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Examiners' Report  
Principal Examiner Feedback

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Pearson Edexcel Advanced Level in English Literature  
(9ET0) Paper 1: Drama

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## **Introduction**

This was another highly unusual series with a very small cohort of candidates. Examiners did not see the range of responses that would be expected from a full summer cohort and, unlike last year's Autumn series, the majority of candidates struggled to achieve the higher levels of performance on this paper.

Again, it was clear that students had not had much recent practice under exam conditions and timing was often an issue. Some responses were rooted in neither the text nor the question and it felt, at times, as if texts had been considered from only a limited perspective.

Many responses did not get beyond fairly general comment on the writer's craft and thus did not have access to the higher levels on AO2 which requires evidence of clear and detailed understanding of how writers use language to make meaning in texts. The loose connections as to how the writer has created meaning resulted in rather generalised arguments, offering personal rather than analytical responses to the questions.

Some candidates used no critical sources or alternative arguments and so lost almost all of the marks available for AO5. Other candidates cited critics but did not engage with them. The strongest responses took a critical argument and then carried that debate throughout their response. As has been the case in previous full series, candidates tended to engage very generally with the context of the time, with "Shakespeare's audience was very religious" or "Shakespearian audiences believed women were weak", rather than developing this to be specific for a play and the question being addressed.

Overall, candidates who were most successful engaged with aspects of stagecraft and showed understanding that these are literary constructions. They also explored a range of interpretations, debating a thesis rather than setting out a definitive reading.

## **SECTION A: Shakespeare**

The majority of responses were on *Othello* and with a few on *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*.

The questions in this section offered a choice between a broad theme (on masculinity, acting, social class) or a more focussed question on individual characters or features, such as language variety. The discriminator, as ever, was whether candidates responded to a question's invitation to comment on presentation and on Shakespeare as dramatist rather than mere description or character study.

As was the case last year, in this restricted series, very few candidates reached the highest levels on AO5 and a significant number seemed to forget to engage with at all with critical ideas. Again, this is perhaps an inevitable result of the unusual circumstances under which these papers were taken.

### Question 3

*Hamlet*

#### **The question asked about how Shakespeare makes use of acting.**

The focus here was entirely on the play within the play with limited exploration elsewhere. Responses tended to be assessed around the top of Level 3, i.e., not moving much beyond a clear discussion of The Murder of Gonzago.

### Question 8

*Othello*

#### **The question asked about masculinity.**

All candidates chose to answer this question on *Othello*, and it was the most popular on the paper. Generally, candidates appeared to know the text well and could refer to it in detail. Weaker responses struggled to stay with the topic of masculinity, tending to drift off onto character studies of Iago or Othello. References to critics were made but not always pursued in detail. Loomba and Coleridge were referred to most often.

Here is one of the more successful responses to the question. A decent argument is developed (although expression is not always clear and there is a mostly sustained focus on the topic of masculinity. Occasionally references to context seem out of place, but a strength is its use of critical arguments to support the candidate's own. A relative weakness would be the absence of much discussion around the writer's craft:

**The men of Othello are all, to a certain extent, what a modern audience would call 'manly'. Many are soldiers and known to be 'valiant', yet others exert their dominance in other ways, for example, in Brabantio's case, through fatherhood. It could also be said that this heavily-valued notion of masculinity is a terrifying catalyst for the tragedy to take hold with such a gripping influence over the male inhabitants of Venice, it's unsurprising that the threat of lost masculinity wreaks havoc. Othello is particularly susceptible to the negative effects of lost masculinity due to his attempts to fit into Venetian society, despite his 'thick lips' and 'otherness'. Venice was known as a place of wealth, cosmopolitan culture and political stability, as well as being a place where many Christians adopted Christian values to fit in. Ben Olers said that 'for a Black man to be somewhat noble in the west, he would have to have been neutralised'. This reigns true for Othello, who, as a racial other, he must exert masculine, Venetian values in order to survive. Othello's masculinity is called into question from the very start of the play, with Iago telling Brabantio "an old black ram is tugging your white ewe".**

**On the Christian Great Chain of Being, animals are below man, especially noble men, so Iago is essentially depicting Othello as less of a man. With Christianity dominating Venice, peoples belief in the correct**

order of things would no doubt be vital. |it could also be said that when Brabantio says "thou hast enchanted her", the allusion to witchcraft is a largely feminine association. The Witchcraft Act of 1563, made it legal to kill witches accused of curses and this led to the death of nearly 3000 women. However, aside from Iago, Othello is also depicted as the "warlike Moor" he wishes to be. Iago sings "a soldier's a man" and this close tie of war to masculinity is what makes Othello's fall from grace all the more effective. Iago's machinations surrounding the manipulations of masculinity present a show of purpose which could perhaps make us forget that Shakespeare is the brains behind it all. The move from Venice to Cyprus is followed by the removal of external threat- "our wars are done". The lack of war and violence means that there's room for Othello to be nothing but a "lascivious Moor", his one "ocular proof" of masculinity banished. Therefore Othello's lack of soldier status and hence masculinity gives Iago room to tragically drag Othello down to his rightful place.

Masculinity is, indeed, something Iago harnesses to carry out his scheming. G Salgado references Iago's short honeyed sentences and questions, such as "Ha! I like not that" calling into question whether Othello really does have control of his wife. It could be said that Iago intends to improve his own masculinity and that's why he knows exactly how to drag Othello down. Complaining that "preferment goes by letter and affection", Iago wants a promotion in order to move up the ranks into nobility. Here, he displays the archetype of the Malcontent, someone upset with the social order of things, who seeks, through sneaky methods, to rectify it. In improving his own masculinity however, he must not only lessen Othello's, but also "ensnare as great a fly as Cassio". It is Iago's fault that Cassio is demoted and it's this demotion that lets Iago warn Othello to "look to your wife". Again, military roles and masculinity are closely linked, and the loss of both set the start point for the tragedy to occur.

Masculinity is also lost in the play through the failure to control womanhood. Ania Loomba said that Othello is predisposed to his negative beliefs about women due to his otherness and this reigns true as we see how his insecurity with his own "visage" makes it easier for Iago to "prove {Othello's} love a whore". At the start of the play Othello has a "divine" and outspoken wife, who he allows to "let her speak of me to her father. He clearly believes marriage should be a union and that masculinity and femininity are somewhat equal, as shown by "she loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her tat she did pity them". However, upon Iago's warning to "observe her well with Cassio", Shakespeare creates the realms for Desdemona to become Lisa Jardine's alleged "passive-victim". Othello's inability to control womanhood stems from his belief that he has been cuckolded.

Cuckolding was the ultimate insult to a man's masculinity, as it implied a man could not control his wife, which, considering the fact that a contemporary Jacobean audience wouldn't think twice about inter-marriage domestic abuse, a man being cuckolded portrays him as weak. When Othello "strikes Desdemona" we see an attempt to hold on to his masculine power through any means necessary, similar to that of a Macchiavelli. It's this lack of masculine power that furthers his tragic

fall, as his only way to stop Desdemona's alleged wayward behaviour is to "strangle her in her bed".

This is a far decline from Othello declaring "my Desdemona I must leave to thee in Act 1, where he leaves her on a ship full of men before they had consummated their marriage, and therefore risking his lineage and chance of cuckoldry.

To conclude, the loss of masculinity in Othello sets the correct environment for tragic events to occur. Othello's already considered as an anomaly and an Other, so when his military role is removed, and he's given reason to suspect his wife, the order could be said to be broken, but could also said to be fixed. Michael Neill stated that Othello assimilates himself into Venetian society, but under stress, reverts to primitivism. If this is true, then it could be argued that his tragic fall is justified, as if he isn't placed below man and masculinity, "chaos is come".

Question 15

*Twelfth Night*

**The question asked about the presentation of outsiders.**

Few candidates chose this question. While weaker responses tended to offer up what seemed like pre-prepared character studies, better answers considered the play's genre and social contexts, making some reference to theories of comedy and to a range of critical views.

Question 16

*Twelfth Night*

**The question asked about social class.**

This was the more popular question and better answers avoided the common trap of generalising about class stereotypes and focused on the extent to which the play could be seen to uphold or subvert contemporary social expectations. This type of approach lends itself to the level of evaluation necessary for a high level response.

## **SECTION B: Other Drama**

As usual there were differing approaches to this section, with some candidates focusing heavily on the minutiae of the text and others giving an evaluative view but with little specific evidence.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* was the overwhelming choice of play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* saw some responses and a further few had studied *Dr Faustus* or *The Duchess of Malfi*

Context was generally handled well, and most candidates were able to link their comments to relevant historical and biographical information. Again, as in previous series, the best responses fully addressed the writer's craft and considered staging in their textual analysis, rather than just looking at language and dialogue.

Finally, it was clear once again in this section that some candidates had struggled with timing and their responses suffered as a consequence of too long spent on the Shakespeare section.

Question 17

*Dr Faustus*

**The question asked about over-reaching.**

Candidates choosing this question were generally well-prepared and could make effective links to contexts, referencing Calvinism, pre-destination and so on.

Question 20

*The Duchess of Malfi*

**The question asked about the presentation of death.**

Candidates appeared to know the text well, although there was some tendency to discuss key scenes in isolation. A useful approach was to explore the topic in relation to Jacobean drama generally.

Question 23

*A Streetcar Named Desire*

**The question asked about family bonds.**

The majority of candidates chose this question and responded with varying levels of success. Weaker candidates tended to want to write only about Stanley and Stella's marriage, where more successful candidates adopted a broader approach and explored the relationship between the sisters, the marriage of Blanche and Alan and even at Mitch's bond with his mother.

Here is an extract from a successful response that was able to make detailed and meaningful links between the text, its context and the question:

**...Moreover, Stella's choice to carry on living with Stanley after the rape of her sister is in further contrast to Blanche's idea of the importance of family bonds and ties. Williams' use of the image of Stella "accepting**

her child into her arms” is symbolic of Stella’s decision to break her familial bond with Blanche in order to choose her new family in New Orleans as she accepts Stanley and her child as part of her family in ‘New’ America. Furthermore, Blanche’s comment that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers” is another symbol of the break in the family bond with Stella and the “Old South”. Blanche is portrayed as lonely and isolated, placing her faith now in strangers rather than on previous family ties ... Williams uses Blanche’s trunk, filled with papers, to represent the long, convoluted family history to which she feels duty bound...

Question 24

*A Streetcar Named Desire*

**The question asked about the use of stage directions.**

This was another popular question and candidates generally did well here, being able confidently to discuss Williams’ use of a range of dramatic devices to develop his themes. Access to AO3 was what candidates found most challenging and the best approaches involved discussion of Williams’ contribution to the stylistic development of American drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Question 25

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

**The question asked about appearance and reality.**

Candidates clearly knew the play well. Less successful responses adopted a narrative approach but those who explored the text more critically looked at the theme as a vehicle for comedy and social satire, showing understanding of the conventions of a comedy of manners.

Question 26

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

**The question asked about social convention.**

There were some good responses, where candidates explored the play as a means for Wilde to satirise Victorian social values. Some candidates took a rather list-like approach, giving examples of social conventions rather than exploring their significance.



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