A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

7707/2: Exploring Conflict
Report on the Examination

7707
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General

This was the third year of this paper and overall students showed more confidence in handling all areas of the examination. Examiners enjoyed the variety shown in recreative writing, not only because of the texts studied, but also because of the ambition of students in choosing various narrative devices to present to their creativity.

Time, as always, seems to be well-managed on this paper. Even if students chose to do their dramatic response first, there was still plenty of time spent on the recreative task and commentary. This paper is especially challenging in its assessment of all five Assessment Objectives across three very different tasks. Examiners were impressed with students' ability to recognise the challenges in meeting the Assessment Objectives and to show that they understood the different knowledge and skills required for each one. Examiners noted that the biggest areas of change from 2018 responses were in two areas. First, in the quality of the critical commentary, especially with the links made to the base text which focused more securely on writers' stylistic choices and the effects on meaning that adhering to or varying from these generated. Second, in the more relevant and developed discussion of genre and context in *Dramatic Encounters* that enhanced, rather than detracted from, their interpretations. These had been the focus of the 2018 Examiner's Report and had been covered in the CPD courses during the year.

This remains a rewarding paper to examine. Students had obviously enjoyed studying conflict in its different forms, and in the different texts, and were able to respond both creatively and critically. Paper 2 is synoptic in not only calling upon all Assessment Objectives but also in the underlying focus of the specification on point of view and how language choices create representations. Students were able to engage with this in their own creations of character and narrative and in their analyses of character in their texts.

Section A: Writing about Society

In this section the key concepts for study are

- **society**: a group of people working and living in a specific location who act out cultural beliefs and practices
- **characterisation**: the range of strategies that authors and readers use to build and develop characters
- **point of view**: the perspective(s) used in a text through which a version of reality is presented
- **motif**: a repeated concrete object, place or phrase occurs in a work of fiction and is related to a particular theme
- **base text**: the original text from which re-creative writing takes place.

The most popular base text choice was *The Great Gatsby*, followed by *The Kite Runner*. Less popular were *Into the Wild* and *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher OR the Murder at Road Hill House.* Whichever text they had studied, students communicated their enjoyment of these, as well as their pleasure in being creative.

Recreative writing

In this transformation task expertise and creativity is assessed through three different strands:
- flair and originality
- sustained use of style
- convincing use of base text.

As ever, students took different decisions in recasting the base text into an 'account' that provides them the freedom to make representational decisions about the use of dialogue, speech and thought, narrative modes and genre. More effective recasts sometimes took risks that, despite not being sustained, allowed for Level 4 and Level 5 credit for flair and originality. Many of the most engaging recasts to read were ones that showed students are drawing on a variety of narrative strategies confidently. Equally, imagination and flair may be shown in many ways; often these stemmed from students taking a significant detail from the base text and using this to develop a voice and character, or to develop another narrative in which to retell the original events. For example, in *Into the Wild* students used Krakauer's description of his father's reactions to his children or his later illness and for *The Great* Gatsby students inferred Catherine's jealousy and used this in their writing.

There were fewer monologues and students were more experimental with the use of dialogue and description. There was also more evidence this year of planning and selection from the starting extracts before writing. This was, for many, a good strategy and this led to more literal retelling of events and level 1 and 2 achievement.

The task also requires students to think carefully about characterisation and careful selection of details from the extracts given was a fruitful starting point for many. This could be seen in Catherine's choice not to drink in *The Great Gatsby* and Lewis Krakauer's difficult personality in *Into the Wild.* Details from the base text were used to present characters' attitudes to other characters and events. There was a range of responses as to what Catherine's viewpoint for *The Great Gatsby* might be – sympathetic to Myrtle, jealous of her relationship or simply suggesting she got what she deserved. Many reflected on the way Farzana, for *The Kite* Runner, might react to Sanaubar's re-appearance – suspicion, reluctant welcome or concern about Hassan's feelings. Students also considered the voice for their character, using an American 1920s sociolect for Catherine and Afghani lexis for Farzana. And where the voice was less successful for Farzana, it was because the language used seemed too complex for the character Hosseini portrays.

Some students also embraced the opportunities that changing point of view can have and took an oppositional view to the characterisation seen in the base text by choosing to present their character in contrasting ways from the author. This was mostly seen in the presentation of Catherine in *The Great Gatsby* where students chose to have views contradict those that she presented to Nick in the extract as she was often presented talking to a close friend with whom she could reveal her true feelings. Some realised that in *The Kite Runner* and, to a certain extent, *The Great Gatsby*, women had been given a marginalised perspective in the base text and provided Farzana and Catherine with a strong voice. Those who tackled *Into the Wild* responded well to perhaps a less obvious character for a recast than those centring around the story of the main protagonist Chris, showing that they had read the extract and chosen wisely by using Krakauer's description of his father. Likewise for *Mr Whicher,* there was freedom for students to invent a character as well as to use their knowledge of the detective as he was the named audience for the recast.

There was evidence that some had considered the genres used in their base text. For example, in responses to *The Kite Runner* many students chose letters and a few selected a phone call. Sometimes these were well-thought-out with a careful consideration of the most appropriate audience and how to include these within a monologic approach. Others showed thoughtful decision-making related to their own understanding of the base text by justifying Farzana's ability to by presenting Hassan as her teacher and occasionally by using him as a newly literate man as a conduit for the writing. Less successful letters were those where more effort was taken in meeting the chosen genre than in selecting and presenting Farzana's feelings and experiences, with much

phatic content that did not add to the creativity. Letters also caused some additional problems as the extract covered quite a long period of time and one letter to inform an audience on all of the events proved challenging. For *The Great Gatsby*, diary entries and letters were chosen but these tended to be less successful. Indeed, how well the students conveyed a sense of the audience was an indicator of their overall success and the stream of consciousness style narrative adopted by a few was another unsuccessful narrative choice for this transformational task.

For *The Great Gatsby* decisions over setting seemed more important. Many successful recasts took the opportunity to take on the 'gossip' aspect of 1920s New York society and used dialogue effectively. Within this, students thought about where this would take place and used cafes, bars and apartments as suitable backdrops for Catherine's revelations. For some, evoking the 1920s atmosphere worked well. Starting accounts 'in media res' was a popular method for opening the narrative, but other methods chose were an immediate address to the audience or to open with dialogue that introduced a dramatic aspect.

Many used themes and motifs from the base text. At their best, these were integrated well. But sometimes these felt like an attempt to copy the base text author's style and did not add imaginative elements or used the base text convincingly. For example, some students presented Catherine with a working class accent but also drew on highly descriptive elements seen as typical of Fitzgerald's style without sustaining it convincingly. Colour symbolism and references to eyes featured regularly and, for some, were integrated effectively into the transformation. Likewise, pathetic fallacy and, to a lesser extent pomegranate trees and guilt, featured in the accounts for *The Kite Runner*.

More successful responses:

- created rounded characters – sometimes including the receiver of the account
- used purposeful dialogue, effective speech clauses and suspended quotations which added to characterisation and narrative
- use third person narratives well
- controlled the openings and endings of the recasts, engaging the reader and sustaining their interest
- carefully selected details from the base text and used these to create the narrative and/or characters
- conveyed a sense of the specific audience, whether this was included or implied
- looked for clues in the base text from which to construct their character but added to this imaginatively.

Less successful responses:

- retold events very literally and in the same chronology, showing overreliance on the base text
- included tense shifts that made the narrative confused
- chose a voice for their character that was unconvincing
- did not consider all the bullet points
- overlooked the needs of their audience or offered a restricted sense of audience – especially true of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Kite Runner*
- showed a misunderstanding of the text and/or extract– for example, talking about Mrs Wilson for *The Great Gatsby*
- did not use the chosen genre effectively

- used dialogue in a derivative fashion
- unproductively mirror the style of the writers of the base text.

Critical Commentary

The task requires students to refer to specific features they have used, apply concepts or language levels and refer to the base text in a coherently structured and expressed piece of writing. The majority of students were aware of these and responded appropriately. With regards to AO5, it appears that many students were careful with their expression and checked their accuracy where they could. Responses were mainly well-structured and often AO5 guided responses as students organised their commentaries effectively into sensible paragraphs with clear topics for discussion.

There were fewer formulaic responses and students seemed to be more open-minded in their selection from their recast. Examiners noted that students' commentaries were more focused on their actual writing rather than choosing less interesting features such as alliteration. Interestingly, examiners are still noting that students are sometimes writing effective commentaries despite a less convincing recast. This was a result of selecting interesting aspects of their own language choices to explore the shaping of meanings and showing a good understanding of the base text, even if the recasts themselves had not been completely successful,.

Students were generally mindful that although AO1 is not assessed here, the wording of the level descriptors asks them to refer to language which should be understood in a broad way. Some students successfully explored concepts such as narrative point of view and characterisation or applied methods such as speech and thought presentation and explored the role of body language in expressing feelings about events. Indeed more so this year, students identified specific aspects of language choices, offered a rationale for these and discussed the effects they had intended. This approach produced more critically aware responses with an awareness that students were constructing a character with a particular point of view. As ever, students who picked individual features often found themselves with little to say in terms of the meanings created, especially when they were inaccurate when identifying them.

AO4 was much better handled too this year, which was pleasing as the base text is one of their six set texts studied for this specification. Students' references to the base text were no longer so restricted to listing the quotations that they had selected from it without linguistic comment or analysis. Neither were there so many sweeping comments on the content of the extract or whole novel, or to the base text's historical and social contexts. However, some students did waste much time talking about the social contexts for *The Great Gatsby* and less effective commentaries showed a confusion with the time period of the novel.

More successful responses:

- offered careful discussion of choices of setting, characterisation and narrative devices
- developed their topics ie explored a range of choices that presented the character in particular ways
- analysed the language choices used by the base text writer and the meanings from these and then showed how their own choices supported this or offered an alternative interpretation
- wrote about their choices in interesting ways rather than simply labelling features, showing an understanding of the need to be critical and evaluative in their discussion of the meanings they intended

- considered the relationship between their own writing and the base text, sometimes structuring their commentary around this but sometimes allowing paragraphs to be driven by their own decisions and then focusing on the connections
- reflected on specific and precise language choices that they made in their own writing
- moved beyond a narrow definition of language as individual features, successfully highlighting ideas about language, such as narrative, motifs, power, politeness, interpersonal relationships etc.
- showed a perceptive understanding of the base text, the writer's choice of narrative and language techniques and the effects intended
- produced well organised and accurate writing, signposting commentaries helpfully for the reader.

Less successful responses:

- described their own writing with minimal reference to any language detail
- struggled to comment on the language choices in the base text compared to their own where their account had been derivative and too close to the original
- only offered connections to the base text based on the quotations used in the recast
- centred connections centred too much around context
- focused too much on the genre chosen than the content/characterisation
- chose a quotation from the base text and then described the changes that they had made in adapting particular sentences
- selected language levels/features on the basis of being able to identify them or without discussion of how these were shaped to construct meanings
- applied language labels inaccurately or imprecisely – for example, in misidentifying specific word classes or using words like 'imagery'
- made minimal reference to the base text, focusing solely on own writing, or drawing almost entirely on the base text and analysing the writer's choices without considering their own writing
- focused on narrative perspective but without being able to go beyond the use of the first or third person and whether the base text was the same or different
- wrote lengthy responses, listing almost every choice rather than choosing judiciously from their recast and looking at patterns and meanings.

Section B: Dramatic Encounters

In this section the key concepts for study are

- **genre**: a way of grouping texts based on expected shared conventions (here specifically the conventions of drama)
- **characterisation**: the range of strategies that authors and readers use to build and develop characters
- **interaction**: the ways in which playwrights present characters speaking or acting in response to others for dramatic effect
- **speech acts**: the forms and functions associated with particular utterances and types of speech
- **politeness strategies**: the distinctive ways in which speakers avoid threatening face in interaction.

The overwhelmingly most popular text choice was *A Streetcar Named Desire*. However a good number of responses were seen for *Othello* and *All My Sons*, and it still was encouraging to see that a number of centres had chosen *The Herd*. Examiners reported that most responses showed engagement with the set text and an understanding of what the task requires, although there was still a tendency for some students to focus less on close and precise linguistic analysis than they had shown that they could do in their Section A commentaries.

AO1

The mark scheme shows that this assesses three distinct strands:

- use of concepts, methods and terminology
- selection of and analysis at different/appropriate language levels
- expression and presentation of ideas.

However, some students approached this question with less focus on using AO1 in a precise and helpful way, sometimes offering little analysis of linguistic features when exploring the given passages or the wider text. Politeness theories, Grice's maxims and speech acts are most usefully applied when combined with a range of other linguistic features linked to the exploration of meanings. Overall, students are able to select confidently from language levels, specific features and these key concepts but some students might have been produced more effective AO1 responses had they applied ones that they understood more securely. Examiners seek to reward what the students include, rather than there being a prescriptive list, and the indicative content provide suggestions for a wide of range of possibilities that students may or may not discuss.

AO2

The mark scheme shows that this assesses three distinct strands:

- an ability to interpret and evaluate the question focus
- selecting appropriate detail
- analysis of authorial craft.

Students had clearly considered the question focus before they had started writing as they often addressed this specifically in their introductions. For *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the majority chose 'conflicting desires', although some did not consider the 'conflicting' nature of desire in detail. This was often a performance discriminator as more effective responses then selected other parts of the play to explore scenes either where the characters on stage showed conflicting desires. Or, they chose to contrast characters' conflicting desires across the play as part of its tragic trajectory. Many focused on the conflicting desires demonstrated by the sisters in the starting extract and then chose other sections wisely to continue comparing and contrasting characters: for example Stanley and Blanche in Scene 10 or Mitch and Blanche in Scene 9. Other careful selections came from Blanche's interactions with the Young Man and included some subtle understanding of the conflicting desires and secure and developed links made both to characters' identities and to themes of the play.

Text selection for all the questions was a key factor in determining success. For *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 'loneliness' was less well-handled in terms of other parts of the play and some students tried to suggest Stanley's and Stella's loneliness was a key driver but found it difficult to evidence. A larger focus on Blanche's and Mitch's loneliness throughout the play worked best. 'Prejudice' was the most often chosen for *Othello* and many students took the opportunity to explore other types of prejudice other than that levelled at Othello, for example prejudice against

women. With 'loss of control', some simply focused on the "how" and not the "why" this occurred, sometimes leading to less developed and insightful interpretations. Confidence was shown with textual selections for both the *All My Sons* questions, perhaps as each concentrated on some of the larger themes of the play, 'family obligation' and the 'shifting of blame'. Here, students could move from the characters' presented in the extracts to others to make connections linked to the question focus and offer different interpretations.

Different strategies were offered for signposting and structuring responses. Students were clearly shaping their answers around the interpretation using AO1 and AO3 either to support their points or to allow for a change in direction of their answer. Some students used effective topic sentences to link to other parts of the play. These helpfully indicated different interpretations of the question focus. Others weaved in references to show characters' changing identities or changing relationships. Key to success was the quality of the signposting so that either the argument could be followed or it was made very clear that the analysis was moving beyond the starting extract. Sometimes the analysis of the starting extract was the best part of the response and students found it more challenging to choose their own sections and discuss these analytically with the selection of appropriate detail and to analyse authorial craft. For some, their own text selections allowed them to confidently demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the play. Others found this much more challenging and kept returning to the extract to select more features; this invariably led to a less well-constructed responses.

Stronger this year was the sense of the playwright's role in crafting, with some effective discussion of stagecraft and the use of language and dialogue to create characters' identities in reference to the set question. For example, students' discussion of the sisters' interactions in Scene 4 for *A Streetcar Named Desire* explored both their contrasting language styles, for example Blanche's concerned imperatives versus Stella's matter-of-fact declaratives, and considered what these demonstrated about their attitudes. They also made links to orthographical or stage directions that helped to convey the sisters' conflicting desires. These were often then connected to an analysis of different types of femininities together with some social comment on 1940s America.

AO3

The mark scheme shows that this assesses two distinct strands:

- generic conventions of drama (specific dramatic conventions and the affordances of the stage such as soliloquy, asides, use of theatrical space, stage directions)
- the influence of contextual factors on the negotiation and shaping of meaning (these include the social, historical, political, and literary influences on the production and reception of the play).

This Assessment Objective was better handled this year but in different ways by students, with no one approach being more successful than another. What did differentiate levels of achievement was how well students engaged with the genre, both as a play and as a tragedy. There was some excellent discussion of tragic heroes in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Othello* but with specific reference to the actual questions being answered and inclusion of Williams' use of plastic theatre, again with close focus on how examples could be linked to 'loneliness' or 'conflicting desires'.

Likewise, quotations from critics were often used with salience and were utilised in students' introductions and conclusions and/or in the main body of the response to aid interpretation. Biographical, historical and social contexts were used frequently to support points being made but pleasingly these were made relevant to the discussion rather than consisting of simple statements unconnected with the question. Political context featured more in *All My Sons* responses to both

the 'family obligation' and 'shifting of blame' questions, with a good understanding of Miller's possible motivations and views against the backdrop of post-war America. However, political context was used for *Othello,* with some effective links to Venetian and Jacobean politics to explore the prejudices faced by different characters and the groups they represented.

Overall, more successful responses:

- explored conversational interaction strategies used by characters that shape their identities, attitudes and behaviours
- selected language levels and used precise terminology to identify features in support of the concepts discussed
- explored physical descriptions, stage directions and orthographical conventions to respond to the questions and to highlight tension/conflict
- identified the use of different speech acts carefully and explored their associations with particular characters and in interaction
- evaluated how distinctive personal vocabularies, speech patterns and registers given to characters could link to meaning
- selected a range of contextual points relevantly
- explored effectively genre and the use of specific genre conventions with relevance to the question focus
- included relevant references to specific literary critical (although those from non-academic readings were seen infrequently)
- recognised that these were examples of dramatic discourse and kept sight of the writer's crafting throughout.

Overall, less successful responses:

- offered descriptive accounts of the question and the play as a whole
- applied spoken gender theory - these add little to the exploration of the plays, especially when interpreted as deliberately being used by the writer
- did not use Grice's maxims well, often ascribing these again to the writer's use of these
- showed limited awareness of AO1 and the importance of precise linguistic description to support the interpretative elements
- frequently used quotations without linguistic description
- wrote brief responses
- either did not move beyond the extract or made unclear descriptive references to different parts of the pay with limited relevant to the question
- overlooked genre completely
- made sweeping judgements about the social contexts of the time or offered historical inaccuracies.

A breakdown of all Assessment Objectives for this specification together with details of key concepts for the sections of each paper can be found in the *English Language and Literature: Companion Guide* on the AQA website.

https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/AQA-7706-7707-COMP-GUIDE.PDF

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.