
AQA Level 1/2 Certificate

English Literature

8710/1H: Unseen Poetry and Prose/Drama
Report on the Examination

8710
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Report on AQA Level 1/2 Certificate in English Literature: Paper 1H 8710/1H

It was pleasing to see an increase in the entry for this paper from last year and it was equally pleasing to see that the vast majority of schools had fully embraced the ethos of the specification and paid careful attention to the information disseminated at standardisation meetings and ‘Preparing to Teach’ meetings.

Two of the key concepts upon which the specification is built are ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ and these encompass both the freedom of teachers to teach texts in ways their students will find engaging and rewarding and the freedom of students to respond independently when answering questions in the examination. Examiners are trained to respond openly to students’ writing and not to expect rigid, formulaic answers but rather to look for genuine, thoughtful engagement with texts and tasks. It was pleasing, therefore, to see that most teachers had allowed their students this freedom and there were very few instances of students going into the examination with a prepared mental list of features to write about – an approach which is rarely helpful for this paper.

Section A: Unseen Poetry

The unseen poem, *Last Lesson of the Afternoon* by DH Lawrence, proved accessible to students of all abilities and perhaps because it drew upon an experience familiar to most pupils, elicited some good responses. Students fared best when they focused on the question being asked – in this case the feelings the narrator has about his job and his students – rather than launching into a list of poetic devices, accompanied sometimes by unconvincing explanations.

There were some interesting observations which showed that students had read the poem carefully and had engaged with the tone and the details of what was being said. There was evidence of a dawning realisation that perhaps teachers too suffered in the same way as students did, waiting for the blessed release of the bell! There were many sympathetic responses to the narrator whose life is made miserable by his badly behaved pupils and some students were able to see that the narrator was also critical of an education system where the task of describing a dog might have suggested that the students were simply not engaged by the demeaning and undemanding work. Some saw his response as evidence of composure in the face of defeat when he forsakes his arguing and head-butting and simply waits for the bell.

Responses to the ways in which the ideas were expressed often defined the quality of the candidates’ work. References to the ‘soul’ and ‘flame’ engendered some interesting interpretations with students considering religious or apocalyptic associations and many students were able to make sensible comments about the structure of the poem by linking the reference to the bell at the beginning and the end of the text. Many students were unfamiliar with the word ‘quarry’ in the sense it is used in the poem and almost all students were unfamiliar with the idiom ‘to bear the brunt of..’ and were therefore puzzled as to what a ‘brunt’ might be. This, however, did not affect their understanding of the poem as a whole and did not prevent some students from achieving full marks. It is important that teachers encourage students to look at the poem as a whole before they start to unpick the details; in this way students will be less anxious about the parts of the poem they are not sure about. Students need to be taught how to manage their reading when there are words or phrases they do not understand.

Section B

Set Texts

Again, the most convincing responses were produced by those students who showed evidence of engaging with the question in an open-minded way, drawing on their understanding of the text as a whole and shaping their knowledge to the particular question being asked. Occasionally students produced a response which was an answer to last year's question – presumably part of their mock examination – and this limited their achievement.

The most popular texts were *A View from the Bridge*, *Journey's End* and *A Doll's House* although *Never Let Me Go* and *Great Expectations* were much more popular than last year.

This paper tests AO1 and AO2. AO2 asks students to consider how aspects of language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas and themes and it is important to remember that when writing about drama texts aspects of form could include entrances, exits, settings, stage directions, positioning of characters on stage and any other appropriate aspects of the text as drama. Students tend to write about these aspects of *A View from the Bridge* and *Journey's End* very well but seem to be less confident in considering *Romeo and Juliet* as a piece of drama.

Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

Question 02

Most students were able to write convincingly about law and justice in the play and many were able to explore the differences between the American and Sicilian codes of justice. Some identified Alfieri and Eddie as the dramatic means of representing these two contrasting ideas and wrote very well about the ideas explored in the conversations between the two characters. Students wrote well about the dramatic impact of the story of Vinnie Bolzano and the references to Al Capone. In a clever play on words one student concluded that the difference between Alfieri's and Marco's views is that: 'Alfieri insists that the law is justice and the two are the same' whereas Marco believes that, 'Justice is law and the two are the same.' This is a nice distinction, a worthy tribute to the dramatic skills of Miller!

Question 03

Often students responded more favourably to the engaging Marco, in comparison to the flawed protagonist, Eddie. He was seen as the perfect family man who is justified in exacting the retributive penalty of death for Eddie's 'crimes'. All recognised the climactic moment, the raising of the chair over Eddie's head and many saw Marco as an instrument of fate, an idea derived from the Greek dramatic tradition, as he kills Eddie with Eddie's own knife.

Ibsen: *A Doll's House*

Examiners were impressed by the thoughtful, engaged responses to this play.

Question 04

The responses were sympathetic and thoughtful in the consideration of Nora in her unhappy, unsatisfying marriage. Very few students wholly blamed Nora although several commented on her 'failures as a mother' in her rejection of her children. Several students pointed out her lack of care for Dr Ranke and her lack of sympathy for Mrs Linde. Many were able to write about the 'linguistic cage of depersonalising and patronising endearments' within which Helmer traps his wife, although there was some sympathy for Helmer, who students often saw as simply behaving in accordance with his social role. It was pleasing to see students considering the complex relationships and ideas in the play in sophisticated and nuanced discussions.

Question 05

This question drew a range of conceptualised and thoughtful answers with students exploring the ways in which money lies at the root of all the social problems in the play. The effects of money or the lack of money on all the characters in the play were considered and students often concluded that Ibsen aimed to reveal the ugliness and moral corruption of a whole society.

R.C. Sherriff: *Journey's End*

This was another popular text which was accessible to candidates of all abilities. Both questions elicited very good responses.

Question 06

Most candidates were able to trace the progression of the relationship between Stanhope and Raleigh, considering the reasons for Stanhope's initial apparent hostility to Raleigh and the effects war has had on their friendship. There was sensitive exploration of Sherriff's creation of dramatic effects. For example, several students wrote about the significance of the candle flame at the start and the end of the play and the poignancy of Stanhope addressing his dying friend by his first name.

Question 07

Again, students responded very well to this question, identifying and exploring the different types of courage displayed by the characters in the play. Many characters saw courage in all the characters, even Hibbert, and saw the play as exemplifying the courage ordinary men are capable of in such horrific circumstances. This was seen to be emphasised by the structure of the play. As one candidate said: 'The claustrophobic setting, short time span and broken scenes underline the unity of the men in the trench.'

William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*

Whilst still popular, this text was not quite as popular as in previous series. The best responses were thoughtful and analytical but this was the text which seemed to elicit the largest number of narrative responses or responses where students wrote well about issues but treated the characters as if they are real people.

Question 08

There were some interesting responses, especially where students had chosen to write about the less obvious characters such as Lady Capulet, contrasting her attitudes to those of Juliet or the nurse.

Question 09

Responses to this question tended to be slightly more successful, especially where students wrote about the play as a tragedy and considered the role of fate in the play.

Charlotte Keatley: *My Mother said I Never Should*

Senior examiners saw no responses to this text

Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

Very few responses to this text were seen.

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*

Question 14

Students responded well to the question about crime and punishment. The text is very dense and there is much that can be said. The students who performed most successfully were those who selected the aspects of crime and punishment they found most interesting and explored these in detail; this was a far better approach than trying to write about everything. Hence there were some interesting discussions about Magwitch and Jaggers. Most students commented with relish that by the end of the novel true justice was meted out to all in a final retributive scheme.

Question 15

There were many fluent responses to this task also. More successful students commented how each setting was incorporated into Dickens' overall moral scheme. There was plenty of linguistic exploration of the name of Satis House and many students were able to see this setting as representative of Miss Havisham. Students often went beyond the local or episodic and were able to link part to whole in the light of the greater moral scheme of the text.

Kazuo Ishiguro: *Never Let Me Go*

There were some excellent responses to this text. Students seemed completely engaged with the ideas in the novel and were often able to make interesting and relevant comments about the craft of the writer.

Question 16

This was marginally more popular and marginally more successful than question 17. Students wrote convincingly about the 'nightmare world' portrayed in the novel and the way the horror is magnified by Kathy's complete acceptance of her situation. Students wrote about the use of euphemism in the text and the many references to escape, which contrast with the characters' ultimate passivity.

Question 17 was also popular. Most students were able to see the nature of the role of the Guardians and while some stressed the care the Guardians take of the children in their care, most were able to see their hypocrisy – for example the fact that Miss Emily appears to be awaiting a transplant at the end of the novel. There was also incisive comment on the revulsion of some of the Guardians towards the clones even when trying to prove they have souls and even when trying to protect them from the bad treatment meted out to some of their contemporaries.

Mark Haddon: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Very few responses to this text were seen.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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