constitution and identity are so fragile that the naked light bulb and all it illuminates would be fatal to Blanche and her moth-like qualities'. The strongest responses engaged perceptively with Williams' dramatic presentation, usually making references to Blanche's style of dress, her bathing habits and the important role played by the paper lantern to illustrate their arguments concerning her character. There was some excellent AO5 use of references to productions, including the Elia Kazan film.

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

This was a less popular text but some successful responses were seen to both questions. Some candidates focused on Pinter's use of language and silence; some attempted to explore generic concerns such as the influence of the theatre of the absurd and the breakdown in communication that this may signal within the family. Nearly all answers were very attentive to textual detail and stage effect.

**Question 4(a) and 4(b) *The History Boys***

*The History Boys* proved a very popular text. One examiner reported that he 'had thought students might be baffled by the play's 1950s provenance, its 1980s setting, and its West End appearance in 2005, but they should be congratulated on how well they handled these contextual complexities'. Given the complexities there was inevitably some awkwardness in the handling of context but examiners rewarded generalised understanding of changes within the education system without over-penalising factual errors about the introduction of league tables and related government strategy. The (a) option on the contrasting teaching styles of Hector and Irwin was the more popular. Weaker responses were inclined to offer a simplistic reading of Hector's teaching as knowledge for its own sake and Irwin's as teaching to the exam, thereby losing some of the subtleties of the different approaches both characters take.

Answers to the question on the marginalised role of women despite the powerful presence of Mrs. Lintott sometimes treated the female History teacher to further marginalisation in their

## OCR Report to Centres – June 2016

responses, instead dealing with Fiona as a priority. Many candidates were able to consider the significance of Dakin's language in his exploration of Fiona but fewer successfully tackled Lintott's significance as a dramatic device or, indeed, her core speeches. Some successfully commented on her structural role as she gathers the boys at the end to reflect on Hector and memorialise their learning. Hector's wife offered some candidates interesting material for more thoughtful insight, and better answers also included the impact of the rather closed masculine world of the play. Context was sometimes limited to rather weak generalisations about the place of women in society, including an observation from one candidate that 'in the 1980s it would be unusual to find a strong independent woman'.

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

This was a less popular text although it was studied successfully by a small number of candidates.

### **Question 6(a) and 6(b) *Jerusalem***

The (a) option was the more favoured question for this text. Candidates offered a real variety of interpretations of belonging and strong candidates used this variety to offer very successful insights. Candidates considered Johnny's marginalisation, his belonging to the wood, to a past England and to his Romany heritage; Lee's desire to go was contrasted with Davey's similarly to stay; Phaedra and Johnny's belonging to childhood or adulthood made for interesting analysis; the youth of Flintock finding belonging within Johnny's encampment presented a useful focus. One strong answer identified that belonging is a difficult concept to negotiate when the underclass of society is marginalised. Good candidates responded well to the inter-textual nature of the play, the variety of contextual influences it offers and the range of interviews with Butterworth and Rylance that are available online; however, this richness of resources led some students to use a scattergun approach, throwing in plenty of information but not always coherently constructing an argument about belonging.

Answers to the (b) option were far fewer, and dealt with the text less confidently. Pea and Tanya provided the focus for weaker responses who saw women as little other than victims. Stronger responses considered the dramatic significance of both Dawn and Phaedra and were able to make more rounded interpretations.

## **Section 2 Prose**

The unseen nature of this section offered real variety. Centres have taken differing approaches to preparing students for this task and more than one valid way of exploiting and linking the extract to the set text was noted by the examining team. The most successful candidates used the extract as a springboard for interpretation of the set text, finding that the unseen extract offered new ways of seeing the novel they had studied. Successful candidates also spent time digesting the contextual information offered on the extract and reading the passage itself closely for valuable AO2 detail. Weaker answers demonstrated less careful reading of the extract. These responses were often characterised by one or two 'token' links, usually made merely at surface level and often did not develop the assertions about the connections identified.

### **Question 7 *The Great Gatsby***

*The Great Gatsby* was the most popular prose text. Examiners saw many excellent responses here and the pairing of Fitzgerald and Dreiser brought out clearly class issues, twenties hedonism, and the ache of romantic exasperation shared by Gatsby and Clyde. Candidates were much more secure on historical issues (WW1, Prohibition) in *Gatsby* than in a number of other texts. Examiners found that Bella and Sondra were often transposed in candidates' understanding but did not penalise for this common mistake. Clyde's response to Sondra was well-documented, in particular his 'curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have' which candidates were quick to apply to Gatsby; many also connected the 'electric',

## OCR Report to Centres – June 2016

'thrilling' qualities of Sondra to Daisy's character. Strong candidates drew quite sensitive portrayals of Daisy offering material from across the set text to illustrate the characterisation offered. Weak responses often demonstrated a slavish imperative to make links where these could not be justified. The dog in the extract was magnified to unfortunate and unhelpful levels of significance at times.

### Question 8 *The Bloody Chamber*

Sophisticated arguments exploring the tension between the idealised worlds of fairy tale and reality or the interconnectedness of desire and fear that underpins many tales of this genre were very pleasing. These strong responses made effective use of the unseen extract by Orson Scott Card, finding a good deal of interest in the lead character's hesitancy when compared with the bluster of so many of Carter's heroes. Many felt the passage contained an intriguing blend of Gothic material (the setting) and fairy tale elements (often via Sleeping Beauty). The literary fairy tale had been well researched, with many aware of the contents and tone of Charles Perrault's work. Weaker answers appeared to lack confidence with this aspect of the set text, tending to write implicitly about fairy tale elements and foregrounding instead the gothic tropes and archetypes within the story collection. Whilst the manipulation of gothic genre across both set text and extract yielded much valuable material and the inter-relationship between these two genres is clear, students often found it difficult to construct a route from gothic to fairy tale and arguments were oblique and sometimes tortured as a result.

Comparisons to the extract variously explored the 'woman asleep', the skin 'stretched taut across her cheekbones' and the supernatural swirling of the leaves. The forest setting provided material for detailed consideration as did the young man's desire to 'see her, to touch her'. Remarkably few picked out the 'airplane' in the passage, which offered hints of the modern world. Most candidates recognised that, for Carter, the whole text means that they must handle a number of short stories (in practice usually three) to achieve coverage. 'The Erl-King', 'The Snow Child' and 'The Lady of the House of Love' were popular choices.

### Question 9 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Students were clearly well-prepared on the dystopian genre. Knowledge of the set text was often excellent and many candidates were able to offer strong responses with the unseen extract affording a number of clear routes into analysis of the set text. *Anthem's* name and bracelet were often related to *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* uniforms; the 'thoughts which are forbidden' to Thoughtcrime; the 'evil' work of writing to Winston's diary; the Ministry of Love to the Palace of Corrective Detention. Links which focused only on similarity tended to be less strong than those which contrasted Orwell's text more thoughtfully with the passage: the consideration of Winston, for example, with his personal name offering him identity beyond that which Equality 7-2521 enjoys. There was a very natural journey from such comparisons to the contexts of Nazism and Stalinism which many candidates took but the generic dystopian context remained a solid foundation for good responses. The impact of totalitarian manipulation exercised many strong candidates, some of whom explored the individual's fear of difference. As with Williams, biographical details were often less illuminating than literary contexts.

### Question 10 *Mrs Dalloway*

Woolf was a less popular text; however, those responses that were seen by examiners usually demonstrated very sensitive readings both of Clarissa and of Edith in the extract. Responses focused on Clarissa's reminiscences about her youth and experiences at Bourton and the contrast between her nostalgia for life with Sally Seton compared to Edith's recognition that in the past she had been 'braver, younger, more determined'. Septimus' inability to separate reality from the past memories he conjures so vividly was also considered and one strong candidate compared his powerlessness with Edith's sense of being out of control. Septimus could also be viewed as being controlled by the medical professions and only free within his nightmarish visions. One candidate observed that without her past, 'Clarissa' would be merely a wife, 'Mrs Richard Dalloway'. Only the best answers compared the narrative style of the two texts.

OCR Report to Centres – June 2016

**Question 11 *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

This text was relatively unpopular, but the responses seen were often securely engaged in issues of cultural identity and belonging. Strong candidates wrote successfully about Hamid's symbolism and were able to consider issues of belonging beyond culture and nation. The desire for personal belonging and Erica and Changez' mutual search for differing kinds of love also afforded interesting perspectives on the question. Jim provided a thought-provoking foil for Changez with his insistence on shared outsider status alongside his protégée. Contrast between the set text and extract often focused on Changez' solitary experience as opposed to the collective view expressed by Budhos' narrator.