



# **Examiners' Report**

## **June 2024**

**GCE English Literature 9ET0 01**

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## Introduction

The examining team on 9ET01 are always genuinely in awe of the work that has gone in from teachers and candidates to prepare for this paper, which makes significant demands on candidates across five Assessment Objectives. The vast majority of responses on both sections showed focused and thoughtful approaches to the texts discussed and engaged on a personal level with the characters, themes and techniques used by writers. It is a privilege to read what candidates have to say about the texts and we always learn new things from marking their scripts.

While the following report offers specific feedback on individual questions, the following are general points for centres and candidates to note:

- The best answers tended to have well-integrated AO1 and AO2, with solid, consistent AO3 used in a focused way in support. They also used relevant and well-researched critical viewpoints from a range of different sources: some contemporary with the plays in question, from critics and other playwrights and writers of the time; others from more recently.
- Some responses suffered from being overly verbose and made their meaning unclear as a result of using repetitive sociological jargon such as 'behaviours', 'patriarchy' etc. without adequate relevance or explanation. It must be pointed out that scattergun usage of fashionable terms does not improve the argument in an essay of literary criticism: instead, again, the better work tended to smoothly and thoughtfully mesh terminology and critical views with the main argument being presented.
- At the mid to lower bands, repetition was also an issue, and affected the clarity and comprehensiveness of the argument; essays that were placed in the mid to lower bands tended to be both general and repetitious, for the most part, lacking a clear sense of structure and purpose, and falling into the narrative and explanatory.
- Concision was a feature in the best essays: a clear plan and structure allowed points to be built upon one another without repetition, and ideas were firmly and logically linked together.
- Furthermore, nuance was a feature of the best pieces, especially in approaching tricky and delicate topics such as race, sexuality and gender, and the most successful pieces presented ideas with proper regard to context rather than making sweeping statements on attitudes at the time of writing, for example.
- Pre-planned introductions, which give a lot of irrelevant information, such as the date of the text's publication etc. should be avoided. It is better to use an opening paragraph to set out an argument and direction of travel.
- Examiners are pointing out that handwriting is becoming increasingly worse. Some responses required re-reading several times over a couple of days and there are always a few answers where some words/phrases/even lines remained indecipherable even after repeated readings, rendering it difficult to follow the thread of a candidate's thinking.
- Examiners have also noted this year how candidates are so well-versed in the Critical Anthology, and beyond. Keep it up!

## Question 1

*Antony and Cleopatra*

### **The question asked about reputation.**

It was good to see an increasing number of centres choosing *Antony and Cleopatra* for study. This was the less popular of the two questions, but candidates were able to approach the topic from a number of angles, with some responses tending to focus only on the main characters, considering Antony's military reputation and the gendered narrative around Cleopatra's reputation, while others broadened their scope to look at themes such as political and historical reputations and explored the role of Plutarch and how reputation might be forged by myth.

Here are a couple of extracts from a response achieving Level 3 marks on both grids:

*In William Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra', reputation is seen as keeping composure of yourself as the leaders in this play are looked up to by peasants and everyone else in the world. However relationships and alliances may affect your reputation as you deal with consequences whilst everyone is watching your every move. The three leaders in this play, Antony, Cleopatra and Octavius Caesar will explore how reputation is presented, as well as other characters.*

### **(This is a clear and straightforward approach)**

*On the contrary, Antony's ally, Caesar, soon after Antony and Cleopatra's death creates what we know as 'the Roman Empire'. This portrays how Caesar is the opposite of Antony, as when Anthony was enjoying his life in Egypt and excessively drinking and feasting, Caesar was building up the empire by conquering up with other leaders and taking other countries, therefore building up his reputation to be a strong leader....* **(Demonstrating a clear, but fairly general, understanding of context)**

*Tony Tanner suggests how Caesar is "in time with time" and Antony and Cleopatra are in a "state of flux" suggesting how they are out of timeliness and in a bubble. This links to previously as while Caesar is building up his reputation, Antony and Cleopatra are in Egypt soaking up their extravagant life. For example, Cleopatra states "Eternity was in our lips and eyes" suggesting they are out of timeness compared to the whole world moving forward.*

### **(Using a clear critical point to substantiate the argument)**

## Question 2

*Antony and Cleopatra*

### **The question asked about the presentation of Cleopatra.**

The question was popular and appeared to be accessible to candidates of all abilities. The best responses were able to move beyond basic character analysis and consider Shakespeare's craft.

### **Examiner comment:**

'The best answers I marked on *Cleopatra* were able to draw on Shakespeare's manipulation of the visual impact of the character in the theatre – refreshing when so many answers on so many of the texts seemed to have limited sense of them as dramatic works'.

Here is a response that was awarded Level 5 marks on both grids:

*Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as a capricious and fluid character, transgressive of social norms and audience expectations. While Antony is feminised and impolitic, Cleopatra is masculine, powerful and manipulative. Her harnessing of her aesthetic beauty as an almost divine creature allows her to exert influence over Rome and establish a kind of indirect rule. Overall, Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as enigmatic, agile and holding the audience in constant thrall – but ultimately ending in disaster.*

*Shakespeare shows Cleopatra as subverting traditional gender norms, with her relationship with Antony transgressing Roman ideals. While Antony is weak and feminised – Enobarbus cries “Hush! Here comes Antony” to which Charmian responds “Not he; the queen” with Shakespeare employing bawdy humour – Cleopatra is masculine and powerful. Cleopatra remarks how she “drunk Antony to bed, and put [her] tires and mantels on him whilst [she] wore his sword Phillipian”. Not only does Shakespeare show Cleopatra as the perpetrator of such gender radicalism, but also how she removes a phallic allusion in a sword from Antony and equips it to herself. This perhaps conforms to Shapiro's opinion that Shakespeare was ‘the noblest feminist of them all’ all with gender purely a social construct. However, the disastrous climax of the play – the Battle of Actium – suggests Cleopatra's masculinization is an unnatural aberration. Indeed, Antony praises her for a “good rebuke which might have well become the best of men to taunt at slackness ... we will fight with him by the sea”, a tragic and disastrous decision, if evaluating from Aristotle's view that tragedy is most acute when an individual falls from an elevated social position. While Antony's “sword is made weak by [his] affection – ultimately culminating in his farcical inability to kill himself which Jacobson describes as his overindulgence in emotion which leaks down to his soldiers unwilling to put him out of his misery – Cleopatra threatens messengers with a knife: “rogue... hath lived too long!” the exclamative which would be highly irrational and disturbing to a contemporary Jacobean audience. While Jones points out the Egyptian scenes are longer, allowing for greater temporal space for emotion and hedonism, Cleopatra's remarkably fast emotional swings are at the crux of a play ‘in flux’ (Jones) and an empire reforming. In the 19th century, the play had become largely a vehicle for pageantry, reduced to just 12 scenes from the original 42 and with choirs and full-fledged. The return to sparsity and fluidity – well captured in the 2018 and 1951 productions with their evolving stages – in the 20th century helped better capture Cleopatra's volatile and capricious nature. Caesar's criticism about Antony “is not more manlike than Cleopatra” captures the dual track of their gender subversion. Rylance's casting in a 1999 production is indicative of Cleopatra's masculine aura. Overall, Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as transgressing gender norms but to fatal consequences.*

Shakespeare, however, also indicates how Cleopatra makes great use of her aesthetic beauty to garner influence. Enobarbus comments on how she “o’er pictures Venus” beyond even the divine. Antony, on the other hand, is compared to the gods and in the past tense: “his eyes have glowed like plated Mars”. Bloom notes how the play is never quite Antony’s as he is waning from the start while Cleopatra never allows herself to wane. Indeed, Antony seems far more dependent on Cleopatra than she on him. Cleopatra is presented with a remarkable ability to arouse desire: “smiling cupids” – a mythological allusion reinforcing Cleopatra’s godly, hyperbolic status (arguably a pressure of the Renaissance on Shakespeare) “whose wind did seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool”. Cleopatra seems to return the wind with added heat, just as she renews Antony’s desire with added lust. The couple are entirely complementary, with Anthony’s baseless desire resulting in a carnal, unstable give-and – take that drives the play forwards. Not only is Antony enamoured, but nature is personified to be in her thrall too: “Anthony did sit alone whistling to the air, which, but for vacancy, had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too and make a gap in nature”. However, Cleopatra is able to fill this metaphorical “gap” as parallel to the gap she fills in Antony: “she did make defect perfection and, breathless, pour breath forth” filling the vacuum. Water, too, is personified and shown to lust after Cleopatra: the oars... made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their strokes” the simile’s bawdy sexual innuendo translating the passion and desire stimulated by Cleopatra’s divine beauty that drives the play forwards. The characterization of Cleopatra can largely be seen as an attack on the anti-theatrical Puritans who would have been horrified by her sexual indulgence as threatening the social infrastructure of Jacobean society. Indeed, the austere Puritans are embodied as Rome, and would have far preferred the demure Octavia, who Cleopatra is directly juxtaposed against – while Quint argues the clash between Rome and Egypt is characterised by gender, the contrast between Octavia and Cleopatra is brutally stark: Octavia arrives with the simile “like a market maid” while Cleopatra is publicly enthroned on “golden thrones” – the colour symbolism capturing her love of opulence and grandeur. And while Octavia “weeps... a statue than a breather”, Cleopatra has the fluidity of “a serpent of old Nile”. Bloom argues that Cleopatra uses her aesthetic beauty to garner some kind of indirect influence over Rome, seducing Julius Caesar and then Antony. When the ‘mealy-mouthed pragmatist’ Octavius (Burton) comes to power, Cleopatra’s capital (her beauty ;her passion) is worthless within this new framework. Cleopatra’s suicide – where she becomes both the playwright and the actress (Jones) is like the zenith of her power reaching a peak of apotheosis (glorification to divine levels). Her calling for “my best attires” is almost a metatheatrical attempt to regain control of the narrative and the stagecraft of the play; while she calls out to Antony, “Husband, I come!” Shakespeare doesn’t clarify a consistent belief system for this afterlife – rather Cleopatra’s creation of “new heaven, new earth” through “heavenly mingles” consolidates her status as an other-worldly figure. Shakespeare bestows her with such hyperbolic power that she claims she is “fire and air” beyond the spatial or literal confines of earth, but also transcendent of heaven (air) and hell (fire). Overall, Shakespeare makes use of Cleopatra’s aesthetic beauty to present her of as being of incredible power.

*Shakespeare therefore presents Cleopatra's influence over Rome. While Liz Lewis suggests that Antony is the true victim of the patriarchy, Cleopatra is also villainized: Antony's downfall is alleged to be under the "noble ruin of her magic". King James particularly enjoyed the supernatural, and Cleopatra's exotic background would have cast her as a witch to many among a Jacobean audience – while Antony decries "whither hast thou led me Egypt?" a rhetorical question blaming Cleopatra for his inglorious and ill-fated downfall. Indeed, Antony is described as "the bellows and the fans to cool a gypsy's lust". The racial insult of 'gypsy' was common in English courts of the time to construe disloyalty and excess. However, Egypt is not presented solely negatively and indeed the culture is seen as appealing even to Romans: in Act 2 Scene 7 celebrations with Pompey "ripen towards an Alexandrian feast" with "Egyptian bacchanals". Overall Cleopatra is emblematic of the profound influence of Egypt and the misogynistic and racial tendencies of Jacobean society to 'other' those different.*

*In conclusion, Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as a masculine figure at the expense of Antony, able to utilise her great beauty to foster dependence and influence over Rome. Overall Cleopatra can be seen as the driving force of the entire play.*

## Question 3

*Hamlet*

### **The question asked about the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia.**

This was a popular question to which responses varied widely; weaker answers told the story of their relationship, while stronger ones linked it to broader themes and concerns, exploring the complexity of Hamlet and Ophelia's feelings and comparing their psychological states. Some candidates diverted to discussing Ophelia or the treatment of women generally, rather than focus on the relationship with Hamlet. Better responses engaged in detail with Shakespeare's text, while weaker ones focused more on recounting what the characters said.

Common themes were around patriarchy and misogyny and the treatment of women, but contextual analysis was often vague. Many candidates referred to the 'madonna-whore complex' but some responses focused too much on the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude here. One successful approach was to explore Hamlet's feigned madness to Ophelia's genuine madness.

A major area of weakness in candidate responses was limited engagement with the text itself; this kept many from achieving higher levels on this section. Candidates need to be more confident in finding their way around Shakespeare texts.

Here is an example of a strong response, awarded Level 4/5 for AOs 1-3 and Level 4 for AO5:

*In Shakespeare's Elizabethan tragedy, Hamlet, he uses the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia to symbolise the harsh contrast between men and women and the restraints that women experience in comparison to the freedom of men. At a time at which women could often be deemed as 'shrews' and face humiliating punishments – such as being forced to wear a bridle in public for nagging their husbands – Shakespeare reflects upon this inability for relationships to be truly free under the expectation that women should obey their husbands. On a surface level reading one would assume that Hamlet's misogynistic attitudes are mirrored in his disrespectful treatment of Ophelia, but Shakespeare subtly shows a much more intimate level to their relationship*

*As Mack compellingly claims, madness provides 'truth' and it is 'dramatically useful'. Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is cleverly used by Shakespeare to highlight Hamlet's deep affection for Ophelia. Upon seeing the ghost, the first person that Hamlet seeks out is Ophelia and she describes how he 'held me hard and fell to such perusal of my face'. The word 'perusal' means a deep examination and, although the audience is restricted from watching such an intimate act as this scene occurs off stage, we can infer that Shakespeare is attempting to show Hamlet's deep admiration for Ophelia. This moment occurs when the pair are alone and the fact that Hamlet attempts to create a feigned madness by having his 'knees knocking each other' and had a look as if he were 'loosed out of hell' means this antic disposition creates 'truth' in the knowledge of Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia. Indeed, Hamlet's closest friend, Horatio, who witnessed these events with Hamlet was not the one he sought comfort in upon seeing the ghost of his dead father.*

*Yet, despite Shakespeare depicting how Hamlet's madness allowed for him to revel in the reality of his desire for Ophelia, Shakespeare more effectively uses Ophelia's true madness to depict the female suppression in contrast to male liberation. It is Hamlet's murder of Ophelia's father that drives her into madness and her flowery language of 'daisy... fennel' and 'columbine' sends symbolic messages to members of the court, but she remarks of how the 'violets... withered when my father died' and therefore heightens this deep sense of love Ophelia had for her father. Particularly violets represent loyalty and although most readings would infer that the loyalty of Polonius to his King Claudius decay on his death, it can arguably be stated that Ophelia's loyalty to Hamlet has now 'withered' as she goes on to state that that is due to her father. However, perhaps we can also draw attention to how Hamlet had Ophelia to seek comfort in upon seeing his dead father but Ophelia does not have the same privilege as Hamlet is away in England at that moment. Ophelia repeatedly makes reference to her father's death in Act 4 Scene 5 as we see her note, 'He is gone, he is gone... he will never come again...no, no, he is dead'. The fact that Ophelia switches to prose and is singing does indeed provide this sense of freedom as Mack states. However, for Ophelia 'he' may not be clear and it is ambiguous as to whether she is also drawing attention to Hamlet's abandonment of her. Therefore Shakespeare clearly highlights the imbalances of freedom within the relationship of Ophelia and Hamlet, but subtly critiques the prejudice surrounding unmarried couples by showing this deep sense of affection.*

*The death of Ophelia is similarly met with affection, but Shakespeare also creates Ophelia's death first so as an audience we do not get to see Ophelia's reaction in response to Hamlet's death, thus highlighting still this sense of masculine dominance and freedom. During the grave scene, Shakespeare uses the stage direction 'leaps in the grave' for Laertes and straight afterwards we see that Hamlet 'comes forward' which perhaps depicts the sense of protection and a need for Hamlet to defend Ophelia, even in death. Before Hamlet discovers that Ophelia has died, his tone is more playful with the comedic questioning, 'Why... how strangely... how came he mad?' which would be hilarious for the audience as Hamlet is pretending that he is not the Prince. As well as being with Horatio and the gravedigger, this scene works more as a break for an Elizabethan audience from the tension of the play and double casting meant that grave digger could have been comedically played by the actor who played the ghost. In contrast, when Hamlet discovers the grave is for Ophelia, Hamlet makes the remark, 'Have I in me something dangerous?' and wishes to 'fight' with Laertes 'upon this theme' until his 'eyelids will no longer wag'. Hazlitt claims that Hamlet is the prince of philosophical speculators, but in these final scenes that notion is not true. Although it is arguable that Hamlet's time in England has prompted him into action, the fact that there is a clear contrast in his manner before and after discovering the death of Ophelia demonstrates that what is causing this shift from his 'philosophical' mannerisms, as Hazlitt states, is in fact the loss of Ophelia. The Elizabethan honour code worked at forcing men to seek violent justice and revenge for their loved ones and Shakespeare highlights how this aggressive tone comes at Laertes dishonouring the grave of Ophelia by jumping into it. The fact that he states he will 'fight' Laertes until his eyelids no longer 'wag' shows this readiness to meet death and how Hamlet will be ready to die in battle. The mention of the 'theme' also draws their attention to their point of conflict and although Shakespeare cleverly diverts attention to Polonius and this need for Laertes to avenge his father, perhaps the current 'theme' for Hamlet was Ophelia. Indeed, Shakespeare could not be too radical in approach and showed deeply intimate relationship between an unmarried couple, as the playwright of 'The Isle of Dogs' was imprisoned for his radicalism. Therefore the questionable claim of Coleridge that Ophelia is 'deprived of sexuality' is not entirely relevant as Ophelia clearly holds a significant position to Hamlet*

*Shakespeare draws attention to the sinful (in the eyes of an Elizabethan audience) relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet throughout the play. Both characters make sexual remarks openly to the court through a mask of madness, such as 'Lady shall I lie in your lap?... jig maker...country matters... lie between maid's legs... by the cock' and we get a clear impression that Ophelia and Hamlet have possibly had a sexual relationship. Shakespeare appears to critique this type of relationship by creating Hamlet to have misogynistic attitudes to women, such as 'Get thee to a nunnery'... 'God hath given thee one face and you make yourself another' which suggests that Hamlet does not appreciate Ophelia. The word 'nunnery' could act both as a slur for a brothel as well as a religious sanctuary for the purity of nuns and therefore enforces this idea that Ophelia is sinful for her sexuality, drawing attention particularly to the Madonna-whore complex and the fact that it is only ever women who are seen as sinful for engaging in sexual activity. However, Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous as to whether Hamlet can see Polonius and Claudius spying at this point and therefore his disrespect to Ophelia may purely be pretence. Indeed, Ophelia is defensive of Hamlet throughout the play, and upon Polonius attempting to dismiss her conversation about Hamlet by saying, 'Go to, go to', Ophelia disregards her father's demand by continuing the conversation with the statement, 'He hath...' thus coming away from her usual half lies and spilling over the pentameter with 11 or 12 syllables. Perhaps Shakespeare is highlighting how Ophelia has a similar defensive attitude on the subject of Hamlet. Although the restrictions women faced in education and acting may have been an influence for Shakespeare, a far greater influence was the bridles women were forced to wear in some cases of going against their husbands as he is directly opposing the silencing of women.*

*To conclude, the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet does indeed reflect the way in which women did not experience the same liberties as men, but Shakespeare is also defending affectionate and intimate relationships between unmarried couples but could simply not clearly do so due to the time of writing. A modern audience may not see such a relationship as loving, but compared to Elizabethan laws and standards at the time of writing their relationship is indeed intimate.*

## Question 4

*Hamlet*

**The question asked about the extent to which it is a play full of doubt and confusion.**

Stronger responses contextually linked the theme to the state of the country and its uncertain politics. The majority of candidates focused on Hamlet's doubt surrounding Claudius and the task of enacting revenge. Clearer responses at Level 3 analysed Hamlet's state of mind in various parts of the play, such as his encounter with the ghost, his 'to be or not to be' soliloquy, and the graveyard scene. Some responses provided discriminating analysis of Hamlet's ghost as reflective of the dichotomy between Catholic belief in Purgatory and Protestant attitudes towards the supernatural. A few evaluative and critical responses examined the doubt and confusion surrounding Hamlet's feigned or real madness, debating whether Ophelia's doubt and confusion surrounding this, and Hamlet's feelings towards her, drive her to madness. Other high-level responses took the approach of examining Hamlet's doubt and confusion on whether to focus more on avenging his father or saving his mother. Weaker answers, however, merely provided examples of textual moments that involved 'doubt', but did not link this to an argument.

### **Examiner comment :**

'Answers sometimes consisted of a series of examples of problematic areas without any overarching argument. However, even the weaker candidates were able to identify examples of doubt and confusion. At the other end of the ability range, there were some very successful evaluative answers although at times there was a tendency to treat the text less as a work of literature and more as documentary evidence for a shift in historical mindset from Medieval to Renaissance and some seemed more interested in the theological/philosophical aspects than the literary ones. Some answers were able to make excellent use of the dramatic impact of the play in performance, especially analysis of the effect of the opening scene, but there was often little sense of the play as a play. Some candidates made good use of contextual understanding of revenge tragedy'.

Here are extracts from two different approaches – one at the bottom of Level 3, the other comfortable in Level 5.

Example 1:

*Confusion and doubt is a common theme throughout the play which is arguably utilised to present characters, exaggerate moments in the play and to keep the reader thinking and on their toes as the lack of knowledge of what may possibly happen next will keep them intrigued.*

*This leads me to believe that Hamlet is a play full of doubt and confusion and you can see this through the character of Hamlet. Hamlet being the main character, it is expected that the audience knows what his thought process is and know all about his information such as his background. Although some may argue against this as he has multiple soliloquy's throughout, there is still a sense of confusion as we never truly know whether he was actually mad or whether he was acting in order to execute his master plan. The reason why I believe this creates doubt and confusion is because you can easily argue both sides of spectrum. For example, in one of his soliloquy's he states how he is practically playing Polonius (and it is working) as he knows he has been told to spy on him. Therefore in order to execute his plan he has to pretend that he has essentially lost his mind in order to get the unwanted attention of him. However Polonius also states there is a method in his madness, implying that Hamlet is not mad and he has a plan thought out causing more confusion to the audience as they don't know whether Hamlet's devised plan will come into action...*

Example 2:

*In the play, Hamlet, Shakespeare explores doubt, confusion and moral dilemma through his exploration of a Kyd-inspired revenge tragedy. Exploring Hamlet's grief almost vicariously, Shakespeare reflects upon the religious zeitgeist and his own crypto-Catholicism to explore the subliminal introduction of doubt, straying from the piety associated with Elizabethan England. It is argued that Shakespeare 'lost a part of himself while writing Hamlet', undoubtedly contributing to the undercurrent of doubt and confusion within the play.*

*Immediately Shakespeare introduces doubt and confusion through a religious lens, introducing the ghost to the petrified men in 1.1. Shakespeare reveals the internalised deception of Marcellus who argues, 'tis but our fantasy' connoting a desire of Marcellus to reassure himself that the ghost was not lingering amongst them. Shakespeare uses a social discourse on the religious zeitgeist, using the abstract 'thing' to reflect resistance towards any belief in 'ghosts' due to their Protestant beliefs. This reflects the notion that Hamlet is a religious drama while reinforcing the subtle introduction of doubt and fear, foreshadowing Hamlet's reception of the ghost in 1.5. Bernardo queries Horatio with an urgency connoting an attempt at self-reassurance asking:*

*'How now, Horatio? You tremble and look pale. Is this not something more than fantasy? What think you on't?'*

*Again 'fantasy' is explored, reflecting doubt in the true nature of the ghost, a purgatorial spirit displaying perhaps the rejection of the Protestant notion of purgatory. The dynamic verb 'tremble' paired with the adjective 'pale' suggests an unbearable fear displayed by Horatio, foreshadowing the exploration of religious and moral dilemma within the play...*

## Question 5

*King Lear*

**The question asked about the extent to which it is a political play.**

This was a popular question, with many candidates recognising the problematic ramifications of dividing a kingdom. As one examiner commented: ‘the modern world has prepared candidates to understand that ‘political’ can include things such as strategy, propaganda and deviousness as well as the more basic distribution of power’.

Some candidates, however, did not engage with the political element of the question, instead arguing that the play was about family dynamics without mentioning politics, which led to off-task responses. There was a missed opportunity to discuss the family as a microcosm for the political realm, and how the breakdown of the family symbolises the breakdown of the kingdom.

Some discriminating arguments used Bradley to suggest that the division of the kingdom was the cause of the play’s tragedy, implying it spirals Lear’s downfall. There was some critical analysis of Edmund’s motives, with references to primogeniture and the position of illegitimacy within Jacobean society. A lot of focus was on Edmund’s soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2, analysing the plosives to reflect his bitterness.

The best responses adopted a conceptual approach, for example, this introduction:

*Written during an era where politics was meant to maintain social hierarchy in ‘the Great Chain of Being’ and enforce security in a nation, Shakespeare exposes the undermining of politics in his play, with characters taking it upon themselves to sneak and steal their way into power. This arguably results in the extent of politics in the play to be muddled, with no clear assertion in the play on who the true governing force should be at its conclusion. Yet, as critic Kastan states. ‘Uncertainty in Shakespeare anyhow is the point’...*

Here is a further extract from a high Level response that makes excellent use of a critical argument:

*Set in the eighth century BC, Shakespeare's King Lear is a play about a supposedly wise old man learning what it means to be human. The typical response suggests that Lear disrupts the natural order of his Kingdom by relinquishing his throne while seeking to retain the title of king; however, this unbalance leads to his demise and that of his kingdom. I would argue that this is too simplistic: it is only when Lear is reduced to a 'bare forked animal' whose life is 'cheap as beasts' that he truly undergoes his anagnorisis and learns humility. Rather than perceiving the play as this creation of conflict between man and nature, man is united in its folly. King Lear is a mix between Greek and Senecan tragedy with a surprising Shakespearean twist (lack of catharsis) that, for Lamb, makes the play 'Shakespeare's most desolate tragedy'. Furthermore, Shakespeare's King Lear is a seemingly godless world that promotes atheism – a notion that would have been censored (if not summarily punished) had Shakespeare not cloaked his critique in a Pagan setting – as well as a sense of anti-establishment. Lear's harmatia comes from his blindness; he favours the 'glib and oily art of flattery' over Cordelia and Kent's sincerity and it is this folly that leads to him becoming a 'naked wretch' on the heath in Act 3 Scene 2. In this scene Lear remarks 'the art of our necessities is strange' and this (among others) showcases aspects of Stoic philosophy (immaterialism amor fati) in particular the idea that we should live simply. Shakespeare's tragedy can thus be read as a political drama: it both critiques religion and promotes a simplistic way of life.*

*Mack suggests that King Lear is a mix of Roman and Senecan tragedy through 'the adage, Quos vult perdere Jupiter dementat prius'. In Act 1.1, Lear is in a choleric rage at the perceived filial ingratitude of his 'joy' Cordelia (an ironic sentiment as Cordelia is the only daughter who truly loves her father) and Kent seeks to save her from banishment, becoming exiled himself during the process: 'The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter'. The alexandrine which is broken by caesura reflects Lear's unstable state of mind and perhaps the beginning of his descent into madness. Moreover Kent's half-rhymed response embellishes Lear's uncertainty, highlighting Kent's clear sightedness and Lear's lack of it. Set in pre-Christian Britain, but written in Christian times, it is likely that Shakespeare was referring to this adage when he wrote 'By Jupiter'. However, I would argue that King Lear is best read from a perspective of Greek tragedy: first and foremost because the play shares many elements with a Greek tragedy – anagnorisis, harmatia, peripeteia and so on. Secondly because the play contains inspiration from Greek mythology, such as the legend of Cassandra (who appears on stage in Troilus and Cressida) who acts as a foil to Lear's madness caught as he is between the absolute and the expedient (Mack). Moreover, the Stoic philosophy that permeates the play can be seen as an opposition of the establishment in Shakespeare's own society which was both hedonistic and relied too heavily on God to explain the errors of humanity...*

## Question 6

*King Lear*

### **The question asked about the relationship between masters and servants.**

Some candidates focused on familial relationships between Lear and his daughters, which was not the focus of the question. Across the range there were frequent references to Lear and the Fool's relationship, with some discriminating comments about the closeness of their relationship and the Fool's care for Lear in trying to point out his errors. Many candidates also explored the relationship between Lear and Kent, as well as Kent's overall function in the play. Discriminating analysis was seen of the unnamed servant who, despite a lifetime of service to Cornwall, defends Gloucester; there was good analysis of Regan's animalistic language towards him as reflective of her shock that a servant steps out of line.

As with responses to the other Shakespeare questions, the best remained very much grounded in the text itself.

Here is an extract from a high Level response :

*'King Lear reminds us of the human capacity for hatred, cruelty and injustice; it also reminds us of the human capacity for love and forgiveness' (Watts), and in a tragedy such as this the relationship between master and servant is essential. Lear is truly a tragic hero, 'a man who is not eminently good or just, yet whose misfortune comes from, not vice but by some error or frailty' (Aristotle), and it appears that his two most prominent servant – Kent and the Fool – help to protect him from his own tragic 'frailties' amidst the conniving faction between Goneril and Regan. In this way, Shakespeare reminds his audience not to underestimate those of lower class, by 'appealing to a meritocratic ideal' (Bruce), perhaps criticising the inheritance and monarchical structure of Jacobean, and the times before's, society.*

O'Toole argues that, in *King Lear*, 'the traditional morality of loyalty, of knowing one's place and keeping it, is no longer of much use', and it initially appears this way in Act 1 Scene 1 with Kent's retort that Lear 'swear'st [his] gods in vain'. Kent holds himself as someone who has forever remained 'a person (for Lear) to wage against [his] enemies', but in his retort, desperately removes himself from this position of subservience to protect Lear from his tragic 'error' (Aristotle). The transformation from the noun 'person' to 'gods' seems to mirror Kent's own transformation from 'person' to confidante, and we watch Kent's tone switch as he moves from the soft diphthong in 'person' to the sharp sibilance of 'gods'. In his best efforts to protect Lear, Kent ironically has to remove himself from his traditional position of protection, seemingly forgetting his place (as expressed by O'Toole). Interestingly, Kent also mirrors Lear in this section, repeating 'Now, by Apollo, King' as a quip in response to Lear's 'Now, by Apollo', not only interrupting him, but seemingly mocking him, with the plosive of 'King' highlighting Rutter's idea that 'Kent's snarled up venom gets expressed in the plosives and fricatives'. Kent seems to spit at Lear, completely reversing the power dynamic between servant and master, and practically committing treason – a very touchy subject for King James I (who would've been watching) who'd managed to dodge many plots against his rule, including the infamous gunpowder plot. However, O'Toole's theory falls apart after Kent's banishment, as Kent returns as Caius in Act 1 Scene 4 to once again fulfil his duty to his dear master...

And another high Level approach:

... One of Shakespeare's most obvious servants is Lear's Fool, serving not only as entertainment for Lear, but also education. Yet Lear's lack of clarity only allows Lear to see him through the lens of the former. As the Fool attempts to teach Lear that foolishness is 'in motley love' and 'found out there' pointing to Lear, he highlights to the audience not only Lear's past mistakes in his banishment of Cordelia but even his present inability to understand, as Lear ironically jests that 'we will have you whipped' demonstrating his inability to understand aphoristic speeches of the Fool. Arguably the harshest of Lear's critics is the Fool, as noted by Orwell who said that the plays 'most acute social commentary' is not from the superficially wise but 'villains, lunatics and buffoons'. Through a reading of Orwell, we can clearly see the dichotomy between the Fool's two roles of service – entertainment and education. As the Fool tells Lear to 'Keep in a-door/ And though shalt have more', he delivers arguably his most acute social commentary, yet as observed by Orwell, Lear can only see him as a lunatic, calling this 'nothing'. Contextually, one must consider the genuine fools which operated in contemporary royal courts who were often genuinely mad or known as 'feigned' fools both of which acted purely as sources of entertainment. Perhaps Shakespeare appropriates the feigned fool for his Fool character as both his heavily constructed verse and acute social commentary show he transcends the definitive role of 'lunatic' which Orwell assigns. Yet it is that same heavily constructed verse and use of riddle which means Lear only sees the Fool as the servant of entertainment, as his use of the word 'nothing' analytically recalls his quarrel with Cordelia, demonstrating to the audience that Lear still holds many of his irrational beliefs. Thus, Shakespeare uses servitude to demonstrate the futile goodness which servants tried to impart on their masters...

## Question 7

*Othello*

### **The question asked about the relationships between men and women.**

This continues to be the most popular Shakespeare text on the paper, perhaps because the relatively intimate, 'domestic' nature of its drama makes it accessible.

Most candidates discussed the relationships between Othello and Desdemona and Iago and Emilia, with some consideration of Bianca's treatment. There was perceptive discussion around Brabantio and Desdemona's relationship linked to patriarchal control and her defiance of it. The best responses successfully evaluated Shakespeare's message in criticising the treatment of women during the time period, particularly through Desdemona's death and Emilia's outspoken views. Some responses outlined an argument in their introduction but did not stick to this argument, leading to a loss of "control". Clearer Level 3 responses focused on contemporary misogynistic attitudes towards women, particularly Iago's attitudes towards Emilia and Cassio's attitudes towards Bianca. The high Level 4/5 answers tended to focus on power imbalance and power struggles within the relationships, such as women struggling against patriarchal ideals. There were some discriminating analyses of Iago's impact on Othello and Desdemona's relationship, which allowed candidates to demonstrate how relationships change as the play progresses.

### **Examiner comments included:**

'Most candidates showed at least a clear understanding of key aspects of the play, well-supported by contextual knowledge and awareness of different critical views. Better answers made insightful comments on the ways in which different productions have illuminated aspects of the play. This seems a particularly useful 'way in' to understanding the drama'.

'The very best answers showed detailed background knowledge, including contemporary perceptions of colour in non-European people and the liminal role of Cyprus at the edge of the white European world'.

'It might be helpful to suggest to candidates that the past really is a foreign country. At times, a certain tentativeness of approach may acknowledge the candidates' appreciation that it may be impossible ever to know entirely what the attitudes of a distant period and culture were. Terms like 'patriarchy' and 'proto-feminism' are, of course, illuminating ways of understanding the world. However, we might reasonably question the extent to which they might be applied to a society which, for instance, took belief in God and hierarchy for granted. In short, candidates might be encouraged to acknowledge doubt and uncertainty in producing the very best answers'.

'There were lots of generalised AO3 comments on women at the time. There was a lack of quotation from around the play. 'Tuppung white ewe' was used in almost every essay. Candidates were often trying to force race and Othello into the question. There was lots of discussions about the relationships in Level 3, rather than comments on what they represented which were more prevalent in Level 4. Those started with initial depictions of relationships and then discussed how things changed and developed were more likely to present a controlled argument. More impressive and intelligent ideas looked at things like Othello and Desdemona being a warning about misconceptions of true love, or examining the similarities and differences between Iago and Othello in their relationships'.

Here is an example of a high Level response. Its particular strengths are its seamless incorporation of critical ideas and the fact that it never forgets that the text is a piece of drama:

*In 'Othello', Shakespeare presents the interracial relationship of Desdemona and Othello and the perception of this by Venetian society. He also presents how men in relationships are threatened by female sexual stereotypes and alleged infidelity. Ultimately Shakespeare depicts how this leads to the breakdown of relationships, with women becoming victims.*

Shakespeare presents the relationship between Othello and Desdemona depicting the attitudes of contemporary Venetian society towards interracial marriage. Their relationship is discussed by Iago using racist language such as 'an old black ram is topping your white ewe' and this highlights structurally (as the audience have not seen Othello and Desdemona actually together) the importance of the perception of their marriage and the tension between their public and private lives. The use of animalistic imagery not only uses contrasting colours to amplify their racial differences, but also is derogatory and alludes to the stereotype of black men as 'primitive' and violent. Additionally, the use of the possessive adjective 'your' implies that it is not seen as a valid real relationship as women were seen as property passed from father to husband and, as this refers to Brabantio, it invalidates the marital bond. This is continued in 'making the beast with two backs' a subversion of the biblical 'one flesh' suggesting that unity is not achieved. Further, the crude sexual image using 'beast' creates a sense of being unnatural and this blatant racism, although seemingly shocking to a modern audience, would have been familiar to a Jacobean audience. This evokes Loomba's view that a 'nightmare of racial hatred' is depicted whilst the actual presentation of Othello and Desdemona's relationship is more accurately a 'fantasy of interracial love'. They address each other as 'O my fair warrior!' and 'My Dear Othello!' and by sharing a line of iambic pentameter this suggests a close bond and an equal, loving relationship. It also suggests that their relationship is one that possibly transgresses gender roles, as the possessive adjective 'my' refers to the husband and Desdemona is described using military language usually reserved for men. Desdemona saying 'I saw his visage in his mind' whilst immediately suggesting a deeper intellectual bond over superficial attraction, also suggests a sort of 'race-blindness' that may reflect the short-lived nature of their relationship as the real impacts have not been considered. This indeed evokes Loomba's 'fantasy' perhaps foreshadowing that their relationship is unable to survive in a racist, misogynistic society. The casting of actors is also important as recent productions (such as the RSC 2015 one) have emphasised age gaps of more than 40 years, again painting Desdemona as young and naive and hinting that the relationship will not survive.

Shakespeare also presents how men are threatened by alleged female infidelity. Iago's motivations, although unclear, may be partly as he believes 'he's done my office' and that 'I hate the Moor'. The hypothetical tone however, and the long speech with several reasons, elicits Coleridge's 'motive hunting of a motiveless malignity' and although the 'hunting' seems accurate the soliloquy creates an almost conspiratorial relationship between the audience and Iago – the 'motiveless' is unsuitable as his hatred for Othello down to several reasons is made apparent – therefore his motive is revenge. The transactional business language of 'office' creates a sense of impersonal detachment from his wife Emilia, suggesting that Iago is not upset by her alleged infidelity itself, but actually the impact on his relationship. Sexual stereotypes are employed by Iago in his manipulation of Othello when he states 'I know our country disposition well. In Venice they do let God see the pranks...' Iago uses language here not only to cast doubt on Desdemona's faith, but also skilfully uses the adjective 'our' usually used in inclusive first person plural, to exclude Othello and remind him of his status as an outsider. Ryan says this constant continual racism 'predisposes Othello to the insecurity and doubt' – indeed due to the action of the play occurring so quickly (mostly conforming to the unity of time) this is likely as otherwise the complete switch in Othello's attitude seems unlikely and unrealistic as being completely down to Iago. The contrast between 'my life upon her faith' and 'cunning whore of Venice' not only reflects his tragic downfall, but also suggests the importance of perceived fidelity within relationships between men and women and perhaps that Othello's fatal flaw is his susceptibility to believing the stereotypes. The linguistic convergence to Iago's speech patterns and phrases highlights Iago's manipulative power whilst also more subtly implies the pervasive and poisoning abilities of these stereotypes. Othello's exclamation 'I'll chop her into messes! Cuckold me!' explicitly highlights the importance of maintaining male reputation for respect, but also is reminiscent of the stereotypes of Moors as 'over – emotional, excitable and unstable' (Quarshie). As this play was written by a white playwright for a predominantly white audience and Othello was played in blackface, as Quarshie suggests, perhaps a black actor validates and confirms racist stereotypes. Therefore perhaps, in Othello's believing Desdemona's (untrue) infidelity Shakespeare was highlighting how even noble, military, successful black men were prone to succumbing to dangerous stereotypes, so the relationships between men and women are inherently linked to race.

Ultimately, Shakespeare depicts the breakdown of relationships with women becoming victims and being killed by their own husbands. The staging of Desdemona's death occurring in her bedroom is vital as it highlights the interaction between outer society on their private relationship and how a military tragedy becomes a domestic tragedy. Contemporary productions would also have been extremely visually striking, usually emphasising the visual contrast between Othello's blackface and Desdemona's white makeup, as well as the level of imagery with Desdemona laying on the bed representing and reflecting the gendered power imbalance in the relationship. Desdemona's inability (or unwillingness) to accept the violence amplifies the victimisation and tragedy, causing Bradley to describe her as 'helplessly passive'. Her last words 'Nobody. I myself' may in fact be interpreted as her remaining faithful to her husband even despite the brutal murder. However it may also be compared to Tennenhouse's description as 'the embodiment of power' as even in her final moments before death Desdemona takes back the small amount of power from Othello, taking her death and the tiny amount of independence back. Her true character possibly lies somewhere in between these two extremes, with Othello both allowing her to transgress gender norms and express her opinions whilst also being left powerless under the oppressive patriarchal society. Emilia also dies by being stabbed by her husband after she attempts to uncover the story of the revenge, declaring she will speak 'as liberal as the north'. The comparison to the natural wind perhaps suggests the power that women can achieve whilst unrestrained. However, the fact that Iago tries to stop her highlights the punishment of women in relationships who step out of the domestic sphere and go against their husbands. Further, the fact Emilia's revelation must be validated by the morally corrupt, yet high class Venetian gentleman, suggests that women are only allowed to exist within limited frames. Jardine's view that they are 'punished by the patriarchy' is applicable to both women, and as they are of different classes and circumstances perhaps Shakespeare suggests that sexual injustice is rife throughout all of Venetian (and Elizabethan England) society. He may even be seen as a proto feminist by depicting the harm of sexual stereotypes and oppression, however as nothing changes perhaps he simply accepts this in his privileged position as a man.

Overall relationships between men and women are integral to the play, particularly in what Thompson suggests is Shakespeare's key message that there are 'benefits to accepting multiple stories frames and narratives'. This is applicable as he highlights the oppressive restrictions of racial and sexual stereotypes on them. Perhaps by displaying such strong relationships within genders (Desdemona and Emilia and Iago and Othello) Shakespeare suggests the inability of true loving relationships to exist under the patriarchal Venetian society.

## Question 8

*Othello*

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

All candidates considered Othello as othered due to his race, with some discussing his own internal othering. Plenty of contextual links were made to the views on 'moors' in Elizabethan England. Many candidates also discussed women as being othered. Discriminating responses evaluated the marginalisation of women and Shakespeare's criticisms of such. They also evaluated his criticisms of racial divide and the dire consequences it can have. Clearer Level 3 responses focused on Iago's role to incite prejudice from Brabantio with clear analysis of the racial implications of the zoomorphic metaphor "black ram tuppung your white ewe". The high Level 4/5 answers analysed Iago as the "other" which allowed him to "other" Othello, as well as made discriminating analysis of the women as "other" in a patriarchal setting. There was analysis of the setting (Venice/Cyprus/Florence) to explore outsiders, including Cassio as a Florentine.

### **Examiner comments:**

'There was a stronger focus on the question here. However, those that did fail to answer the question often spent too long on Iago (without ever really justifying why he might be considered an outsider). Level 4 responses explored more complex arguments, such as the impact the treatment of outsiders has on tragic character development. Level 3 responses tend to be a character-based response that just pointed out that they were outsiders and why'.

'There seemed to be many responses where candidates had pre-planned introductions, which gave a lot of irrelevant information'.

Here is an example of a strong opening:

*Shakespeare constructs 'Othello' to include most characters as outsiders in some sense, whether that be outsiders of Venice due to the move towards the 'Green World' of Cyprus, or due to their racial, or gendered qualities. The notion of being an outsider is ultimately what leads to the tragic 'tale of suffering and calamity... concluding in death' (Bradley) as Iago's machinations allow for Othello's internalization of status as an 'outsider'...*

Here is an interesting, high-scoring response which presents a convincing argument and keeps the text in sight at all times:

*In 'Othello', Shakespeare presents the concept of outsiders as a way of enhancing and focusing on those who are considered 'insiders'. The fact that women are outsiders in patriarchal terms, for example, while remaining the rational thinkers in the play, shows the negative aspects of the patriarchy. Othello's irrevocable nature as an outsider, at the core, despite his charismatic and honourable nature, shows the irrational dogma of Venetian hierarchy and judging standards. Shakespeare creates many 'outsiders' in the play in order to show the ridiculous and illogical nature of the concept.*

*Women are repeatedly portrayed by other characters as intrinsically inferior and irrelevant, such as a Iago's patronising attitude towards Emilia in 3.3 as he calls her 'foolish' and 'snatches' the handkerchief from her, as well as Cassio's laughter thought of marrying Bianca contrasted with the charming language he uses to her face – 'most fair', 'sweet love'. Men in the play assume they are superior and above all women in every situation, outcasting them from the concept of rationality and valid thought. Shakespeare however, overtly characterises the women as innocent, rational and in many ways intellectually superior to the men. As Neely states, 'all our rational thought in the play comes from women', referring to Desdemona's eagerness to forgive and restore Cassio's 'Reputation, reputation, reputation!' through making his 'bed... seem a school' and Emilia's reproach to Othello's irrational, entranced behaviour at the end – 'Thou hast killed the sweetest innocent' as a climax to her constant (and correct) defence of Desdemona across the play. As would have been expected in the Jacobean (and seemingly Venetian) societies, men are at the top of the pyramid due to valid, intellectual advantages and the ability to judge, making women inferior outsiders in an ingrained inter-societal way, but Shakespeare reverses the reality by making the men in his play malicious, jealous and untrustworthy. In this sense women, as 'outsiders' is presented as an unfounded and irrational concept, through the application of dramatic events onto the accepted gender hierarchy.*

*In terms of 'internal outsiders' such as the Venetian women, Othello is also eternally unavoidably considered different and held to a higher standard. Although he is considered 'valiant' and 'most worthy' by the Venetian elite, his status was most definitely difficult and complex to achieve, as we know he was 'sold to slavery' and suffered a 'distressful stroke'. His life's story may have been inspired by Leo Africanus, writer of 'A Description of Africa', who was a Moroccan slave self-made into a writer in England in the 1500s. Despite any merit, status or quality, however, Othello's race will always be a visible demarcation and the impact of this is seen through his 'readiness to respond' (Bradley) to Iago's manipulations, as the speed of assumption reveals his insecurities. Karim-Cooper posits Othello as a 'model minority' which holds associations of minorities as held to a higher standard in order to even begin to access the privilege of the majority, which Othello attains – 'your son-in-law is more fair than black' – showing at once the respect held for him as well as the internal unavoidable prejudice. Shakespeare makes Othello's complex nature as a high-status, renowned outsider vulnerable and exploitable, and Iago's ease with which he destroys him enhances Othello's hidden insecurities due to the fact that he knows very well he is never at the same level as his white counterparts. The seed of prejudice and of his 'outsider' nature is planted from the very first scene – Shakespeare makes it clear that the white characters hold mixed views on the 'Moor'. Through this layered presentation, Shakespeare portrays such prejudice as irrational and destructive by making Othello 'noble Othello', the victim of a society in which he is 'abused' (Smith).*

*In terms of cultural, literal outsiders, the 'Turks' seem to never appear. Shakespeare structures the play in an ironic, war-less way, as the threat is dissolved by the with the Venetians focusing on the Turkish threat more than the issues within their own society, which is ultimately the downfall of the play rather than a war. Perhaps a comment on the contemporary wars against the Ottomans, it is very easy to forget the reason for the double-setting and the proximity in which the characters find themselves from Act 2 onwards, and the speedy elimination of the outsider threat that the Turks encompass can be considered Shakespeare's nudge to look at our own society rather than focus on others, yet another way he uses outsiders in order to evaluate the 'insiders'.*

*In a structured and broader sense most of the characters in the play are outsiders to Iago's tactics – 'web of deception' (Karim-Cooper) as he controls the plot without them knowing. In conjunction with the audience's knowledge of it, the dramatic irony begins in the very first scene – 'I follow but myself' – and the sheer level of manipulation extending to all facets of the text makes all but Iago outsiders to a mysterious, malevolent force. According to Honigmann, he enjoys 'a godlike sense of power' and that 'godlike' quality makes those he controls excluded from any capacity for real rational decision-making. By further complicating the debate of who is really an 'outsider' in the play Shakespeare explores the weaknesses of society, the capacity to be manipulated through prejudice and stereotypes. 'Othello is only a victim of racial beliefs because he is an agent of misogynist ones' states Loomba and that encompasses Shakespeare's use of Iago to control the narrative. The drastic and dramatic push of all characters outside the realm of really knowing what happens, all due to their predispositions, easily engaged against women or other races is the ultimate meta-point Shakespeare attempts to make, showing what presents a strength (allegiance to our own gender, race, culture) as a weakness.*

*This even extends to Iago as, of course, nobody is safe from identity insecurities, as his name can be associated with Santiago Matamoros, one of the figures at the mythical battle of Clarijo, where the Christians defeat the Muslims. As literal 'Moor-slayer' whilst also having Spanish connections to his personality, Iago's identity in combination with his exclusion from the upper rank – 'the lieutenant is saved before the ancient' – gives him motivation and reasons to create the chaos he does. This, along with Cassio's demarcation as a 'Florentine', leaves audiences to consider if anyone is actually not an outsider, as all main characters seem to have some sort of discrepancy between their identities and Venetian standard. By portraying Othello as 'different' and at first associating him with 'charms', 'witchcraft' and even cannibals ('Anthropophagi') then slowly revealing the corrupt and unique nature of those who assume they have a right to repress him, Shakespeare twists the concept of an outsider into something unintelligible, as, at a point around Act 4, it becomes unclear who the real non-Venetian outsiders are.*

*Overall, Shakespeare presents 'outsiders' as an unreal threat criticising those who perpetuate the separations and divides seen in the text. The 'outsiders' all exist in order to draw attention to the 'insiders' who, by definition, assume they are superior and different – but turn out just as human as those they consider different, if not worse.*

## Question 9

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

### **The question asked about the play's structure.**

A very small number of candidates chose to explore the play's structure, but most were able to comment in some detail on setting, plot lines, the shaping of the opening and ending and use of contrast for effects. The best responses looked closely at Shakespeare's manipulation of structure, linking his crafting to the conventions of dramatic comedy and evaluating critical debate around the play. Weaker responses tended simply to describe the various plot lines and to cite names of critics without really engaging with their ideas.

Here is an example of a secure Level 4 response, with a controlled argument, consistent focus on the question and helpful use of critical ideas:

*'A Midsummer Night's Dream' is carefully crafted to combine the plots and characterization traits of each of the three classes established: the sophisticated Athenian court and young lovers, the foolish mechanicals and the mischievous fairy kingdom. Through Shakespeare's technical structure, the play leaves the audience comically satisfied and with the choice of whether to accept the messages of the play's reflection of the chaotic nature of the human condition, or gather that this dramatic representation of humanity's faults is but a 'dream'. Many critics have argued on the meanings and symbolism that the craft of the play represents, debating on which group is in control or orchestrating the driving plot of the play.*

*In the opening scene of the play, Shakespeare portrays many traits of tragedy, such as forbidden love (in the forced marriage of Hermia and Demetrius under her controlling and highly patriarchal father Egeus). Many critics have argued about the purpose of the play's opening, such as Johnson who argues the masked tragedies of the introduction to the Athenian court provide 'conflict' for the audience to engage in. They set the first tone of the play and the audience are sympathetically encouraged to understand its events. This is emphasised by the erratic exaggeration of Egeus' superiority and authority over his daughter Hermia, shown by his harsh and irrational language: 'As she is mine, I may dispose of her' with the emphasis on possession – 'me' 'my' 'mine' and the undeniable support from Theseus: 'Your father should be as a God'. Although arranged marriages were more common in the upper class of the 16th century, they were usually seen as cruel and harsh. However, in keeping with the comical genre, Shakespeare makes it known through the reaction of other characters that Egeus is to play a dramatic villain, for example through Theseus gentle language towards Hermia: 'Take time to pause, fair Hermia' and Lysander's heated emotion describing the theft of his lover's fate.*

*In turn, this leads the young lovers into the 'topsy-turvy landscape of the woods' (critic Smith argues) where the Apollonian logic and order of the patriarchal world of Athens is reversed in a setting full of supernatural and 'erotic mayhem' (argues critic Ryan). This is aided by the use of time structure: the 'deep midnight' providing a time of uncertainty, insecurity and apprehension of a 'dreamlike' state. This is highlighted by the repeated motif of the moon and the control it possesses over the characters, presented by the fairies' imagery of 'moonlight' and 'cold moon' dictating the place and time they are most active and mischievous in the wood (Oberon and Titania's quarrel and the location of the 'herb-flower' love-in – idleness). This spiritual folklore can be contextually linked to the idea of Midsummer itself and the festivities celebrated during summer nights in the Elizabethan era where the rational and consequential behaviour of, typically, the lower classes was disguised in the night time darkness and separated from civilised towns (bonfires in the wood stick festival). The use of the setting of the woods is vital to the central comedic conflicts of the play, providing the 'inversion of the natural order' (critic Fender argues) where fairy Queens are in love with craftsman who have an ass for a head and love becomes interchangeable for the four young lovers. Although the fairies' meddling causes extremities, Shakespeare enables Puck's fun to be harmless as he manages to fix and resolve the issues he created (and even further balances the love square of the Athenians).*

*This leads to the conclusion of the play where Shakespeare takes the time to dramatically portray the resolution for each group and their relationships. In this instance, marriage becomes the 'comic closure' for the play (critic Hopkins argues) restoring the patriarchal and ordered world of the real world, subtly reflecting and accepting the Elizabethan reality for the Elizabethan audience watching and allowing Shakespeare to cleverly avoid conflict – especially with the high authority of Queen Elizabeth I. Despite being obviously relevant through the marriages of the noble Athenian lovers, this is also relevant to the fairy world too. Titania's reaction to Oberon's cruel prank is instantly to swoon over him: 'My Oberon! What visions have I seen!' and celebrate with music 'such as charmeth sleep' and dancing. Therefore the fairy couple are symbolised to the natural condition of the world, 'We are their parents and original', and the natural world is restored through patriarchy and its conditions. For the mechanicals, little change to their dim intellect is provided, however their purpose is to purely provide comedy (by the play-within-a play) to both the audience of the Athenian court and audience at the Globe. This therefore highlights the overall nature and genre of this Shakespearean comedy, allowing the mechanicals to 'colonise' the finale (argument made by Fender) leaving the Elizabethan audience to celebrate the resolutions of the other dramatic groups through light-hearted entertainment.*

## Question 10

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

### **The question asked about the disruption of social order.**

This was by far the more popular question on this play. Responses of higher quality engaged more with the dramatic function of the fairy kingdom and the mechanicals, and how Shakespeare combines the different plots and environments in the play. At the top end candidates produced some sophisticated critical analysis, combining some rigorous textual discussion with a sophisticated grasp of theories of comedy and the possible implications of Shakespeare's treatment of the fairies and the mechanicals in juxtaposition with the court of Athens.

Here is an opening to a clear Level 3 response:

*In Shakespeare's comedy 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' to the largest extent does the famous playwright present the play as disrupting social order in his very own society. Identifying the argument made by critic A D Nuttall that Shakespeare's 'thought is never still' we get the idea he always he is always commenting as a questioner, philosopher, critic and thinker. This is shown in three aspects of the play: Shakespeare's challenging of patriarchal values in society, Shakespeare's disruption of social classes through the Mechanicals, and challenging the notion that our lives and loves are decided already through the irrationality of love...*

This is the approach of a Level 5 response:

*'A Midsummer Night's Dream' written sometime in the 1590s, is a play about the roles of nature and human society and how the two coexist, each one influencing the other. There is a strong running theme of the disruption of social order within the play characterised by the influence that the occult has as a symbol for chaos upon human society.*

*The dynamic between nature and society is shown within the framework of the play. It opens in act one in Athens, a scene taken from antiquity connoting order, human civilization and the mythology of great heroes (the presence of figures such as Hippolyta and Theseus). Scene two act one introduces the audience to the forest wherein a lower human class (the Mechanicals) and a higher than human class (the Fairies) reside. The play does not return to Athens until act five, the final scene; therefore the prevalence of nature over society is shown by the structural borders of the play taking place in Athens while the rest centres upon the forest, revealing a dominance of nature over civilization.*

*Kieran Ryan demonstrates his theory regarding how the structure is used to usurp society through the observation that 'at the heart' of the play lies Bottom's affair with Titania. The scenes in the woods are introduced and closed by the Mechanicals, and the turning point, the play's pinnacle is an ass spending a night with the Queen of the Fairies. This elevates Bottom to a position that is higher than the cuckolded Oberon – the most powerful figure in the play. Furthermore, the Mechanicals take centre stage with the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe. The play-within-a-play forces the Athenians to take the roles of audience members and through this Shakespeare encourages his own audience to examine their attitudes, criticisms and opinions through the reversing of societal roles (the Mechanicals become people of Greek antiquity within this play – Pyramus and Thisbe was written by Ovid in his Metamorphoses). Shakespeare disrupts the social order of class systems and elevates nature to a high power for facilitating this.*

## Question 11

*Measure for Measure*

### **The question asked about corruption.**

This was clearly an accessible question across the range, with around half the candidates opting to answer it. Many made interesting comparisons between the Duke and Angelo and the extent to which their leadership had been affected by human corruption. Weaker responses struggled to define corruption, tending to fall back on character studies alone. The corruption of religion also featured heavily, with many linking Angelo to Puritanism and Isabella to an unsympathetic Catholic virgin martyr.

Here is an extract from a Level 5 response:

*...Furthermore, Shakespeare presents the complete surrender and embrace of human corruption to introduce a disturbing darkness into the playworld, itself corrupting the expected comic atmosphere. Shakespeare does so almost immediately from the plays outset with Claudio's 'show[ing]...to the world' mirroring the carrying of Christ on the cross, depicting him as a sacrificial figure atoning for the deep and widespread corruption within Vienna, which Shakespeare only highlights further with nightmarish semantic field in Vincetio's claim that he has seen 'corruption boil and bubble / Till it o'er-run the stew', echoing the witches of Macbeth's chants. In this way, as Emma Smith puts it, despite having the 'syntactic qualities of a comedy', Measure for measure adopts the 'semantic qualities of something much darker, maybe even a tragedy'. This disturbing darkness though is perhaps best portrayed through the character of Angelo, who after his moment of tragic Anagnorisis in which he realises that he is indeed 'blood', finds himself because of his puritanism to 'have no capacity to manage his own feeling [director Roxanne Silbert], leading to his complete surrender and embrace of human corruption. The tone of vicious anticipation that seethes as he contemplates the thought of 'raz[ing] the Sanctuary' of Isabella's body, combined with the vivid synaesthesia in his remark that 'Heaven [is] in [his] mouth, as if [he] did but only chew the name' descends the nightmarish atmosphere into something much more disturbing – into something hellish, which is only crystallised with the biblical and satanical allusion in his resolve to continue to 'write 'Good Angel' on the Devil's horn'. That Angelo not only rejects piety, but places himself as the lord's enemy would have been quietly shuddering to a Jacobean audience considering the Basilicon Doron's teaching that good rulers ought to 'loveth and feareth the Divine Majestie'. The disturbing atmosphere that arises from Angelo's surrendering to human corruption is only emphasised further with his forcing of Isabella to 'yield the treasures' of her body to him in the space between the 'garden' and the 'vineyard', portrayed almost as an unnerving excitement to reenact the story of Genesis and Eden. The disturbing darkness of this male corruption though is perhaps best portrayed through its effects on the women of the play, particularly Isabella, through the devastated screaming imperatives 'Die, perish!' following Claudio's plead for her to corrupt her body to save himself, and the violent rage exuding from her cry 'O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes' following the duke's corruption of the truth with his 'brutal lie' [Frye] of Claudio's death, likening Isabella to the scorned victimised heroines of the Shakespearean Tragedies. In this way, Shakespeare presents male corruption to be a contagion, with the power to corrupt even the most emblematic of virtue...*

Finally, by the play's conclusion, Shakespeare seems to champion an acceptance of human corruption, using it as a force for good. The playwright does so throughout the course of *Measure for Measure* through his lower class characters and Lucio. Lucio's remark that licentiousness and human corruption is 'impossible to extirp' and the bold pithy of Pompey's complaint 'Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the city' portray the reality of human corruption within Vienna, a proxy for Jacobean England, that cannot be denied. As Dr. Liam Mcnamara argues, Pompey's complaint also indirectly suggests that 'there can in fact be morality in apparent immortality', a notion that Shakespeare only further expresses through Lucio's remark that Vincetio's 'feeling of the sport' was in fact a force for good, since it 'instructed him to mercy'. Yet Shakespeare best presents this acceptance of corruption and use of it a force for good in the play's conclusion through Mariana's beckoning declarative that 'They say the best men are moulded out of faults, / And for the most, become much more the better / For being a little bad'. Through this didactic, Shakespeare presents his audience with an alternative view to the polarised Jacobean cultural opinion that was ought to either be a puritan extremist or victim to their own corruption. It perhaps also provides further explanation as to why Vincetio decides in the end to marry Angelo to Mariana and Lucio to Kate Keepdown, instead of ordering for their death: In doing so, he finally forces Lucio and Angelo, who become microcosms of Vienna and his audiences, to accept their human corruption as a part of their identity, and learn from it. That the acceptance of human corruption is intertwined with the expected marriages that mark the comic conclusion of the play is also insightful, suggesting that it is necessary in order for his characters and playworld to move forward. This acceptance of human corruption is further championed through Isabella's forgiving of Angelo, who through the words 'Most bonteous sir...let him not die', transcends the playworld from the eye for eye Old testament derived justice system, and 'awakens thoughts of a larger, perhaps divine, mercy' [Diana Devlin]. And although the authenticity of this forgiveness has been the focus of much debate by critics over the centuries, that Shakespeare chooses to end the play with this outward image of forgiveness, he only further seems to champion this acceptance of human corruption.

## Question 12

*Measure for Measure*

### The question asked about authority.

Examiners pointed out that candidates appeared to approach Question 11 and Question 12 interchangeably as many explored authority as being corrupted. Some candidates made links to current affairs, e.g. Trump, Putin, Partygate and so on; for many it was clearly a relevant and engaging question.

In terms of AO3, the best approaches linked the Duke's presentation to James VI & I and evaluated Shakespeare's intent to flatter the King in his moderate and fair ruling, often paired with contextual links to the succession crisis and *Basilikon Doron*. As one examiner put it: 'candidates are now considering the relationship of King and play more critically; the idea of the play as a 'warning' to the King is becoming increasingly popular'.

The best responses overall avoided didacticism and instead explored, in a nuanced way, Shakespeare's use of ambiguity and the helpfulness (or not) of the play's labelling as a 'problem play'.

Here are three introductions to responses that achieved high Levels:

Introduction 1:

*'Measure for Measure' is a play that examines the relationship between those of different status and how positions of authority can often corrupt those who stand in them. Though Shakespeare criticises authority in a sly and secretive manner, according to the critic Tebbetts, through the relation of King James I to the Duke, it is also important to remember that the play's nature as a comedy makes it difficult to detect this underlying narrative. Shakespeare weaves threads of dissent into the play that mocks the importance of the monarchy in much the same way as the characters themselves display ignorance of authority's manipulation of events, cleverly disguising the criticism as a pervading commentary on the moral responsibility of mankind, rather than of authority alone...*

Introduction 2:

*Throughout 'Measure for Measure' a key theme explored by Shakespeare is the abuse of authority which contributes to the play's nature as a 'problem play' as it is unclear whether Shakespeare suggests that authority is invariably misused. Hampton-Reeves describes how the play can be interpreted both as 'a strong affirmation of the importance of good governance' and 'a cynical satire about the inconvenience of overzealous authoritarianism'. This essay will explore both of these interpretations, finding in the key figures of authority evidence for and against their misuse of it before concluding that the playwright's judgement on the nature of authority is intentionally ambiguous, but offers a strong interpretation against authorities in inevitable misuse...*

### Introduction 3:

*In 'Measure for Measure' we can argue that Shakespeare presents and criticises the extremes of legal and religious authority through the characters of Angelo and Isabella. Yet, through the character of the Duke, Shakespeare presents a perfect balance of authority, perhaps as a means to reflect and flatter his new patron James I.*

*Through the character of Angelo we can argue that Shakespeare criticises legal authority in isolation as this comedic killjoy is shown to fail. Angelo tells Isabella that 'it is the law, not I, condemn your brother' and we can perhaps see that Angelo relies heavily on the power and authority that being 'the voice of the recorded law' gives him, as he admits that he was proud of the thought that his 'power could range all from fools' in his soliloquy before he propositioned Isabella. Perhaps Shakespeare criticises the fact that this power has been given to Angelo, as he consistently uses it too harshly as 'we must not make a scarecrow of the law'. We could see Angelo as a stock comedic killjoy and Shakespeare's audience would know that the 'precise Angelo' was puritanical and thus expect him, in true comedic fashion, to fail. Indeed, we might even argue that Angelo relies so heavily on legal authority and so little on religious authority that when his strongly held puritanical beliefs are challenged, he loses them entirely as 'now I give my sensual race the rein'. Shakespeare's use of sibilance perhaps evokes a sinister feeling in the audience as Angelo gives himself over to iniquity completely, as his puritanical belief in predestination perhaps means to him that he can no longer be saved and it is this that leads him to proposition Isabella. Wilson Knight argues that 'Angelo is not a conscious hypocrite' and we might agree with this or it is arguably his emphasis on legal authority and not on religious authority that leads him to fail. Indeed, we could see the effects of Angelo's reliance on legal authority in the city of Vienna as Mistress Overdone comments 'here's a change indeed in the Commonwealth'. Thus we might agree with Hampton-Reeves who said that 'in both worlds we see collective suffering when authority is misapplied' as Angelo's misuse of legal authority is damaging not only to Isabella, the victim of his lust, but also to the people of the city. Thus Shakespeare presents Angelo's authority as flawed arguably criticising it...*

## Question 13

### *The Taming of the Shrew*

The question asked about the relationship between Katherine and Bianca.

This was the less popular of the two questions. Candidates found it accessible, but some of them found it challenging to move beyond straightforward character studies of both women. Better responses went on to explore the characters as representatives of contemporary social attitudes towards women, marriage, economic stability and so forth. The best performances on AO5 considered the sisters' function in light of theories of comedy, using critical ideas from the Edexcel Anthology and other sources.

Here is an example of a response that meets all the criteria for Level 3 on both grids. It is clear and relevant and its argument, although straightforward, is controlled. Some of the references to context are a little generalised and, overall, the piece lacks the discrimination and development we would expect to see for Level 4:

*William Shakespeare's 'The Taming of the Shrew' is a provocative comedy of the Elizabethan era that is used to explore gender roles, identity as well as class and status. The Minola sisters, Katherine and Bianca forming the main story, Kate leading the main plot and Bianca leading the subplot. Shakespeare masterfully presents the relationship between the two in many ways, by representing the strain in sisterhood by using Bianca's sweetness as a device to accentuate Kate's shrewishness and by presenting Kate's eventual obedience as a tool to reinforce Bianca's shrewish nature.*

Firstly, Shakespeare presents the relationship between Kate and Bianca as one that is strained as they have opposing attitudes depicting them as being far from close despite being sisters. This is evident in act 2 scene 1 where the sisters are seen arguing over Bianca's suitors and Bianca states 'I prithee, sister Kate, untie my hands'. This is significant as it reveals to the audience the power dynamics between the two as Bianca's pleading of 'untie my hands' illustrates how Kate is the one who has tied her up and thus has more control. Furthermore, the use of the address 'sister Kate' highlights how Bianca has to show some level of respect and adherence as Kate is older, therefore obeying Elizabethan social conventions. However, the audience may question whether the use of 'sister' was in fact used by Bianca to mock her sister by accentuating the differences in attitude they have towards each other as well as society as a whole. Shakespeare effectively does this to show how Bianca's use of language and polite terms is what grants her various suitors, as opposed to her sister who receives none. Unlike Bianca's more subtle reaction, Kate is seen to 'strike her' and then 'rushes at [her]'. This is relevant as it reinforces the bond between Bianca and Kate to be one full of differences resulting in such fights. Newman notes that during the 'spat' between the two, the correlation between a woman's silence and the marriage market is made clear. This supports a portrayal of the sisters' attitudes towards one another, as Kate is one to 'strike' and 'rush' and so can be considered as feisty, which effectively emphasises her image of a shrew which is why she struggles with the marriage market. However, Bianca is seen to act more calmly and vulnerable, evoking a more prim and proper image for herself, which is why so many men like Lucentio become obsessively in love with her to the extent that they feel themselves 'burn, pine and perish'. Shakespeare purposefully presents such a relationship to show an Elizabethan audience the different types of women and why a woman like Bianca is considered by society as the better of the two. As well as this, the strain between the two is reinforced when looking at the way the parenting for the two differs. For example, during this spat Baptista (the father of the two) scolds Kate by saying 'thou hilding of a devilish spirit'. This implies that Baptista himself considers his own daughter to have a 'devilish spirit' suggesting that he associates her with the absolute worst. This juxtaposes the treatment of Bianca who is regarded as a 'poor girl' and the empathy for her from Baptista is so clear that it is noticed by Kate who admits to her father that 'she is your treasure'. The use of the noun 'treasure' adds an element of possessiveness as well as value, reinforcing Bianca's worth for her father. Newman indicates that 'Kate is motherless and to some degree fatherless' which can be used to assist in the interpretation of this scene, as Shakespeare may be subtly trying to note how Baptista's contrast in the way he treats his two daughters is perhaps why she is so outspoken; as she is labelled as a shrew, so that image becomes her 'master status' and she lives up to it, which is reflected in Becker's 'labelling theory'. For the audience at the time, the attitude imposed on them by the father, as well as the one adopted for each other, is pivotal and central to the play as it accentuates each sister's characteristics as an individual.

As well as the attitudes presented towards each other Shakespeare, creatively constructs the relationship between the two by showing how their individual natures directly impact the other, even if they are not present in the scene. For example, in the opening scene Tranio's and Lucentio's observation of the two show how one's image emphasises the negatives of the other, as Tranio states 'that wench is stark mad'. This is referring to Kate who is considered to be mad as she is not living to the expectation of being a quiet complicit girl of the Elizabethan era. The use of the term 'wench' is included by Shakespeare to demonstrate the derogatory language that was used on women, both to their face and behind their backs, which can be seen as a reflection of what the audience themselves would agree with or may perhaps be a form of Shakespeare subtly critiquing such treatment. The adjective 'stark' emphasises the amount he perceives her to be mad, but also adds to the degree to which such women were looked down upon. Moreover, the use of the term 'that' completely dehumanises Kate, giving her no self-autonomy as she has broken moral conduct. Bates concludes that Kate embodies 'the shrewish female' as all she does is considered to be out of pocket and is only seen to be so gravely insulting because of how Bianca is perceived to have mild behaviour and sobriety. It is Bianca's mild behaviour and silence that contradict Kate's loudness and her silence make Kate seem even more extravagant. This is interesting to see by Shakespeare as the very start of the play sets such a foundation. However, as we reach the end of the play, the roles are reversed and it is Kate's obedience that reinforces Bianca's shrewishness. Act 5 scene 2 makes this apparent as all the men wager on whose wife will be obedient and come to her husband's command and when Lucentio commands Bianca, she sends him word that 'she is busy' and cannot come. Whereas when Kate is commanded, she arrives. This response from the two would be shocking to the audience as the Elizabethan society was dominated by the patriarchy and so a woman was expected to submit to her husband's commands. Kate's obedience demonstrates her to be submissive and tamed, which is why critics like Thompson believed that Petruchio has made Kate 'a Bianca with words'. This is significant as the 'words' represent Kate's initial characteristics of being outspoken and authoritative, however by becoming a Bianca she is now complicit and in line with the Elizabethan expectations. Bianca, on the other hand, is looked down upon to a greater extent, as Kate, the one who was expected not to listen, has conformed, and she is now the one who is recognised by Bates as the play's new Shrew.

To conclude, Shakespeare masterfully presents the relationship between his two leading women, Kate and Bianca, as one that is used to accentuate the individuality of the other. He constructs Bianca as a foil to her sister and Kate as her antithesis, both demonstrating shrewish behaviour and obedience.

## Question 14

*The Taming of the Shrew*

### **The question asked about romance.**

This was a popular question around which most candidates appeared confident. The vast majority were clearly well prepared to write about marriage in the play and there was plenty of solid exploration of romantic relationships as compared to financial transactions. Many focused on the relationship between Petruchio and Katherine as being based on money and dowries and compared it with Bianca and Lucentio's romantic relationship. Candidates were keen to share what they knew about context, but this was sometimes expressed in very sweeping terms.

Here are some examples of the different approaches taken by candidates:

Example 1:

*Shakespeare presents romance as an old-fashioned social convention, which he subverts to make more modern and socially just. In 16<sup>th</sup> Century England the patriarchy was a rigid structure people lived by, meaning romance was very male dominated. Whilst Shakespeare expresses this 16<sup>th</sup> Century attitude to romance and love at the end of the play with Katherine's monologue, the pretence and disguise throughout the play creates ambiguity for the audience who are unsure whether Katherine is being serious or ironic. Furthermore, Shakespeare undermines traditional notions of romance through Bianca and Lucentio's, where Lucentio fails to see beyond Bianca's outward appearance. Finally, Shakespeare explores romance, again through the protagonists Katherine and Petruchio, as a power struggle...*

Example 2:

*Shakespeare uses the lack of romance in his play 'The Taming of the Shrew' to reveal the transactional idea of marriage, for example, a financial transaction from the father of the bride to the husband. Shakespeare does this through the relationship between Petruchio and Katherine (where the inclusion of 'taming' in the title already presupposes the lack of romance) and the idea of the male fantasy of women in the Induction.. .*

Example 3:

*Newman's interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of romance, 'the relationship between silence and the women's place in the marriage market is made clear', captures precisely my own view regarding any romantic relationship in the Elizabethan era. Romance is presented as completely transactional regarding Bianca and her older 'shrewish' sister, Katherine as their father Baptista Minola seeks the best deal whilst 'playing the merchant's part'...*

Example 4:

*'The Taming of the Shrew' by William Shakespeare is argued by some to present an altogether pessimistic view of romance. However, some argue that its 'warts and all' presentation of marriage presents romance in a way which is not pessimistic but realistic and hopeful...*

Example 5:

*In Shakespeare's melodrama the theme of romance is utilised to emphasise the capability of transgressing social position and class, highlighting the flaws of social order in the corrupt Elizabethan era. This is most evident through the constructs of Kate and Petruchio and their perplexing relationship...*

## Question 15

### *Twelfth Night*

The question asked about the extent to which it is a dark comedy.

This was a popular question which candidates appeared well-prepared to answer. Common topics explored when considering the darker aspects of the play included: the play's ending; the cruel treatment of Malvolio; Feste's role; the pervasive theme of death; unrequited love and deceit. The highest-scoring responses were those that also explored the question in relation to critical ideas around the genre of comedy.

Here is the opening to a high-Level response – critical and evaluative in its approach:

*'Twelfth Night', written in 1601, is the last of Shakespeare's comedies and is often described by critics as his 'darkest' one. The elements of cruelty, violence and death so intertwined with the romance and humour certainly suggest this to be true, as modern audiences cannot help but pity Malvolio and Sir Andrew, victims of Sir Toby's supposed jesting. Furthermore, the plot is borne from the prospect of a dead twin and so the idea of death constantly lingers around the main plot. However, Shakespeare is still seen to adhere to the comedic genre with his mainly happy ending, and so it is difficult to define 'Twelfth Night' as a 'dark comedy' with the whimsical, romantic feelings generated by the twins' reunion and subsequent perspective marriages.*

Here is an example of a response that scored full marks. It is wide-ranging, convincingly argued and – importantly – it keeps the text itself in sight and never forgets that it is a piece of drama intended for performance.

*'Twelfth Night' by William Shakespeare is regarded by some as the first of the dark comedies. Indeed, there are moments where the play fringes on darkness and the fact that the first account of this comedy being performed was by John Manningham, who watched it on Candlemas in an illuminated church, would have perhaps enhanced the darker moments of the play. The ending, in modern productions at least, might have left audiences feeling uneasy about the injustice of Malvolio and Antonio. Nevertheless, ultimately, an Elizabethan audience would have endorsed the madness that takes place as it would have reminded them of themselves in their desire to leave the routine during the Twelfth Night festivities in January.*

Malvolio's position as 'a victim of festive abuse', as suggested by Labriola on the extent to which the festive revellers take the gulling, can be taken as an indication that Shakespeare's play treads the ground of tragedy or a dark comedy at least. Modern productions have tended to make their primary concern to highlight the injustice of Malvolio's treatment, with the comedic aspects as secondary. For example, a 2005 production includes blood being poured over Malvolio's head – a stagecraft element reminiscent of tragedy – and this feature makes us recognise that the director saw tragic elements in the play. As Bevington argues, Malvolio is drawn into a crime of social aspiration and is handled harshly in this unusually satirical play'. A modern audience arguably fuels a degree of sympathy when Malvolio appears cross-gartered, especially due to Maria's cruel tone in the scene before when she remarks, 'I have dogged him like his murderer' – we can hardly overlook the darkness of this line. In the scene itself Olivia feels sympathy for her steward: 'Let this fellow be looked to' and her fondness of tone perhaps stirs a degree of unease. The darkest scene of the play undoubtedly is the prison scene, as the comedy is taken to an unnecessary level of cruelty. Maria has Feste put on 'a gown' and 'beard' and disguise himself as a priest and later remarks that, 'thou mightst have done this without thy beard and gown. He sees thee not.' which clearly demonstrates the lengths of cruelty they have gone to. Throughout the scene Feste repeatedly calls Malvolio mad: 'Madman, thou errest' and there is an abundance of darkness imagery: 'I say to you this house is dark'. By alluding to the surroundings in a non-detailed manner, Shakespeare gives directors licence to interpret Malvolio's prison in any way they see fit. It can therefore be reminiscent of an asylum in some cases and this draws upon a theme of madness and nods towards the treatment of the mentally ill. In Shakespeare's time madness was seen as being caused by supernatural means and some saw it as a punishment from God. The mockery by the of the mentally ill also traces back to ancient Greek and Roman times when they were perceived as fools and used as entertainment. This context also adds an element of religious darkness to the play, especially when Feste says, 'Malvolio, thy wits the heavens restore', as well as an earlier scene where Maria and her cohort pretend that Malvolio is possessed and treat him in a patronisingly gentle manner: 'Pray God he be not bewitched!' This religious language nods towards Shakespeare's mockery of Puritans who were devote Protestants who saw indulgence is a sin and wanted to shut down the theatres. Shakespeare is described by some as 'making a caricature of Puritanism' (Mehdi), therefore these scenes are by no means light-hearted. Indeed, Olivia herself recognises this injustice when she mirrors Malvolio's language at the end of the play: there never was a man so notoriously abused'. This line epitomises the treatment of Malvolio as cruel, unjust and pitiful and perhaps Shakespeare encourages the audience to look with kindness upon the mentally ill, even if he demonises Puritans in his play.

On the other hand, Malvolio's treatment only makes up a small proportion of the play's events and we cannot fully regard 'Twelfth Night' as a dark comedy whilst there is comic misunderstandings and general revelry taking precedence as a theme. These elements are all, of course, conventions of comedy and the festive holiday atmosphere throughout – pinpointed by abundant singing – recognises Barber's idea that comedy was directly related to holidays. In this case we must consider that before Henry VIII's reforms to the Church, Twelfth Night was celebrated as a period of carnival. A Lord of Misrule was appointed who would take charge of the festivities and parades and Sir Toby embodies this role in the play. He introduces the festival atmosphere in the third scene of the play with his witty word play. He puns on Maria's line 'You must confine yourself within the modest limits of order' and replies, 'Confine? I'll confine myself no finer than I am', remarking that his clothes and boots are good enough to drink in and, of course, drinking is the principle form of revelry in the play, for Sir Toby at least. A light-hearted atmosphere is created through the comedic duo of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew and these two stock characters – bomolochus – (fools, drunkards) are key to the play's ongoing festivities. Indeed, Feste too vitally contributes to this with his reference to a classic pub sign, 'Did you never see the picture of 'We Three?' – this pictured two donkeys, implying that the viewer was the third fool – and so this includes the audience, making the tone light-hearted and reminding them of the time of festivity. The crowd in Shakespeare's time would have been rowdy, eating and drinking in the stands and may have gone off to drink afterwards. Comedy is acknowledged by Barber as a way to let off steam, free from ordinary conventions within the theatre. The letter trick scene is integral to 'Twelfth Night's light-hearted nature, as the festive revellers hide in a box tree on stage. Their occasional remarks – 'Out scab!' – which interrupted Malvolio's speech would have been hilarious. What makes this scene so engaging and light is that as the revellers act as an onstage audience, the actual audience are therefore included in the scene. Therefore all the events of the play are part of the audience's own festivities. Priest says that the contemporary audience would have loved the play as 'it gave them an image of themselves'. Additionally, Hollander calls 'Twelfth Night' 'a play of revels, tricks and disguises' which underlines the play as light-hearted at its core. The dramatic irony evoked by disguise would have enhanced the comedy of the play. For example, Viola's disguise which 'wreaks a certain amount of havoc' (Salinger), leads to comedic moments, such as when Feste says 'send thee a beard' the audience knows Violet cannot grow one. Shakespeare's principle objective was to reflect the time of Twelfth Night in all its aspects, making sure the audience was included in its irreverent moments so that they would leave feeling entertained and satisfied. This marks his play as a light comedy at its heart.

Nevertheless, there is some ambivalence within the ending of Shakespeare's play which also makes us consider the extent to which one can really regard the play as light. First and foremost, Malvolio's threat, 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you' – which uses animalistic imagery – could potentially leave an audience feeling uneasy. As Langley outlines 'there is always a fault line which makes us question the completion and harmony of the conclusion' and this certainly also applies to the fate of Antonio and the way things turn sour and violent with the supposedly comedic duel. We are not expecting injury to occur within a comedy and yet Sir Andrew appears crashing the nonchalant, loving tone for the audience 'with a bloody coxcomb'. The dual which Sir Toby previously set up thinking 'oxen and wain ropes cannot hold them together' has turned sour and it too sours Sir Andrew's and Sir Toby's relationship. You could say that the friction within certain relationships – theirs shown through Sir Toby's harsh tone, 'Will you help? An asshead. A thin faced knave. A gull!' – to some extent overshadows Orsino's jubilation: 'I shall take share in this most happy wreck'. Ultimately, however, we see the return to order and resolution of marriage which align with, not only with the tripartite structure of comedy, but also Fry's 'new world' which founds itself on a new beginning, ruled by love.

Overall the dark territory that Shakespeare's play occasionally treads into makes us consider how he wanted his audience to feel when they left the theatre. There is arguably a sense that the festivities had to end, as it was not only the end of the Twelfth Night festivities, but the trickery had also surpassed moral behaviour and had gone too far.

## Question 16

*Twelfth Night*

### **The question asked about status.**

This question was equally popular with candidates and there were some excellent discriminating responses that looked at status inversion as part of the 'carnavalesque' and as a tool for comedy. Others considered Shakespeare's use of satire in the play. Some candidates missed opportunities to broaden their answers by focussing only on gender and not looking at other aspects of status.

### **Examiner comment:**

'Weaker responses tended to be stuffed full of critical quotations with very little reference to the text itself or simply went through each character in turn, commenting on their status'.

Here are some examples of approaches that were successful in accessing all five of the assessment objectives:

Example 1:

*In Shakespeare's epiphany play, 'Twelfth Night', the rigid, strict hierarchy of Elizabethan England is contorted, allowing Shakespeare to raise radical political messages regarding both social class and patriarchal impositions through his dramatic presentation of relationships between both masters and servants and women and men. Despite this arguably progressive depiction of roles, Shakespeare's 'topsy turvy' world is ultimately temperamental, enforced by the conventionally comedic ending in marriage that makes his play 'ultimately conservative' (Ga). This correlates with Frye's 'green world' theory with its reversal of norms as bound to the parameters of the fantastical Illyria and to the parameters of the play...*

Example 2:

*Shakespeare presents status as fluid. As Tiffany Stern suggests, 'Twelfth Night' is about 'a world in reverse'. This is highlighted in the ambition characters have to rise above their status, seen predominantly in Malvolio. This fluidity is presented also in Feste, who acts as a transgressor of boundaries but also of class...*

Example 3:

*Shakespeare extensively explores ideas of status in 'Twelfth Night', both in terms of social standing and the different status afforded to each gender. This is primarily achieved through the play's presentation of the conflict between Carnival and Lent, as the former disrupts the natural social order and allows the status of characters to change, while the latter aims for a constant hierarchy. These ideas of status are linked to the festival aspect of the play and its change or constancy determines the impact of fleeting Carnival. Shakespeare therefore presents status as usually constant and unchanging, but susceptible to alteration during times of revelry...*

Example 4:

*In 'Twelfth Night' William Shakespeare presents status in a number of interesting ways. It is used partially as a way to fulfil the comic conventions of subversion and mistaken identity, typical of Shakespearean comedy. However, it also may allow the playwright to explore the idea that status is static and that there are consequences surrounding subversive desire beyond one's own status. Through this, Shakespeare is also able to invite a contemporary audience to reflect on the strict Tudor hierarchy and the idea of marriage based purely on love...*

## Question 17

*Les Blancs*

### **The question asked about different points of view.**

This text – Hansberry’s exploration of the differing forces and agendas in play as a result of colonialism, imperialism and racism in Africa at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – is new to the Edexcel A Level specification, so it was great to see that some centres had adopted it for study this year. Candidates had clearly been well-prepared and could discuss the play’s crafting and contexts with confidence.

Any centres considering studying this play with their students can find an Introductory Guide on the Edexcel English A Level site here:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/A%20Level/English%20Literature/2015/teaching-and-learning-materials/GCE-Eng-Lit-Les-Blancs-guide.pdf>

Here is a clear and relevant response that shows good knowledge and understanding of the play’s contexts. It was felt that the candidate could have further explored the dramatist’s crafting of the play. It received a mark at the top end of Level 3.

*‘Les Blancs’ by Lorraine Hansberry is a play set in a fictional African country of Ztembe which follows its struggle for independence. Hansberry started writing the play in 1960 but the idea crystallised in 1961 after the playwright saw Les Negres which her title mirrors. She disliked the play seeing it as ‘a conversation between the white men about themselves’. In her play she set out to do the opposite by exploring all points of view. She presents the differing points of view between those Ztembians disagreeing on the best path to independence, mirroring the internal struggles within the civil rights movement in which Hansberry was involved. She also explores the white perspective, that of colonisers well-meaning missionaries and those removed from the conflict.*

A key conflict which Hansberry grapples with throughout the play is whether liberation can be achieved without violence and is violence a justifiable means of achieving independence. This is already foregrounded with the epigraph in which Hansberry quotes Frederick Douglass: 'This struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one and it may be both moral and physical but it must be a struggle'. In act one scene two the audience gets to see the differing perspectives and points of view within the black community in Ztembe. The three Matoseh brothers are present on stage. After not having seen each other for a long time they exchanged perspectives on the growing conflict in their motherland. Abioseh corrects Tshembe: 'Resistance, Tshembe? You mean the terror'. Through this Hansberry shows how Abioseh is unsupportive of the resistance movement and condemns its violent methods. He continues, 'We have a group – responsible, educated, enterprising men like ourselves who want to build not destroy'. His perspective mirrors that of Martin Luther King in the US. He urged for achieving equality through peaceful methods and advocacy. In this scene it is later revealed that Abioseh is wearing a robe of a Catholic priest and a crucifix as he is training to become a priest. His dress visually represents to the audience which point of view he has embraced. He has chosen the strategy of assimilation, similar to that argued for by Booker T Washington in the civil rights movement.

Tshembe's point of view changes throughout the play. He is more understanding of the violent resistance than his brother Abioseh, but for the majority of the play refuses to embrace it. His conscience is represented visually by an African woman who appears on stage at critical moments of the play. She first appears in the prologue and dances on the stage wearing feathers and silver, suggesting how she is the personification of Africa. At a climactic moment 'She pulls [a spear] from the earth with great strength and raises it high', suggesting how she also represents a call to arms. In act one scene 3 she appears once again. Tshembe addresses her without having to look at her as she 'has overrun the terrain of his mind' which visually represents how deeply what she represents is ingrained within Tshembe, even as he fails to embrace it. He shouts, 'I have renounced all spears!' He is very clearly drawn to the woman and he admits, 'Even as I held my bride, she lay beside me'. But he is not yet ready to respond to her call to arms. Tshembe represents the point of view of all those torn between comfort and a sense of duty. He has started a family in London and wishes to return to them, but at the same time cannot rid himself from a sense of duty towards Ztembe.

As the events of the play unfold, Tshembe moves closer to accepting the need for violence. In act 2 scene 8 he tells Madame Nielsen, 'I know what I must do.' In act 2 scene 9 this knowledge turns into action 'the one pulls the trigger', he kills Abioseh for betraying the resistance. He has embraced the thing which he for so long renounced. He has accepted the perspective represented within the play by Peter/ Ntali and Ngago, a leader of the resistance who in act 2 scene 6 calls to arms and alerts the audience to the direness of the situation. He shouts 'Kill the invader. Let us drown them in the blood they have shed for a thousand seasons!' His speech presents the point of view that there is no other way to respond to centuries of violence but through a violent resistance. This is a perspective which Tshembe eventually endorses and which was close to Hansberry herself who, as a college student, wrote in support of the Mau Mau uprising during the Kenyan fight for independence.

*In her play Hansberry not only focuses on the black people of Ztembe, but includes an array of white characters as well. In act one scene one they all feature on stage together, allowing the audience to see their different points of view on the resistance as well as their role in Ztembe. Major Rice is an embodiment of the archetype of the violent coloniser with which Hansberry would have been familiar given how she studied the history of the Belgian Congo under the tutelage of WEB dDu Bois and read about the the practises of King Leopold's officials of cutting off the hands of young men as a preventative measure. Before Major Rice appears on stage he is preceded by gunshots, 'Without warning there are several loud rifle shots off stage', giving the audience an auditory his signal of his violence. He sees all that Ztembians as a potential enemy, employing a technique of racial profiling common both in Africa and among the American Police Department. In act one scene 3 he orders Tshembe, 'now up with your sleeve' wanting to check for signs of resistance purely based on the fact that Tshembe is a black man. Further, Rice exemplifies a perspective known in colonial discourse as the white narrative of ownership. In act one scene 3 he claims, 'This is our home, Mr Morris. Men like myself had the ambition, the energy and the ability to come here and make this country into something'. He feels entitled to the land, focussed on a utilitarian principle, thinking he can make better use of it. But Hansberry includes more nuanced perspectives of white characters as well. Madam Neilsen is an example of a character who has a great understanding of the situation in Ztembe. As she is almost blind she can be seen as representing the archetype of Teresius, a blind figure able to see what others don't. In act 2 scene 8 she urges Tshembe to join the resistance, understanding the reality of the situation. Further Hansberry illustrate one goes home only to die; I am already home'. Hansberry also includes the point of view of the 'great white father', a paternalistic perspective held by many white people at the time, based on the idea of 'the white man's burden'. The idea that it is the duty of white people to educate black men as they are unable do it themselves. As a cypher character Reverend Neilson never appears on stage, however in act 2 scene 5 De Koven, another white character aware of the realities of the situation, tells the slightly naive Charlie about how the Reverend dismissed the local people's attempts at self-governance: 'Children. Children. Go home to your huts before you make me angry'. Hansberry shows how even the missionaries who appeared to have good intentions perpetuated the colonial dependencies and made it impossible for the Africans to gain independence.*

*Hansberry wants to bring to the American literary consciousness the cause of African independence by showing the harmfulness of the seemingly benevolent colonial relationships.*

*In conclusion, Hansberry allows the audience to see a variety of different perspectives in her play by including a wide variety of characters, both black and white, who represent different perspectives. She uses the protagonist Tshembe to illustrate how one's point of view changes when faced with the realities of the situation.*

## Question 18

*Les Blancs*

### The question asked about the use of symbolism.

This was the more popular question and candidates had plenty to say about the play's use of symbolism. Common topics were: the use of drums and dancing for symbolic effect; the Woman as a symbol of Africa; the hyena fable and the various symbolic functions of characters. The best responses were able to fully embed contextual knowledge and understanding into their response to the writer's craft.

Here are some examples of successful approaches to this question:

Example 1:

*'Les Blancs' was written in response to Jean Genet's 'Les Negres' which Lorraine Hansberry thought to be 'a conversation between white men about themselves'. Her play uses conflicting symbols of Africa and Europe, of natives and colonisers, to create a portrayal of both sides which need to be heard in this conversation. Additionally, Hansberry uses The Woman to symbolise the importance of tradition and of fighting for one's own people despite the chaos and sacrifice this fight may cause...*

Example 2:

*Throughout 'Les Blancs', Hansberry develops Eric as a character tormented by his own internal struggle with identity and a yearning for a sense of belonging through a combination of influences symbolising Africa and those symbolising Europe. As Tshembe approaches the Matoseh hut for the first time in the play, he happens upon Eric sitting on a mat and 'drink[ing] a good one, adjust[ing] his pith helmet and study[ing] himself in a hand mirror as he whistles an African tune'(53) while the off stage, drums continue to beat. The youngest brother sits on a mat in front of a Kwi hut and the tune he whistles has originated in Africa. Through setting the scene in a way heavily symbolic of the native Zatembe way of life, Hansberry demonstrates the impact of African traditions on Eric. However, this is starkly contrasted by the alcohol, the mirror and the pith helmet, all of which symbolise the European customs which Eric has also grown up amongst...*

### Example 3:

*...The most powerful symbol introduced by Hansberry is The Woman who appears in the Prologue. She symbolises violence and decisive action that the revolutionaries in Zatembe eventually take. She is completely silent and never once speaks a word, to highlight the contrast between resolving conflicts peacefully through talk and amicable deliberations and through warfare. By making the woman the first character to appear on stage, Hansberry highlights the inevitability of violence and the futility of passive talk. She punctures all the pivotal moments of the play, opening and closing act one and appearing every time Tshembe grapples with his confused loyalties. Moreover, in the Prologue, she approaches the spear that is 'planted down stage' and pulls it from the earth 'with great strength' and 'raises it high'. The placement of the prop 'downstage' at the front, close to the audience, draws attention to it and makes it specially important being in the immediate field of vision of spectators. Her raising it symbolises and foreshadows the fact that violence will prevail. The woman also throws that spear to Tshembe at the end of act one and he 'catches it instinctively', simultaneously screaming, 'I HAVE RENOUNCED ALL SPEARS!!!' This contrast between what he does and what he says further emphasises the unconscious tendency towards violence. The woman also appears at the very end when Tshembe has committed murder of his brother and her appearance finally reveals Hansberry's opinions. Through this final moment, she signals that her sympathies lie with Malcolm X rather than Martin Luther King, suggesting that peaceful advocacy propagated by the latter will be ineffective, whereas it's the call to revolution of the former that is the way forward in the struggle for equal rights...*

### Example 4:

*...Hansberry employs Abioseh's silver cross as a symbol of colonial oppression. It is hung on a chain around his neck, subconsciously bringing to the mind of the audience a restraint or a noose about one's neck or chain gangs of slaves in colonies. More importantly, however, Tshembe recalls where the silver has come from, obtained by the labours of black men in the mines of Zatembe. In an argument with Charlie he refers to the mines as 'scars in the hills' 'cut by strangers'. This medical imagery is suggestive of the deliberate harm inflicted by the oppressors and the suffering of those that show visible marks of being physically exploited and the long time throughout which colonialism thrived. A scar takes a long time to form and for cut skin to heal, which is symbolic of the three centuries of exploitation of Zatembe. It also symbolises the fact that colonialism left lasting marks on the countries which it has affected...*

### Example 5:

*...Hansberry references storytelling – the African oral tradition and the classic play ‘Hamlet’ by Shakespeare – to draw parallels and connections between the two cultures that seem at odds with one another. In 2.2, Peter, also known as Ntali, relates to his cousin Tshembe the fable of Madingo in order to motivate him to join the revolution, sharing the struggle of Africans and Europeans as possible to remedy by decisive action. Tshembe responds with a reference to ‘a similar tale which concerns a Prince’. Hamlet, after careful deliberation, chooses to act and the play ends in the tragic deaths of most characters. This way Hansberry both contrasts the outlook of Ntali and Tshembe and shows connections between Africa and Europe. Unlike her contemporary, Malcolm X, she acknowledges and appreciates aspects of European culture and does not believe in the simple binary of black and white races and their opposite goals. Her use of symbolism in the stories told referenced in Les Blancs shows her nuanced approach to the two cultures and their relationship to each other...*

## Question 19

*Doctor Faustus*

**The question asked about the extent to which Faustus is presented as a rebel.**

This was the less popular question on the text. More general responses here tended to take a narrative approach by simply retelling the story with occasional references to language methods such as symbolism. Responses heavily relied on the reference to Icarus in the Chorus. More discriminating responses focused on the defiance of Icarus and linked it to ideas of Faustus' defiance of religious, social, and moral boundaries. Candidates referenced ideas of Calvinism, predestination, and religious turmoil and conflict within Elizabethan society, as well as Faustus embodying the dichotomy between Renaissance Humanism and Calvinism. In quite a few cases, there was a lack of appreciation of the text as a piece of drama, with missed opportunities to discuss elements such as soliloquies, the play's use of structure and its impact on an audience.

### **Examiner comments:**

'There was a clear indication that some candidates are being taught generic introductions which were not helpful to their arguments – one intro does not fit all!'

'The contextual understanding of the Renaissance, Humanism and the changing approach to religion was all very impressive. Responses were, for the most part, genuinely enjoyable and interesting to read. It was a privilege to read and learn so much from these intellectually curious candidates'.

'Some candidates tried to write about Calvinism without understanding what it was e.g. saying that it was a branch of Catholicism. Coverage of the text was quite limited in some answers, but others made very good use of the subplot as a means of belittling Faustus' achievements'.

'Responses were well-focused on the question, particularly the idea of rebellion against religious views, which often pushed candidates into Level 4. Weaker responses got too lost in biographical or religious context at the expense of the text. For some candidates, the use of critics (AO5 is NOT assessed on this Section) is not helping them and taking away from the focus and control for their AO1'.

Here is an example of a neatly-argued, conceptual response that was awarded a borderline Level 4/5 mark. It does not quite reach the highest level because there is too little focus on the dramatist's craft (AO2) at times:

*Within that some interpretations Marlowe presents Faustus, not as a rebel but as a slave to the influences of hell, restricted by his choice to damn himself and equally confirming to sin as Christians of the period were to conform to virtue. Marlowe emphasises this through the use of tragic form, with Faustus' fate echoing the structure of Renaissance tragedies. For instance, Marlowe uses the originally Greek feature of a 'harmatia' – a character's fatal flaw – for Faustus this is pride, as his initial condemnation of traditional disciplines –*

*'A greater subject fitteth Faustus wit [...]*

*Too servile and illiberal for me' –*

*demonstrates his belief in his intellectual superiority, which then leads him to sin. Another key aspect of Renaissance and Greek tragedy which Marlowe uses to present Faustus as not a rebel but a servant, is the antagonist Mephistopheles, to whom Faustus is bound, emphasising the lack of rebellion. Faustus declares early in the play that, 'Had I as many souls as there be stars, I'd give them all for Mephistopheles' – a commitment that suggests that Faustus is not rebelliously presented, but merely a servant of the devil. Faustus' continued devotion to Mephistopheles throughout the play also strengthens this idea. A further technique from Renaissance tragedy that suggests Marlowe does not present Faustus as a rebel is 'catharsis'. At the end of the play the audience witness Faustus' dramatic and spectacular death – a cathartic experience intended in Classical and Renaissance tragedy to purge audiences of negative feeling. This ending arguably strengthens the idea that Faustus is not a rebel as he merely succumbs to the fate that was promised to him, unable to escape it, further emphasising his lack of rebellion. This presentation of Faustus as non-rebellious could link to the idea that Marlowe intended the play to be an updated morality play – a mediaeval play that would warn audiences of the consequences of sin and persuade them to live virtuous lives. The presentation of Faustus as unable to rebel from the authority of the devil could warn audiences against sin by threatening that once they have sinned, they would be unable to escape damnation.*

*Another suggestion that Faustus is not a rebel can be found in his adherence to Calvinist theology, as he repeatedly claims 'I can ne'er repent' and 'Damned art thou, Faustus. Damned!' 'Despair and die'. Thus perhaps suggesting that he believes in predestination and that his sin is evidence of his place in hell, thus removing the possibility of rebellion. Faustus' lack of rebellion from this position is emphasised by Marlowe's juxtaposition of it with the more Anglican influences in the play, which stress the importance of free will and Faustus's ability to escape defeat he is convinced is inevitable. Pleas by the Good Angel to 'think of heaven and heavenly things' and by the Old Man to:*

*'Break heart drop blood and mingle it with tears –*

*Tears falling from repentant heaviness*

*Of thy most vile and loathsome filthiness'–*

*suggests that rebellion is possible And Faustus can be saved but that his choice to believe in Calvinist predestination and not to rebel damns him. Marlowe's presentation of Calvinist theology can therefore be seen as urging audiences who have sinned to rebel from the temptation to continue and, unlike Faustus, redeem themselves. This interpretation thus reinforces the suggestion that the play is a sort of morality play, advocating Christian themes such as rebellion from sin.*

*However, the play has also been argued to be a Renaissance humanist depiction of the tragedy of the rebellious freethinker in being restricted by mediaeval religious values. This interpretation suggests that Marlowe does present Faustus as a rebel with his attempts at intellectual freedom a subtle challenge to the period's Christian orthodoxy. Throughout the play, Faustus attempts to gain knowledge represented by the motif of books which Marlowe uses to represent the knowledge and free thought that religion at the time discouraged. Faustus begins the play throwing aside books that symbolise his limited knowledge available and his acquisition of books from Mephistopheles and Lucifer represent forbidden knowledge. This is amplified by Lucifer's book which he claims will allow Faustus to turn 'thyself into what shape though wilt'. This use of symbolism by Marlowe could be emphasis of Faustus' rebellion, as he attempts to achieve more than what the mediaeval-esque religious restrictions of the period allowed. Contextually, this rebellion mirrors the attempts by humanist thinkers of the period to rebel against tradition. Marlowe himself had even been described as one such thinker, often condemned as an atheist due to claims such as Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest. He was in fact awaiting trial for blasphemy on his death. The playwright thus may have echoed his own rebellion in that of the protagonist whose search for knowledge and originality (developed by his questions to Mephistopheles which include 'Tell me who made the world?') reflect the rebellion of Renaissance thinkers is eventually doomed. Faustus' demise can be said to be not evidence for a lack of rebellion, but symbolic of restrictions on free thought and perhaps even of those who criticise Marlowe himself as blasphemous. Faustus' final cry of 'I'll burn my books. Ah, Mephistopheles!' could be symbolic of the rejection of knowledge and rebellion – an ineffective attempt at survival as Faustus promises to destroy the symbols of knowledge. Within this interpretation, Marlowe could thus be said to present Faustus as a rebel from religious rules, his struggle on the surface a submission to sin, but in reality a representation of the rebellion of Renaissance humanists and their castigation by religious enthusiasts of the period.*

## Question 20

*Doctor Faustus*

### The question asked about greed.

Better answers usefully engaged with the implications of 'greed' and made good use of the imagery of gluttony and excess; weaker approaches just treated it as a question on ambition. Responses were generally strong in Levels 4 to 5, evaluating Marlowe's message about the negative consequences of sin. Links were made to Divine Right of Kings, predestination, tragedy genre, and religious uncertainty.

As with Question 19, there were lots of references to Icarus in the prologue, but weaker responses did little to develop these ideas with reference to the wider play. Candidates focused on gustatory imagery and metaphor as symbolic of Faustus' greed for power/knowledge. The best responses linked their analysis of these methods to scenes across the play, such as with the parade of the seven deadly sins, which included gluttony. Context was often quite generalised, but in the higher level answers there was some well-informed discussion of Renaissance Humanism v Calvinism.

### Examiner comments:

'Responses were often littered with context or critics that did not particularly engage with the question or dramatic craft. Some candidates clearly wanted to write about power or naivety and were just swapping those words for the word 'greed'. Quotations actually relating to greed made a difference between low-Level 3 and mid-Level 3 candidates'.

'Most successful answers came from those that thought around the idea of greed – greed for learning, status, material goods, power. Therefore, they could develop the essay'.

Here is an example of a Level 2 response to the question. It shows general understanding of the play and its contexts, but all the time it is sitting on the surface of the text itself. There is no 'consistent analysis' or 'clear understanding of the writer's craft' that we would expect for Level 3.

*Greed is presented in a variety of different ways within the play Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. It is seen continuously throughout and never in a positive light.*

*Faustus is a victim of excessive greed, so much so he sells his soul to the devil to get what he wants: 'Say he surrenders up to him his soul letting him live in all voluptuousness having thee ever to attend on me'. This showcases just how greedy Faustus is as he has learned and done everything he can so now he feels he has to sell his soul to the devil just to get more. Therefore it represents how much greed has influenced his mind, almost to the point where he will go insane if he doesn't get what he wants. During the 16th century when the play was written England was a very religious society. Marlowe writing about someone selling their soul to the devil would have been really shocking to the audience, as it goes against all their religious beliefs and faiths.*

*Faustus tries to take advantage of his greed by ordering Mephistopheles around: 'Here Mephistophilis. Receive this scroll a deed of gift of body and of soul but yet conditionally that thou perform oral articles prescribed between us both'. This presents Faustus as having no hesitation. His greed and desire was so powerful that not once did he second guess ordering around Lucifer's servant. He got straight to it and took all the risks involved he was so impatient. At the time this play was released everyone was highly religious so anything to do with the supernatural or the devil was highly looked down on and was an act of blasphemy, you would have been murdered. This furthermore presents how greedy Faustus was as he was so eager to throw away his religious beliefs to fulfil his greedy nature. The good and evil angels help to present Faustus' utter greed. The good Angel tries to mediate with him, telling him it is the wrong choice and he has enough: 'Sweet Faustus leave that execrable art' but the evil Angel tempts him even more: 'No Faustus. Think of honour and of wealth'. This showcases how easily Faustus is a victim to temptation as he completely disregards what the good angel has to say and follows the bad angel on what they're saying.*

*Marlowe presents Rafe and Robin as more subtly greedy men. They are constantly trying to steal from people for their own benefit: 'What shall I do? Good angel, forgive me now and I'll never rob thy library more'. Unlike Faustus, they don't let the greed become them. They feel guilty for getting too greedy and want forgiveness – Something Faustus has never done. This therefore showcases how Marlowe presents greed as subtle but not a big deal through Rafe and Robin. He may have used them as examples of forgivable greed, contrasting to Faustus who's greed went so far he never has the chance for forgiveness.*

*At the end of the play it is clear to see how guilty Faustus is feeling for how greedy he had been in his lifetime 'Oh God whom Faustus has abjured! Oh God whom Faustus has blasphemed'. Faustus is finally recognising his mistakes and understanding there is no chance of heaven for him now. This is seen as an act of redemption as even though there is nothing he can do about it now he still feels guilty for it and would change the past if he could. This therefore presents how greed can change a person and when people snap out of that almost greedy trance the amount of guilt they feel for their actions can be saddening.*

*In conclusion, Marlowe presents greed in Doctor Faustus as negative, mind controlling and harmful. Greed was the leading factor as to why Faustus sold his soul to the devil as he was demanding for power and wealth.*

## Question 21

*The Duchess of Malfi*

**The question asked about the extent to which the play is a critique of contemporary society.**

This was the more popular question and the vast majority of candidates chose to write about the play's exploration of corruption in contemporary society. Context was often quite generalised around the corruption of the Jacobean court, but there were some successful links to James' promotion of favourites and upward social mobility being seen as a threat by some. Little reference was made to the Italian setting and, in discussion of the Cardinal, some candidates wrote as if the English church was Catholic. The best responses explicitly stated what aspect of society was being criticised and provided much more controlled answers. These were often linked to Webster's overall purpose, for example his interpretation of honour as integrity rather than rank, linked to Delio's closing speech.

### **Examiner comments:**

'Across responses marked, a large focus was on the metaphor early on in the play of the fountain. Level 2 and 3 responses explored this method in isolation, with little reference to the corruption elsewhere in the text. Level 4 responses explored the symbolic significance of the fountain metaphor in reference to corruption later in the play, usually in reference to Ferdinand and his problematic relationship with the Duchess. Contextual information was not always secure, though there were a couple of examples of discriminating contextual knowledge relating to the corruption within the court of James VI & I'.

'There were some good answers for this question. The weaker candidates tended to focus on only Bosola. There did seem to be a lack of clear paragraph structures in many of these responses, however, and this often undermines access to the 'controlled' aspect of Level 4'.

Here are two examples of successful approaches to the question:

Example 1:

*Bernard Shaw called Webster a 'Tussaud laureate', denouncing his characters as seemingly two-dimensional, over-embellished creations with no depth. This perception of Webster is not uncommon and certainly when the play was performed by the Kings Men in Blackfriars in 1606, Webster was attempting to impress Jacobean audiences who had been over exposed to the saturated genre of revenge tragedy. Webster therefore certainly was only resorting to sensationalism to ensure his contemporary audiences were entertained. However, in setting the play in Italy – depicting the tale of murder and revenge in a foreign location – Webster was able to craft a work that could freely reflect the turbulence facing Jacobean society during James I regime, evading the Bishops Bar of 1599 which did not allow for depictions of living monarchs on stage. Webster's play seems to critique corrupt leadership, the treatment of women and finally explore the extent to which society becomes redundant in the face of divine justice ...*

## Example 2:

*The structure of Jacobean society centred around the idea of the Great Chain of Being and, in his play, Webster presented the horrific consequences of such a structure. Within the opening scene, the audience were warned: 'ift chance/ Some curs'd example poison't near the head/ Death and diseases through the whole land spread' by Antonio. Webster's use of 'poison' explores the idea of an ill-natured and venomous nobility who can lead to the suffering of their country. In such foreshadowing, Webster was alluding to the poison that he saw in James' court, through the greed driven nobles that abused his court to gain their own rewards. Webster uses the metaphor of the Malji court to display this.*

*The questioning of structure is continued as Webster advocates for a meritocracy to replace the Great Chain of Being with his ending. Delio's closing rhyming couplet:*

*'Integrity of life is fame's best friend/Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end', truly consolidates Webster's desire for a new society based on integrity. In traditional Jacobean plays, the last line was reserved for nobility, yet Webster giving it to Delio furthers his support for a meritocracy. The structural significance of Delio opening and closing the play reinforces his importance and challenges the significance of nobility. In this structure and language, Webster is able to directly challenge England's structure and critique the design of society through his play...*

## Question 22

*The Duchess of Malfi*

### **The question asked about the presentation of Ferdinand.**

This question was the less popular and responses were sometimes limited to over-simplifying character studies or descriptions of Ferdinand's corrupt actions. However, there were good accounts of his obsession with rank and his extreme behaviour, the best of these again linking to Webster's dramatic purpose.

As with Question 21, candidates often focused on the fountain metaphor, though sometimes at the risk of not really focusing on the question because they did not link this image of corruption back to Ferdinand. More discriminating responses discussed the "poison" and how Ferdinand is metaphorically poisoned by his obsession with his sister. Some comments were made on the dark aspects of Webster's drama, with reference to corruption within the Jacobean court. Broader approaches explored the idea of Ferdinand as a foil to the Cardinal.

### **Examiner comment:**

'Responses tended to be more Level 3 here due to a lack of engagement with the text itself or with the writer's craft. Candidates don't seem to know the play as well as with other questions.'

Here is an example of a Level 4 response to the question. There is evidence of a discriminating approach and some effective detailed analysis of the text, but there is not enough engagement with the play's contexts or with its function as a piece of drama:

*In the 'Duchess of Malfi' Webster presents the character of Ferdinand as a sinister political figure who dominates and suffocates his eponymous sister. Webster arguably criticises his encouragement of sycophancy and sensationalises his incestuous passionate feelings towards the Duchess and her chastity through his descent into madness.*

Webster portrays Ferdinand as being infatuated with the Duchess' purity and reputation. In the first warning he and his brother give the Duchess, he informs her 'You live in a rank pasture here, i'th' court. There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly: 'Twill poison your fame'. Webster's semantic field of decay and poison to represent the potential corruption of the Duchess' character amplifies the strength of his feelings about her purity through the evocative imagery of 'honeydew' and 'rank pasture'. His greatest concern is with her status as a widow, which he claims have 'livers more spotted than Laban's sheep' – a continuation of the disease imagery. Contemporary beliefs surrounding widows determined that a woman should remain chaste following the death of her first husband, in accordance with the Overbury figure of a virtuous widow who spends the remainder of her life mourning for her late husband. Ferdinand despises the idea of the Duchess' defiance of this, leading to him making violent assertions that he wishes to 'make a sponge of her bleeding heart' and to 'purge such infected blood as hers'. Webster's visceral language of infected blood emphasises the passion of Ferdinand's fury and hatred; his disgust at the Duchess' tainted purity. The bodily level of violent threats suggests a deep concern with her sexuality, to the point it is almost incestuous. The Cardinal, though a cruel leader himself, is a voice of reason in regards to Ferdinand's madness, questioning the extent of it; to which Ferdinand responds: 'It is not your whore's milk that shall quench my wildfire, but your whore's blood.' The blood imagery is continued in conjunction with the evocative 'whore' expressing his excessive emotion and the juxtaposition of 'milk' and 'blood' encapsulates Ferdinand's inability to accept the Duchess' own love and sexuality, affirming his desire for her to be pure. Ferdinand even lectures his sister on the importance of reputation and asserts, 'she shook hands with reputation and made him invisible. I will never see you more'. The hyperbolic 'never' accentuates his stubborn opinion of the Duchess, yet he fails to follow through on this claim as he continues to visit her and torture her. Overall, Webster characterises Ferdinand as possessing an insatiable obsession with his sister and her purity, portraying his utter disgust at her marriage.

Webster explores how Ferdinand's excessive passionate feelings manifests as madness. Before succumbing to his diagnosed lycanthropy, Ferdinand makes references to wolves suggesting there is a madness inside that only accumulates throughout the play before erupting. After the Duchess' death Ferdinand tells Bosola 'the wolf shall find her grave and scrape it up, not to devour the corpse but to discover the horrid murder'. the atavistic act of digging up a grave insinuates a feral aspect of Ferdinand that is evoked as a result of the Duchess' death, greatly contrasting the external appearances of a politician or duke that were previously upheld, emphasising his descent. The delusion of Ferdinand's refusal to accept that 'horrid murder 'as anything but own doing implies a fracturing of his psyche in order to cope with his guilt. He attributes Bosola's actions to fate in the metatheatricality of the line: 'As we observe in tragedies, a good actor many times is cursed for playing a villain's part. I hate thee for it', admitting no responsibility in her murder. This notion aligns with his dying words that, 'Whether we fall by ambition, blood or lust like diamonds we are cut with our own dust', again returning to his obsession with the Duchess' blood and immoral lust, yet finally taking some responsibility for his actions. Webster presents his madness almost comically as he attempts to throttle his own shadow and many productions portray this in creative ways, such as the 2024 production at the Sam Wannamaker Playhouse, where the actor followed his lines being projected onto the floor in front of him, introducing an element of metatheatricality to present the disintegration of his mental state. He unwittingly reveals truths in his madness, such as saying 'when I go to hell', implying an innate understanding of the sins he's committed, yet a surface level refusal to acknowledge this.

Ferdinand is also presented as a sinister ruler who encourages sycophancy. Early in the play, he instructs those around him to 'only laugh when I laugh' demonstrating him exercising an authoritarian level of authority, the same kind he oppresses the Duchess with. Antonio comments on his nature, calling him 'a most perverse and turbulent nature' which is clearly demonstrated throughout the play. Delio comments on how the law to him is 'like a full black cobweb to a spider' presenting him as a cruel figure.

## Question 23

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

### **The question asked about women's behaviour.**

This was by far the most popular question on the text. Most candidates showed a clear engagement with the question and could develop clear lines of argument. There was sometimes, however, a lack of engagement with the text itself and there were a lot of generalised comments about women in the Victorian period, e.g. women had to be confined to the house. More discriminating responses discussed the nuances of female roles within society and analysed Wilde's satirical criticism of women's behaviour in the play to mock social attitudes. Often, responses tended to revolve around marriage and treated the question as an opportunity to write about this topic, rather than exploring other areas.

### **Examiner comments:**

'In weaker responses, there was little attention given to quotation and writer's craft. Level 2/low Level 3 responses tended to try to analyse satire, but simply stated, "this shows Wilde satirising..." and didn't develop their points.'

'In general, it seemed that candidates had quite a good understanding of the ways in which this apparently light comedy tackles late Victorian topics such as hypocrisy, class privilege and gender roles. However, what seemed to be rarely grasped was the tone of Wilde's masterpiece – the way in which his daring aphorisms manage both to provoke and entertain in a breathtakingly cheeky way. Although it is foolish to break a butterfly on a wheel, candidates might, nevertheless, be advised to investigate the ways in which humour is used to defuse otherwise contentious topics by managing our nervous reactions.'

'Weaker candidates seem to really struggle with this text and provided extremely superficial character studies or even general summaries of scenes in which female characters appear. There was some very limited sense of contextual understanding or of the play in the theatre.'

Here is the introduction to a response that was awarded a mark on the Level 3/4 boundary. You will note that the candidate is focusing on critical reception of the play, but AO5 is not being assessed on this section and time would have been better spent on analysing the language and structure of the text itself:

*In Wilde's comedic play 'The Importance of Being Earnest', he experiments with the conventions of Victorian society, presenting perhaps a more modern interpretation of women and their behaviour. He uses the character of Lady Bracknell as a comic device to create social satire on the aristocracy and upper classes, whilst also maintaining the strictures of the aesthetic movement – 'art for art's sake' – by having the sole purpose of his play to be a farce rather than a pure social critique. Furthermore, the experimentation with social conventions of the tropes of women in literature, such as the ingenue (Cecily) and the new woman (Gwendolen) throughout the play suggests that although some women's behaviour is perhaps reflective of the contemporary values of Victorian England for women to be innocent, chaste and uphold respectability, but it is also presented with several features that come as a result of the Revolution, such as the 'new woman' of a more public status with greater depth and complexity.*

*Some critics argue that 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is a 'world without patriarchs; there are no fathers to speak of'. This is likely due to Wilde's careful construction of Lady Bracknell – an overbearing spirit and a driving force among the play – whose position as a woman contrasts the traditional features of a submissive and passive woman. Throughout the play, Wilde uses her as the structural barrier to the marriages of all other characters. For example, she denies Gwendolen's desire to marry Jack (or Ernest as she knows him) merely due to his dubious social background and a lack of a 'recognised position in good society' as she puts it. This behaviour from Lady Bracknell acts mainly as a source of pure comedy and laughs among the Victorian audience, reinforced by the decision to fill her speeches with lines of pure nonsense but spoken in a formal unsophisticated manner ...*

## Question 24

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

**This question asked about the extent to which it is a play about trivialities.**

Relatively few candidates opted for this question. High level responses fully explored Wilde's purpose and were able to evaluate his use of satire in presenting trivialities, resulting in some excellent AO2 analysis. In weaker responses, candidates simply listed the trivialities in the play rather than constructing an argument about Wilde's intentions. Popular focus was often on names, food and drink, and the belittling of marriage.

Here is an example of a high-scoring response. It demonstrates a controlled, convincing argument, good use of the text and detailed engagement with contexts:

*The 'Importance of Being Earnest' is a satirical comedy through which Wilde sought to criticise and mock the Victorian upper classes. In this, triviality is vital. His satirization of the upper class obsession with names, etiquette and appearances allows him to encourage his audience to laugh at the superficiality within upper class Victorian society. Names are a fundamental theme within the play and Wilde mocks the Victorian obsession with one's background and status. In Lady Bracknell's farcical interview of Jack for the position of Gwendolen's betrothed, she is ultimately put off by the revelation that his origins are unknown. Lady Bracknell's famous line, 'A handbag?' can be delivered in a huge number of ways – shock or anger or confusion – but the succinct phrasing is emphatic, focusing in on Lady Bracknell's own focus on Jack's origins. She later states angrily that she will not let Gwendolen 'marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel'. While he uses the metaphor of Jack being found in the station as an example of the triviality of Victorian marriage, Lady Bracknell's serious regard of Jack as a person literally descended from a cloakroom is absurd and hilarious. The triviality of marriage is again highlighted by Lady Bracknell's interview of Cecily where her attitude changes dramatically when she discovers Cecily's wealth. She satirically remarks, 'Is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? Until yesterday I had no idea there were any families or persons whose origin was a terminus'. Again Wilde is using his metaphor to highlight the absurdity of these trivial concerns. But upon discovering Cecily's real origin, she says, 'Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her'. Her sharply juxtaposed tone before and after this discovery illuminates the Victorian concern with background and wealth in marriage. Marriage was a businesslike social transaction and this is particularly seen in the example of marriage advertisements where women would detail their wealth and rank in the newspaper to attract a suitable match. Wilde satirises the superficiality of this tradition further in his use of the name Ernest. Both Gwendolen and Cecily idealise the name for their future husband with a ridiculous tone: Gwendolen's 'ideal' has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest and Cecily's 'dream' is to love someone whose name is Ernest. This total absurdity again satirised the Victorian obsession with names, but more so because of the homophone 'Ernest'. Neither Ernest in the play (Algy nor Jack) are truly earnest. Their names actually mean nothing and have no link whatsoever to their true characters, rendering the concern with names within the play trivial, absurd and ultimately useless.*

Wilde also mocks the triviality of Victorian social etiquette. This is most seen in Gwendolen and Cecily's standoff where they embody a Victorian attitude of 'pas devant les domestiques' (not in front of the servants) forcing them to maintain a calm persona despite their anger. Wilde mocks this view as Gwendolen and Cecily speak politely and later with elaborate politeness. The more angry they get, the more polite they appear, resulting in a highly comedic scene. Wilde notes that the presence of the servants provides a 'restraining influence under which both girls chafe' but later undermines this in the sense that when Cecily does get her revenge, she does so under the pretence of etiquette, using it to her advantage. When Gwendolen declines sugar in her tea, Cecily puts four lumps of sugar into the cup and when she asks for bread and butter cuts a very large slice of cake. Her actions allow her to remain within the domestic sphere expected of her as a woman and through this Wilde showcases how the facade of superiority that the upper classes seek to exude is obvious to all. Equally, Gwendolen's extreme anger at Cecily for the action shows also the unnecessary focus on such trivial matters as tea and cake: she 'rises in indignation' and says 'I warn you Miss Cardew you may go too far'. The fact that 'too far' is not stealing the man to whom she is betrothed, but giving her cake is immaterial to the characters on stage but glaringly obvious to the audience and their triviality is heightened further when the incident is almost immediately forgotten. Moments later the girls 'moved towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists as if for protection'. The quickly shifting allegiances and moods of the play allow Wilde to showcase the totally useless triviality of Victorian social norms.

Finally, the triviality with which the characters approach important topics and vice versa is relentlessly mocked by Wilde. Victorian England was becoming more and more concerned with the importance of education. Children now were legally required to receive an education, but Cecily approaches her own education with dismissal saying, 'I look quite plain after my German lesson'. Her concern is not her education, but her appearance – a triviality which ultimately matters little. Moreover, the character of Miss Prism, who represents the education system, is totally inept and remarks that she once wrote 'a three volume novel' in earlier days. This style of novel was known for its triviality, basic plot and romantic ideals – quite unbecoming for an educated woman. She also tells Cecily to omit the chapter on 'the fall of the rupee' as it is somewhat 'too sensational'. The fall of the rupee represents a great failure on the part of the British Empire and Miss Prism's dismissive tone shows her refusal to take matters seriously and instead focus on more trivial matters, something Wilde – who was from a family of Irish nationalists – would have disliked. Overall this creates a sense that the upper classes are too focused on their own trivial matters to worry about truly important events, something Wilde criticises.

In conclusion, through his presentation of triviality in the play, Wilde mocks and satirises the trivial concerns of a Victorian upper class.

## Question 25

*The Rover*

### **The question asked about male behaviour.**

A few more centres appear to be studying this play for A Level which is good to see. This question was the more popular of the two. While weaker responses tended simply to describe the male characters and their actions, stronger approaches considered how Behn explores the hypermasculine, often violent, culture of 'the libertine' in the context of the play's Interregnum setting and in its Restoration production.

Here is an example of a high level response, very much focused on the writer's craft:

*Aphra Behn's 'The Rover' set during the Carnival in Naples – a period of pre-Lenten observation characterised with excess and overindulgence – serves as the perfect backdrop for Behn to explore the dominating element of male behaviour. Unlike their female counterparts, who depend on the chaos Carnival provides to offer them some sort of autonomy, the male characters of the play enjoy the compounded freedom that Carnival provides. Through her different stock characters, such as the rake, Willmore, the parody of the fool, Blunt, and the underlying tensions in the interactions between the Spanish nobleman and the English Cavaliers, Behn is able to engage with different facets of male behaviour whilst still operating within the play's nature as a Comedy of Manners.*

*Through her most prevalent Cavalier, Willmore, Behn portrays the unrestrained and unrestricted element to masculine behaviour. Even amongst his fellow Cavaliers, Willmore is able to distinguish himself as the manifestation of the libertine values that Restoration men were free to uphold. In act 2 scene 1, Belville and Frederick enter disguised in '[masking habits]' yet Willmore is '[in his own clothes, with a vizard in his hand]'. Not only does he not feel the need to don a disguise, Behn depicts him as in control of his perception as he simply holds the mask in his hand. This control is contrasted in his conversation with Hellena later in this scene as she has stripped herself of her aristocratic attire and has '[dressed like a gypsy]'. This enhances the freedom and agency Willmore is granted through his masculinity, whilst Hellena has to adopt a new identity in order to engage in witty dialogue and be on par with him. Hellena's need for a disguise is culminated in act 4.2 during which she comes in '[dressed in man's clothes]'. Through her Breeches Role she transgresses the boundaries between gender roles, adopting the disguise of a page boy. However due to Behn's elevation of the rake, he is able to see through her disguise, cementing his role as this master of disguises. Perhaps this is Behn's method of criticising invasiveness of masculine behaviour, as when he recognises her he belittles her to a 'monkey or parrot' stripping away the agency her Breeches Role granted her. Outside the boundaries of the play, the breeches used by Shakespeare in his play 'As You Like It', exposed the complexities of gender and identity. Yet, it was diminished and commandeered by Restoration playwrights, positioning the actress as a sexual object on stage, showcasing the voyeuristic side to the actions of those playwrights. Although Willmore's masculine behaviour permits him freedom and Behn elevates him using this trait, she also encapsulates how these freedoms impede the female attempts to achieve such liberties.*

*In contrast to her rakish hero, Behn uses the stock character of Blunt as the country bumpkin as a comedic parody of typical male behaviour. Blunt is separated from his fellow Cavaliers as he is displaced in the Carnival setting of the play. As stated by Sinclair, 'the cuckold is the object of ridicule' in the same way that Blunt is often a source of comedy in the play. In act 2.1 Blunt thinks he has found a noble woman, describing her as 'so fond, so amorous, so toying'. Through the pleonastic triad, Blunt elevates the 'cheap whore' Lucetta, emphasising his gullibility and naivete. Though Belvile and Willmore recognise her ingenuity earlier on in the play, Blunt's foolish behaviour leads him to swapping her fake 'bracelet for the toy of the diamond' he used to wear. In fooling Blunt, Lucetta describes herself as his 'absolute captive' which would have seemed apt to a Restoration audience, as women were viewed as subordinate to men. However, Blunt submits to Lucetta, stating he is her 'humble servant'. The cuckold becomes the slave, reducing himself to being of an even lower status to a prisoner, subverting the control that male behaviour exerted in typical courtship. He is duped by Lucetta and her gallant Philippo, whose name is reminiscent of the vilified kings of Spain. They steal his 'family arms... a medal of his king and his lady mother's picture', signifiers of Blunt's identity which evoke English history. Although this scene serves as a facet of a Comedy of Manners in that a rich Englishman is duped of his belongings by a whore, a contemporary audience would have understood the wider significance of this scene. England and Spain were longstanding enemies throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, hence this scene is highly politicised. In being duped by Lucetta, Blunt is brought below the Spanish. Moreover as he is the only Roundhead in the play, Behn uses this to relay her contempt for Cromwell's regime and her loyalist agenda. Hence, Blunt acts as a weak parody of masculine behaviour.*

*Behn also portrays masculine behaviour as inherently violent, supporting Hughes assessment of 'violence not reason' being the foundation of society. The sentimental lovers, Florida and Belvile, initially meet at the Siege of Pamplona as he 'threw himself into all dangers to protect her' when the French soldiers threatened rape. Though this chivalrous act portrays him as the hapless lover, the nature of their meeting enhances the violence which exists at the periphery of the play. This violence is seen to infiltrate the romantic relationships and rivalry of the play, as in act 2.1 the Spanish and the English fight over the most revered courtesan, Angelica Bianca. The phallic symbols of the sword shows the men's compulsion to defend their masculine integrity. Even Belvile, the sentimental hero, joins in the fighting, displaying how his good morals and etiquette are overcome by his urge to assert his dominance. The duelling becomes almost farcical as the Spaniards fight each other – 'Antonio and Pedro draw and fight' – perhaps to portray the masculine inclination to violence as weak. The duelling interrupts Angelica's mock courtship, demonstrating that women are secondarily the objects of men's desires, primarily the terrain on which they fight.*

*In conclusion, Behn uses Carnival as a focal point to explore the different manifestations of male behaviour. By positioning and contrasting her male characters alongside each other, she is able to portray her own ideals such as a somewhat feminist agenda and her political agenda of her loyalty to the Stuart kings.*

## Question 26

*The Rover*

### **The question asked about features of comedy.**

Not many candidates chose to answer this question, but those who did were clearly well-prepared to discuss features of Restoration comedy with clear understanding and confidence; and most were also able to link Behn's comic crafting to the wider political and social contexts to the play's production and reception. Common areas of focus were: witty dialogue, the Carnival setting, 'discovery' scenes, mistaken identity, marriages at the end and the subversion of class and gender expectations. Some candidates were also able to explore the text as a dark comedy; others looked at elements of satire and how a Restoration audience might have received the play. Many focused on the character of Blunt and the visual comedy he brings to the stage as the 'country bumpkin'.

### **Here are some examples of successful approaches to this question:**

Example 1:

*Behn's use of stock characters allows her to probe various aspects and features of the comedic genre. She immediately portrays Blunt as the stereotypical English country bumpkin from the play's exposition and her use of word play from the literal meaning of his name provokes a humorous reaction from her audience as they realise the extent of his stupidity. Effectively one of Blunt's roles is to provide comic relief and there is a sense of bathos and prophetic irony when he poses the rhetorical question, 'When did you ever hear of an honest woman that took a man's money?' in 1.2, as this situation occurs a couple of acts later, in what can be considered to be the climax of the play, if abiding by key comic conventions. In fact Acts 3 and 4 are prime examples of Restoration comedy as they make use of the unique feature of the discovery scene: '[the scene changes and discovers Blunt]' and Behn uses animalistic imagery and a semantic field of dehumanisation as she describes him as 'creeping' out with everything about him as 'all dirty'. Blunt himself emphasises his plight – which contemporary and modern audiences would have found hilarious, both visually and conceptually – by repetitively referring to himself as a 'dog' and a 'puppy'...*

#### Example 2:

*...Behn also explores the comedy genre by framing the events of the play to occur in the form of a Comedy of Manners. These were plays which were typically satires on the excesses of the aristocracy and Behn's presentation of Dons Pedro and Antonio evidence this. Don Antonio, the viceroy's son, would initially have been perceived as wise and intelligent, yet hilariously shows himself to be foolish and ridiculous when he wants to avail himself of Angelina's services, assuming Florinda will never know, he brusquely commands his page to 'Name not these distant Joys, there's not one thought of her will check my Passion here'. There is much humour here as he is unaware that he is being observed by Don Pedro and thus Behn presents him as foolish and the subject of ridicule – a consequence of his desire for satiating his lust and excess, as per the features of a comedy of manners...*

#### Example 3:

*As a writer, Aphra Behn makes clear her position as a Stuart loyalist and libertine advocate, owing to her disdain surrounding social and sexual regulation. This becomes particularly clear in her use of features of comedy, such as satire, sexual innuendo, rakish behaviour and mistaken identities during Carnival...*

#### Example 4:

*Behn uses the festive comedic atmosphere of Carnival to highlight the opportunity for female agency and emancipation. Helena and Florida show that Carnival offers an opportunity to 'wave a fine farewell to the world and take all innocent freedoms' where Behn's alliteration and similes allow the Carnival to be elevated to a divine and poetic force that allows women to escape from the rules to which they are traditionally confined. In this festive comedy Helena reverses the Petrarchan standard for courtly love and becomes a huntress, declaring, 'Not every he that likes me shall have me, but he that I like', directly comparing the world before and after the Carnival for both women and a wider society. For the Cavaliers the carnival marks a release from the Puritan restrictions imposed during Cromwellian rule and allows both the dull English and the Spanish women a chance to be as mad as the rest, even for a short time...*

## Question 27

*A Streetcar Named Desire*

### **The question asked about the use of stagecraft.**

This continues to be one of the most popular plays in Part B of the Drama paper. Responses were divided, roughly, equally between the two questions.

Responses to the question on stagecraft showed a variety of approaches. While many candidates provided examples of stagecraft elements, they often failed to connect these elements to a cohesive argument. Some candidates misread the question, focusing on stage directions instead of stagecraft, which sometimes led them astray. However, those who correctly identified stagecraft provided a broad analysis of lighting, props, sounds, and music. Less successful responses tended to list these elements with minimal analysis, whereas more advanced responses integrated these elements into a discussion of how they evolved throughout the play, such as the intensification of piano music during Blanche's moments of mental anguish. Many linked their analysis to the concept of 'plastic theatre', though some connections felt forced, particularly when referencing Williams' sister and his exploration of sexuality. Stronger responses effectively evaluated how stagecraft reflected a broken world and illuminated the hypocrisies of a new America, with insightful connections to expressionism and influences from Chekhov and Brecht.

Blanche's costume, particularly in the opening scenes, was a focal point for many, with higher-level responses exploring how her attire symbolized her outsider status and foreshadowed her character development. The juxtaposition between characters through coloured clothing was a common theme, with varying degrees of success in its integration into broader arguments about stagecraft and the escalating conflict between Stanley and Blanche. There were also occasional, but often unlinked, references to Williams' personal struggles with homosexuality and alcohol.

### **Examiner comments:**

'The question immediately invited candidates to discuss dramatic techniques and candidates are less likely to get lost in 'character says' responses and instead focus on 'Williams does'. AO3 was a bit weaker on this but the handling of a wide variety of symbols, props, staging and lighting choices and costume meant that AO2 was impressive for many candidates.'

'In general, the question on stagecraft proved quite a challenge for those candidates who went blindly into it and reduced the analysis to a simple analysis of what they had memorised about plastic theatre. This aspect of the play needs to be better taught and handled so that the analysis makes a direct and interwoven link to the writer's intentions. A line of argument is helpful in guiding the analysis, otherwise the responses are rendered descriptive and narrative in most cases'.

'Some basic responses focused purely on the use of 'plastic theatre' and what this stood for. Better responses focused on the use of how the stagecraft allowed Williams to create two separate worlds – the Old and New America and the conflict that arose between the two of them, represented through different aspects of stagecraft e.g. the contrast in music between the 'blue piano' and the 'Varsouviana.'

'These questions were well-answered for the most part. There is a tendency for the candidates to try to write about critics, at times, but most of them know the Assessment Objectives and stick to them.

Some candidates get stuck trying to explain how Streetcar relates to Aristotle's theories and they start to lose track of the question.'

'There were a few candidates who still write a pre-prepared introduction paragraph that says when the play was written and it usually does not have anything to do with the question.'

Here are two introductions to successful responses:

Introduction 1:

*When considering Williams' use of stagecraft in A Streetcar Named Desire, it is vital to acknowledge his use of expressionist theatre which permeates the play. Plastic theatre, which includes the use of light, sound, props and costume symbolically, cements the portrayal of the characters of Blanche and Stanley as binary opposites, and their ongoing conflict which could act as a microcosm for the contemporary issue in Williams own society of the struggle within American society between the eroding, genteel society of the Old South, and the harsh, gritty society of the New South. Williams ultimately depicts how Blanche, a vulnerable woman in a patriarchal society, is intrinsically incapable of surviving in the harsh post-war industrial reality of the 1940s New South...*

Introduction 2:

*Tennessee Williams wrote about his work that its central theme was the 'destructive power of society on the sensitive, non-conformist individual' and the 'ravishment of the tender'. It is this aim that comes across most clearly in his use of stagecraft. Using the concept of 'Plastic Theatre' – a method Williams invented of using the surroundings of the characters to enhance and intensify the play – Williams creates the character of Blanche. He uses lighting, sound and stage direction to highlight her instability and the ways in which she is incompatible with the world around her, portraying its hand in her eventual downfall...*

Here is a response that was awarded a Level 5 mark. Its particular strength is the way it seamlessly engages with the play's contexts – something not all candidates were able to do with this question:

*In 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Tennessee Williams uses stagecraft to reveal truths in a landscape that encourages repression and performance. Through the use of stagecraft, he engages with the tragic genre to reveal the inner psyche of vulnerable members of society that accompany a shift in power dynamics and the rise of a new social order. It not only serves a narrative purpose, but also speaks to the audience about the failings of the New South in accommodating safely or people.*

*In the play, Williams uses costuming to reveal the power dynamics between the characters. His rich colour imagery and fabric choice speaks to the transition from the 'old South' to the 'new South' after World War Two. Stanley wears a 'vibrant green silk bowling shirt' and 'brilliant' silk pyjamas. One interpretation for Williams' costuming choice is that it reveals what Stanley prioritises most in life – pleasure. His immigrant blue-collar background sets him apart from the French aristocracy that the DuBois sisters herald from, leading to an insecurity about his own power. Just fifty years before this play was written (1947) he would have held no power over characters such as Blanche and Stella. However, the emergence of the new South criticised, and aimed to reject, its history in the slave trade and uplift ideals of the American Dream, providing Stanley with a belief in the tangibility of upward mobility. To affirm his newfound power, he uses luxury fabrics, such as silk, speaking to his inner uncertainties about his power and identity being questioned. In addition, the pyjamas hold connotations of rest and his intimate relationship with Stella, thus establishing him as a hedonistic, pleasure-driven character. This, again, is mirrored in his bowling shirt. The game of bowling reflects his treatment of his relationship with women as unserious – something to toy with or compete for. He also benefits from the new social hierarchy as a man who feels that it is his right to assert power and control. When Blanche enters the scene, she places a strain on Stella and Stanley's relationship, as her refusal to adapt to the new South threatens to undermine all that Stanley represents. She is a symbol of authority, an oppressive force that 'others' him. Williams, however, shows the triumph of the violent, physical and masculine power as the play culminates in an act of violence off-stage. Stanley rapes Blanche once and for all. Her fluffy, white bodice – a symbol of purity – is tarnished in the eyes of society. After the rape, she is 'decked out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled satin evening gown'. Williams is using symbolism to construct her identity of the 'destitute woman'. The 'white satin evening gown' is reminiscent of a bygone era of wealth, prosperity and power. The 'soiled' and 'crumpled'*

*nature of it represents Blanche's own identity which has been degraded. During the first showing of the play, the audience cheered at Blanche's rape, showing how deeply entrenched the belief in the American Dream was in society.*

*Therefore, Williams uses costuming – an element of stagecraft – to show the inevitable decay of the old South, whilst simultaneously criticising the violent actions and abuse it enabled in a society overly concerned with individual success.*

Williams also makes use of stagecraft to reveal Blanche's fragile identity, and to criticise the sadistic pleasure more powerful characters hold in revealing reality. Blanche is unable to exist in reality, relying on illusions and performance to place her in a comforting state of denial in which she doesn't have to face her own lack of power. Williams uses setting and props to emphasise this. When Blanche arrives at Elysium Fields, the stage directions describe the houses as 'white frame, weathered grey with rickety outside steps'. Already Williams is foreshadowing the degradation of her identity. The 'white frame' is imperfect and marred, revealing the true colours beneath and the adjective 'rickety' suggests an instability in this constructed identity. Blanche's insecurities arise from society's fetishism of youth, therefore Blanche's 'adorable little coloured paper lantern' that she uses to cover the naked light bulb is representative of herself. The plethora of adjectives to describe the lantern, such as 'adorable' and 'little' show a projection of her own fears. She manipulates Mitch's perception of it to one of youthful and innocent appearance through the light imagery. The use of 'naked' also suggests that Blanche is vulnerable without this constructed façade, unable to survive without it. Williams again makes use of material choice to further convey the extended metaphor, as the paper is fragile and easily destroyed. Whilst Williams' use of setting adds a claustrophobic feel to the play, increasing tension by showing the characters to be trapped in this situation that is increasingly spiralling into tragedy, he also uses it as a representation of Blanche's inner psyche as she tries to customise it with the paper lantern and construct a more beautiful and false reality. It is easily destroyed as it was constructed and, as her mental state declines, the boundaries of a setting are transcended and Williams makes a shift from the real to the surreal. His use of plastic theatre had previously served to ground the audience in reality and create a fully immersive experience, but 'the shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form' when her mental state is declining. The threatening shadows show the invasive nature of the masculine power that have invaded her inner psyche, just how Stanley has championed her destruction. His animalistic and violent characteristics invade the room and thus her inner world. This can also be seen through the metaphor of the locomotive. It alludes to the unstoppable perpetual motion of time and therefore to the inevitability of change. It is heard approaching outside '[Blanche] claps her hands to her ears and crouches over. The headlight of the locomotive glares into the room as it thunders past'. The powerful natural element of 'thunder' shows this progress to be inescapable and overpowering by emphasising our mortality and vulnerability at the hands of nature. The headlights are also a continuation of the play's light imagery, as it invades the space and shines the truth of the matter on Blanche's illusions. Therefore, Williams shows change to be inevitable. One is given a chance to adapt or perish as hiding in a state of illusion is unsustainable.

Williams also makes use of soundscape to show the haunting nature of grief in a deeply repressed society. The soundscape of Blanche's grief over the death of Allan Grey encompasses the Varsouviana polka music which is used during times of existential turmoil and distress, After World War Two, a deeply scarred population returning from war and violence were thrust into a world that prioritises appearances over true communication. A large push to return to the traditional gender roles and family unit, to establish a sense of normalcy, resulted in a repression of grief and anger. Williams highlights the importance of communication in avoiding tragedy through Blanche and Mitch's relationship. Mitch is immediately othered by Blanche, who identifies him as having a 'sort of sensitive look'. His mother's imminent death has created grief that initially unites them. When Blanche opens up to Mitch about Allan Grey's death, the polka music plays 'in a minor key, faint with distance'. 'A minor key' holds connotations of sorrow and grief, fitting with the mood of the story. However, after the shot is heard the polka resumes 'in a major key'. This is slightly odd, as a major key is more uplifting and hopeful. One interpretation that can be made from the key change is that the burden of this repressed grief is lightened by Blanche sharing open and honest communication with Mitch. However, the grief that brought them together once again drives them apart, as Mitch says, 'You are not clean enough to bring home to my mother'. This shows the influence of purity culture on society, as Mitch deems Blanche unworthy of him due to her sexual past. Ultimately, he prioritises his mother and we see a triumph of the repressed new South. Therefore Williams, who writes 'out of love for the old South' is questioning the progress that is made in the rise of a new social order if it is limited by abuse and violence.

In conclusion, Williams makes use of costuming, setting, props and soundscape to contribute to his disapproval of the landscape of repression and violence that is created through the rise of the New South. Not only does such a wide variety and frequency of stagecraft contribute to the narrative, but it also expresses a personal frustration at his audience, who are blinded by the hope provided by the American Dream and do not understand the abuse of the vulnerable in the affirmation of newfound power. Despite all of this, Williams also accepts the inevitability of change.

## Question 28

*A Streetcar Named Desire*

### **The question asked about the relationship between Blanche and Mitch.**

This was another very popular question. Many candidates in Level 3 detailed the chronology of their relationship without tying it to a broader argument. Most responses considered Blanche as representative of the Old South and Mitch of the emerging new America, with better responses discussing their inevitable incompatibility and linking it to the tragedy genre. However, as with Question 27, some contextual links, like Williams' sexuality and his sister, felt forced.

Stronger responses extended their analysis to compare Blanche and Mitch's relationship with that of Stanley and Stella. Candidates at lower levels (Level 2/low Level 3) tended to list key interactions between Blanche and Mitch without deeper analysis, often discussing their first meeting at the poker night. The best responses highlighted Mitch's character development, showing his adoption of Stanley's behaviours paralleling the revelation of Blanche's past, and explored the mutual vulnerability between Blanche and Mitch. Some candidates were limited by a superficial exploration of the characters as symbols of the Old and New South, lacking a deeper contextual understanding of American societal changes. Additionally, there were often unlinked references to Williams' homosexuality and struggles with alcohol. Some candidates lost focus by contrasting Mitch's relationship with Stanley instead of concentrating on Mitch and Blanche. The most effective responses, however, targeted the constructed nature of Mitch and Blanche's characters, linking their analysis back to the playwright's intent.

### **Examiner comments:**

'Weaker responses tended to turn this into a Blanche and Mitch question separately, analysing the characters instead of the relationships. Level 4/5 candidates tended to examine what the relationships symbolised or how it contributed to tragedy, rather than a Level 3 retelling of events with quotations. Those who used aspects of stagecraft such as the 'quieting of the polka music' as Mitch entered did better in terms of AO2 rather than those who ended up do a 'Blanche says and then Mitch says' retelling.'

'Some really interesting answers on the different stages of their relationship; too many neglected to mention the final scene when Mitch stands up to Stanley. Very best answers mentioned how both benefited emotionally from relationship, even if there was no real physical 'desire' between the two.'

'General responses focused on how the relationship developed through a need for each other and the contrast between the passionate relationship between Stella and Stanley. More secure answers considered the stagecraft used to represent the characters and highlight difference in background between the two e.g. costume and foreshadowing that the doomed relationship to come due to societal and cultural differences.'

Here is a response that was awarded a sound Level 4 mark. It is rather verbose and repetitive in expression, but there is a clear sense of an argument being shaped. It also has a very strong focus on the question and consistently has the audience perspective in mind. The text is being explored in detail, ranging across the play, and detailed links are made between the play and its contexts. While some of the detail on context is a little laboured, the response is nonetheless often discriminating in approach:

*'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams follows Blanche, an ageing Southern Belle when she is forced to live with her sister in New Orleans after her life falls apart. An important aspect of the play is Blanche's developing a romantic relationship with Mitch, the gentler friend of her sister's husband. The relationship between Mitch and Blanche is key to the play due to how Mitch represents Blanche's hope for a better life and an alternate presentation of masculinity from that of Stanley. However, the relationship also reflects Blanche's sabotage of her positive relationships through her reckless sexual behaviour and lying. The ultimate tragedy of their relationship, with Mitch attempting to rape Blanche and standing by as she is institutionalised, is an important aspect of the breakdown of Blanche's life as the play progresses. Mitch represents hope for Blanche and when her relationship with him is lost, so are all the other aspects of her life.*

*The importance of the relationship between Blanche and Mitch can be seen through how he is often presented as respectful and gentle. This is a strong contrast to the other men in the play, especially Stanley, and emphasises why Blanche is drawn to him. Before kissing her after their date he says, 'Can I – uh – kiss you goodnight?' The dashes breaking up his sentence show that Mitch is heavily stuttering, showing his nervousness around his relationship with Blanche. Additionally, the simple language he uses and the fact he phrases this as a question shows that Mitch is keen to respect Blanche's boundaries. His actions are awkward in their simplicity, such as 'he shuffles' and 'coughs a little'. He is genuinely concerned about the prospect of upsetting her and making her uncomfortable. This highlights part of the appeal of Mitch to Blanche as he comes across as kind and respectful. Blanche is strongly appealed by the trope of a Southern Gentleman. This was a trope that was popular when A Streetcar Named Desire was first performed in 1949, of a wealthy white man from the southern States of America. This Southern Gentleman is seen as extremely respectful and principled – traits that were seen to have been lost on most modern men, but that could still be found amongst wealthy men in the South. Blanche's casting out from Southern society has put her in a situation where she is unable to find a true southern gentleman; however Mitch does initially seem to reflect the qualities of chivalry and respect, even if not wealth. As someone who aims to embody the 'Southern Belle' it is logical that Blanche is drawn to Mitch, the closest person she can find to a southern gentleman.*

*The appeal of Mitch in their relationship can be seen further through the ways in which Blanche and Mitch bond over shared interests and experiences. When Mitch shows Blanche his lighter she reads 'with feigned difficulty' and says, 'Oh! Why that's from my favourite sonnet by Mrs Browning!' The exclamation marks show the extent of Blanche's pleasant surprise at Mitch sharing her tastes in poetry (as well as having any awareness of poetry). Her exclamation of 'Oh!' and the use of 'Why', as well as referring to 'Mrs Browning' reflects Blanche's active attempt to present herself as sophisticated, through her soft but considered language. It is clear that Blanche is greatly pleased by this, creating a connection between herself and Mitch. New Orleans had a thriving culture, involving jazz music and the mixing of different cultures due to high levels of immigration. Blanche chooses to instead keep referring to traditional literature, reflecting her attachment to the old South. So the fact that Mitch shares these preferences is a positive development for her. When Mitch tells her he was given his lighter by a dead lover, Blanche says, 'in a tone of deep sympathy', 'Oh!' showing her increasing surprise and positive feelings towards Mitch as she learns more about him, with the italicised 'Oh!' showing that this is the most important revelation yet. This is due to Blanche's own past with her young husband having killed himself. When the stage directions highlight that she says this in 'a tone of deep sympathy' it is clear that a strong connection has been created between Mitch and Blanche over their shared experiences. Therefore, their relationship initially seems to be greatly positive, with Mitch being gentle and respectful and the two bonding over literature and the tragic events of their pasts.*

However, there are flaws in the relationship between Mitch and Blanche throughout the play, partly due to Blanche's actions. Blanche's self sabotage is presented as reckless, but also tragic due to her past. The audience is encouraged to sympathise with her for her inability to maintain a relationship with Mitch. These flaws in the relationship become obvious before and during Blanche and Mitch's date. Prior to the date Blanche kisses a newspaper boy, telling him 'Honey lamb. Come here. Come on over here like I told you. It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children'. This is an extremely uncomfortable scene for the audience due to the infantilising language Blanche uses, such as 'honey lamb' which is an uncomfortable reminder of the fact that she used to be a teacher. She uses exclamation marks and lighthearted language to attempt to justify her actions, but this falls flat. Most striking is the direct instructions she uses, such as 'Come here' and 'keep you' which emphasise the extreme power imbalance in the interaction. Therefore, the audience realises when watching the scene that Blanche is unable to keep herself from maintaining a healthy relationship with Mitch, instead sabotaging this by her sexual desire to kiss a younger man. The flaws in the relationship between Mitch and Blanche become extremely clear through this scene. Furthermore, during their date Blanche says she has 'old fashioned ideals' then 'rolls her eyes knowing he cannot see her face'. The contrast between Blanche's over the top language and her hypocritically rolling her eyes demonstrates that the relationship between Blanche and Mitch is heavily based on her presenting a false version of herself. Blanche aims to be a Southern Belle. This is a trope in film and literature of a wealthy white woman from a romanticised version of the American South. A Southern Belle is young, beautiful, desirable and, importantly, morally and sexually pure. Blanche wants to present herself as a Southern Belle to Mitch. However, Williams subverts the trope through the fact that Blanche is a promiscuous alcoholic whose hypocrisy is obvious. Therefore, her presentation of herself to Mitch is inherently based on a lie, meaning she sabotages their relationship through her desire to present herself as a Southern Belle. However, it is important to note that Blanche's self sabotage is not intentional and the audience is still encouraged to support the relationship between Mitch and Blanche. Blanche tells Stella, 'I want to rest. I want to breathe quietly again. Yes, I want Mitch - very badly'. Blanche's repetition of 'I want' and the use of exclamation marks shows the strength of her desire for a stable romantic relationship with Mitch. This encourages the audience to view her self sabotage in a sympathetic light, as a compulsion she wants to overcome.

*The relationship between Blanche and Mitch is defined by the ultimate tragedy. Despite his previous sympathy for Blanche and strong hope for their future, upon finding out about Blanche's sexual past and her lies about it, Mitch is furious and attempts to rape her. This is in stark contrast to his earlier portrayal as a man who is respectful of women. He says, 'You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother'. This statement is short but has a large impact, reminding the audience of one of the prior positive qualities of Mitch – his relationship with his mother – and turning this against Blanche. This stark statement, showing that he views Blanche as sexually unclean, emphasises that even Mitch does not want to be with Blanche knowing the true extent of her past. After the end of the Second World War there was an increased focus in America on the traditional American 'nuclear family'. This was an ideal of a middle class family in the suburbs with children. It set expectations for the role of women, with a focus on women being docile and following the needs of their husbands. It was especially important for women to be pure in terms of their sexuality, not having sex until marriage and only sleeping with their husbands. Blanche's past goes against this ideal, which likely influenced Mitch's view of an ideal woman. Therefore, Blanche and Mitch's relationship is sabotaged by Blanche's past going against the ideal view of women. When attempting to rape Blanche, Mitch is 'fumbling' and he 'clatters' awkwardly down the steps when leaving. This language reflects prior language used to describe the awkwardness in Blanche and Mitch's relationship when he was focused on treating her respectfully. It shows how Mitch has not inherently changed as a person. His traits, such as awkwardness, are consistent and he had the capacity to treat Blanche so horrifically all along. Blanche and Mitch's relationship in this light comes across far more negatively, with Mitch's supposed kindness being a façade. Williams therefore shows that Stanley is ultimately very similar to Mitch in their treatment of women, and presents the idea that all men are willing to engage in violence towards women to fulfil their sexual desires. Mitch's positive traits were seemingly a mask. The tragedy of the relationship between Mitch and Blanche is that she intentionally hid her past, whilst Mitch hid his negative traits. When Mitch discovers the truth, it is when his true personality is exposed.*

*In conclusion, the relationship between Blanche and Mitch in A Streetcar Named Desire is at the heart of the play's tragedy. The relationship initially provides hope for Blanche, with Mitch seeming to be a kind man and the two bonding over shared experiences and interests. However, it is quickly clear that Blanche's lying and reckless sexual behaviour will prove to be an issue in the relationship despite the audience being encouraged to sympathise with Blanche. The ultimate tragedy demonstrates that Blanche's lies did in fact result in the end of the relationship, but that Mitch also seemingly concealed the uncomfortable and violent aspects of his personality. Blanche's tragedy is all the more sad because her relationship with Mitch gave her hope but this is taken away.*

## Question 29

*Sweat*

Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* is a new text on the Edexcel A Level specification.

The play is set in one of the poorest cities in America – Reading, Pennsylvania – where a group of factory workers struggle to keep their present lives in balance, ignorant of the financial devastation looming in their near future. Based on her extensive interviews with residents of Reading, *it presents* friends and fellow workers pitted against each other by big business, and a topical reflection of the present and poignant decline of the American Dream.

It was great to see that some centres had adopted it for study this year. Candidates had clearly been well-prepared and could discuss the play's crafting and contexts with confidence.

Any centres considering studying this play with their students can find an Introductory Guide on the Edexcel English A Level site here:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/A%20Level/English%20Literature/2015/teaching-and-learning-materials/04-gce-eng-lit-sweat-guide.pdf>

### **The question asked about the significance of the past.**

This new play is studied in only a few centres, but candidates were clearly well-prepared and explored a range of approaches to the text, often focusing on the theme of nostalgia. There is a sense, however, that candidates are perhaps less confident about discussing dramatic structures here than with the classical drama texts in Section A. While there was appreciation of the emotional impact of the play, there were also quite a number of generalisations about context and dramatic craft.

Here is an example of a discriminating approach to the question, with a sound focus on Nottage's craft:

*Sweat is a play centred around the community of workers in Reading, who face the trials and tribulations brought on by the socio-economic happenings in America across a decade. The play constantly gives significance to the past, as analepsis used throughout to compare the lives of the characters in 2000 and 2008. The play shows how rising tensions socially move in parallel motion with time passing, therefore justifying how the characters constantly glorify the past. As Sweat was a platform for real stories from real people, Nottage carried out a series of interviews with civilians of Reading. She said they all began with a statement "Reading was" demonstrating how Reading felt like a city which was static, unable to move on, traumatised by the socio-economic mistreatment that they faced. This is certainly conveyed through the play as ultimately Nottage shows that the characters of the play's attachment to the past is what inhibits them.*

Nottage presents this through the motif of change versus stagnation and this is evident through the use of foil characters. Tracy and Cynthia, despite being best friends, juxtapose each other. Tracy's attachment to the past is made clear through her language. She uses a semantic field of stability, 'sturdy' 'firm' 'power' as she remembers the days that you were 'valued for working with your hands'. She takes on an eloquence which she lacks in her day-to-day dialogue, as if she is being transported back to the past, taking time to pause: 'a craftsman' and 'I remember when I was a kid'. Whereas Cynthia gives this same significance to the future as she constantly refers to her dream of being on a cruise in the Panama Canal. Cynthia shows herself to be more aspirational, wanting to make improvements while Tracy longs for the ease of the past. This stays consistent even in the 2008 scenes as Cynthia has chosen to move on from the events of the past by working a job as a nurse, still seeking to make money whilst Tracy becomes 'strung out', frozen in time and unable to move on. This is also demonstrated by the use of news headlines which stay consistent throughout the play. They begin with a public aspect such as 'the down Dow Jones industrial average falls by 778.6 points', then feature a private aspect which is local, such as 'Reading residents sample fresh apple cider'. Not only does setting this binary opposition of public versus private, macro versus micro help to contextualise how economic events have significance on the events that happen in the play, but it also demonstrates that there is constant change happening socio-economically while the characters of the play become consumed by the drama of the past within their community, demonstrating the stagnation of the town. A more resistant reading would be to say that it is also a reminder to the audience not to fall victim to this stagnation as we indulge in the entertainment of their attachment to the past, failing to question what is happening on a bigger scale.

Nottage presents the significance of the characters' attachment to the past through their monologues. Nottage describes these monologues as arias, an opportunity for the voiceless to find their voice and share their song. However most of the characters use this opportunity to emphasise the past. For example Brucie's monologue highlights the disparity caused by the generational shift when exploring his past in his monologues: 'the hustle man, my pop didn't go through this shit'. He outlines the hard work of his father as if he is telling a story, reducing his journey to work in a few lines as 'he packed a razor and a Bible and headed north'. In relaying the past, even for Brucie who Nottage characterises as the realist of the play, the truth becomes distorted and glorified, ignoring the fact that there were still trials and tribulations that would have been faced. Because of this attachment to his glorified version of the past, Brucie finds it hard to move on from his position of stagnation, often repeating 'I'm trying'. This is also evident in Jessie's monologue, as we see her in a new light when she relays the past. When referencing the naivete of her youth, she often started her dialogue with 'God' demonstrating how she gets excited by the recount of her stories. This contradicts the angry drunk which she portrayed in scene 1, suggesting that the characters become changed when they talk about the past, almost hypnotised by nostalgia.

However, it could be argued that attachment to the past comforts the characters. This is clear in act two when the tension between Cynthia and Tracy reaches a climax. Tracy, who once referred to Cynthia as 'babe' calls her a 'fucking traitor' and stage directions such as (shouts) and (shouts back) are used. But suddenly the tension becomes slightly diffused, as Tracy recalls the day they went to Atlantic City. She glorifies the excitement and abundance of the past by listing 'champagne, buffet, seafood fountain' and the pair stop shouting and indulge in the memory. We realise here that Nottage uses the character of Tracy to demonstrate how the past is a comfort as she feels separated from the 'worn in' familiarity of the bar. Thus through the ending Nottage demonstrates how addressing the past can also comfort the characters. In scene 7 the language used by Chris and Jason strongly contrasts Scene 1. The motif of entrapment through the metaphor of 'barbed wire' is contradicted by the motif of motion through the metaphor of 'rivers' and 'bridges' when speaking about the consequence of events from the past, connoting hope and movement. This suggests that in order to move on you have to face the realities of the past.

Overall, the significance of the characters' attachment to the past is in relation to the fact that the American Dream seemed more attainable back then. The past sections evoke a juvenile naivety, as the character shared their dreams of social mobility, for example Cynthia's dream of promotion or Chris's dream of becoming a teacher. Nottage wanted to emphasise how this attachment to the past is what caused voters to be so susceptible to political campaigns promising to reinstate the hope of the past like Trump's 'Make America Great Again' cautioning the audience to not be vulnerable to this indoctrination. As Stan says - being the voice of reason - 'nostalgia is a disease' and Nottage wants to emphasise the importance of not succumbing to it; the very last stage directions (unable to conjure words just yet) evoke hope and give power to the future as she implies that there will be a time when we can move on.

## Question 30

*Sweat*

### The question asked about betrayal.

Few responses were seen on this question. Candidates appeared to struggle to expand on the topic of 'betrayal' beyond the falling-out between the friends in the bar. Better approaches looked at the play's wider social and political contexts and considered the betrayal of the working class by capitalism.

Here is an example of one such approach:

*Nottage's 'Sweat' borrows from tragic conventions as her play depicts how a community can crumble as individuals are self-centred. Arthur Miller reclaims tragedy, saying it is no fit only for kings, but to represent the tragedy of common humanity. In Reading, characters are constantly trying to assert themselves in a society that is ultimately rigged against them. Betrayal in 'Sweat' is the fatal flaw of common humanity, signifying the value of community and togetherness. But, as characters become disillusioned, acts of betrayal occur as they all race towards the American Dream. Nottage's drama intends to confront uncomfortable topics like betrayal in order to challenge the audience on their own acts of betrayal. Ultimately, Nottage presents the importance of community amongst a suffering Rust Belt, ruptured by betrayal.*

*Nottage presents how betrayal of work can leave a community feeling futile. She sets 'Sweat' against the backdrop of the betrayal of workers by their employer. Olsted's is a shared experience among the community. They bond over the shared history by joining a 'union'. As Cynthia expresses, she 'knew she'd accomplished something [she] was set'. It is clear that being in a union made her proud and confident in her life. Nottage, as a form of activism, refused to put her play on show in big metropolitan locations. She solely focussed on the importance of performing 'Sweat' to make those who shared this experience feel heard. Therefore, her intended audience would empathise with this excited feeling of being part of this unity. However, betrayal seeps into this as the American government introduced the NAFTA whereby plants looked to employ cheaper labour of immigrant, mindlessly replacing the loyal workers. It is made evident that the community becomes futile through the character of Stan. He acts as a sounding board as he invites characters to express their problems and emotions. Brucie opens up to Stan: 'To be honest ...I don't know what to do'. It's clear that work gives the people of Reading a sense of identity and without it, they cannot find hope. Nottage confronts the illusion of the American Dream, where characters believe in the possibility of upward mobility. Work is their ideal ticket to this American Dream, but with its betrayal, they are left futile...*

## Question 31

*Waiting for Godot*

### **The question asked about the presentation of Lucky.**

The majority of candidates chose this question, most exploring Lucky as a symbol of oppression. Many responses focused on his monologue – but very few attempted any analysis of it. There was some exploration of his relationship with Pozzo as a critique of capitalism and a few considered Lucky as Beckett's mouthpiece.

### **Examiner comments:**

'Weaker candidates were spending too much time on Beckett himself or on Sontag's Sarajevo production, and not enough time on the text itself.'

'Better answers explored the ambiguities of Beckett's darkly humoured presentation of this character, not least through the irony of his name.'

Here is an opening to a sound Level 4 response:

*Having lived through times of repression such as the French resistance, the rise of the Nazis and World War Two this post-war disillusionment brandishes its mark powerfully on Beckett's plays. Lucky is the embodiment of a lack of free will made evident by his complex relationship with Pozzo, as well as contrastingly functioning as a comical sphere.*

*The characterization of Lucky is compelling, as he serves to demonstrate the sheer lack of free will the human condition holds. Having grown up as an Irish Protestant minority in a largely Catholic area, Beckett's search for one's identity and his true self was often fractured. This broken heritage often left a mark on his work and is most notably depicted through Lucky. When Lucky first appears on stage, he is being ordered around like a slave by Pozzo. The monosyllabic imperatives such as, 'basket!' which is repeated a countless number of times, coupled with the image of Lucky with a rope round his neck, questions his free will. Vladimir and Estragon's dialogue depicts his restraint by saying, 'It's the rope... it's the rubbing... it's the knot... the chafing'. The anaphora of 'the' and the mirrored syntax powerfully, through structure, convey the repressive nature Lucky is locked under. The imagery of 'knot' has dark allusions to struggle and futility through its hoisted imagery, which often reflects Beckett's own life and the back and forth pendulum like imagery is successful in evoking the endless restraint Lucky will be forced to endure. Moreover, further enhancing this slave-like repressive nature is the names Lucky is called. Pozzo calls him 'Pig!' multiple times. This is ambiguous as it can be assumed that Beckett uses this as an insult or Lucky's human form is questioned. This double meaning is legitimised by Pozzo himself saying, 'I am perhaps not particularly human'. The use of 'perhaps' and 'particularly' are effective in fostering confusion as well as uncertainty which are powerful in Beckett's plays. Thus, Lucky serves as a powerful mechanism for Beckett to represent the fate a state of humanity as he is in a slave-master dynamic...*

## Question 32

*Waiting for Godot*

### **The question asked about the use of ritual.**

Not many candidates answered this question, but those who did clearly had a firm grasp of the text and the means by which Beckett uses ritual to various ends in the play. There were some excellent, conceptual responses. Here is an example of one such:

*Samuel Beckett's absurdist play, 'Waiting for Godot' uses ritual to highlight the futility of human existence, as the characters of Vladimir and Estragon serve as everyman and thus their repeated use of ritual suggests human action is useless in a purposeless world. Due to the play's genre of tragicomedy, Beckett chooses to portray both the comical and tragic elements of rituals, as the audience may find themselves laughing at the characters and their rituals only then to reflect on their own ritualistic behaviour in life.*

*Beckett presents rituals and uses them for the purpose of slapstick comedy, perhaps to lure the audience into a false sense of security due to their overtly humorous nature. The opening of the play begins with Estragon 'trying to take off his boot' and failing, leading to the humorous image of him pulling 'at it with both hands, panting'. The use of this action as an exposition in the play immediately establishes the key theme of suffering, as Estragon is evidently in pain and unable to remove his boot. Furthermore, there is a sense of laughing at such physicality, implying that Beckett is allowing the audience to laugh at their pain. The use of ritual truly begins once Vladimir and Estragon begin to peer into their hats: 'inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again'. Hats arguably symbolise intelligence in the play, as Lucky can only think once his hat is on, for example. However, on the other hand, the ritual of examining and wearing this hat is likely to be entirely pointless and absurd, thus creating a comical moment in which the audience can laugh at the ritual's overt absurdist nature. This is similarly shown through the beginning of Act Two in which Vladimir 'halts extreme right (of the stage) gazes into distance, extreme left gazes into distance'. This action is incredibly futile, as his 'gazing' and 'halting' lead to no avail or conclusion, and rather paint a similar picture for the audience as the beginning of Act One, where the men simply enact rituals and repeated behaviours perhaps for the sake of action. Therefore, Beckett seems to be using rituals to provide a sense of slapstick comedy, perhaps inspired by clowns and the use of rituals to entertain.*

*Vladimir and Estragon are clownish figures, as they are clumsy and pitiable in both appearance and action. However, they also resemble clowns' desperation to understand and master the world around them, despite their inability to do so. Therefore, even when Beckett chooses to use slapstick comedy as a means of honouring the partially comic genre, he also could be providing the audience with a dark undertone with these rituals of how the men have to perform them in order to be entertaining, not only for the audience but for each other, which the clown figure may similarly struggle with.*

Beckett also uses ritual as a means of waiting and passing time for the men, which is the central crux of not only the play but their existence. For example, Vladimir and Estragon often describe their futile rituals and interactions as a sort of tennis match in which they pass the ball between one another; they nonsensically describe how the leaves 'make a noise like wings' leading to stichomythic dialogue in which these suggest other nouns they could use as a comparison ('leaves', send and then 'leaves' again). This ritual of repeating a vague description has no purpose and leads to no conclusion, but rather simply 'passes the time' as both men repeat to one another throughout the play. They therefore seem to be comforted by rituals, as the eternal and nondescript action of waiting is able to be broken down into time-filling activities that allow such an activity to pass more quickly. However, as Vladimir ascertains, 'habit is a great deadener'. This could suggest that the use of habitual rituals are able to increase the speed of time's inevitable passing, but 'deadens' the men as it does so due to its futility and pointlessness. Throughout the play, the men begin to take action as a response to the futility of their existence, such as suggesting 'Let's go', but ultimately remind themselves they cannot leave as they are waiting for the ambiguous figure of Godot. This entrapment to a singular place despite no central authority (due to Godot's absence) is a postmodernist element of the play, reminding the audience of the absurdity of the men's passive waiting behaviour. Moreover, Martin Esslin in his essay 'The Theatre of the Absurd' outlines a lack of progress as a key element of absurdist works, which is displayed through Vladimir and Estragon's use of rituals that lead to no progress, only time passing (which it would inevitably do regardless). Therefore, Vladimir and Estragon seem to perform routines and rituals for the sole purpose of making their only action in the play of waiting more bearable, reflecting the human condition according to the nihilist argument that living is simply waiting for death in a world with no truth, morality, value or meaning.

Moreover, Beckett uses rituals to reflect the futility of human interaction and connection in a world devoid of meaning. For example, when Pozzo and Lucky enter in Act One of the play, Pozzo performs a routine in which he orders Lucky to complete meaningless tasks. The repeated use of imperatives such as 'Up pig!' portrays this ritual as incredibly cruel, but additionally alienating. Despite the fact that Pozzo and Lucky are interacting in this ritual, Lucky is completely alone and disenfranchised, which arguably Pozzo is too. This is reflected in Pozzo's desperation to be heard such as when he asks, 'Is everybody listening? Is everybody ready', to ensure he is being acknowledged. However, once Pozzo and Lucky exit the stage in Act One, even their goodbye to Vladimir and Estragon is ritualistic, such as repeating the phrase 'Adieu'. This ritual depicts the performative nature of the interaction between the characters, perhaps reflecting that all human interaction is essentially ineffective. And yet, the characters choose to continue to use rituals in order to have interactions and form relationships. Albert Camus would have argued that this is the correct method of living, as he suggested Sisyphus from the Myth of Sisyphus was an ideal hero for bearing the elusive feeling of absurdity, rather than killing himself as a result of his eternal dilemma of being condemned to roll a rock up a mountain only to see it roll down the other side. Therefore, the characters' employment of rituals as an attempt to interact with one another may be futile, but should not necessarily be condemned as they decide to use rituals to make connections regardless of whether they do.

*In conclusion Beckett makes use of rituals in 'Waiting for Godot' by showing the futility of human existence through displaying their meaningless nature, suggesting humanity also is ritualistic in its behaviour in a world devoid of meaning.*

## Paper Summary

Based on their performance on this paper, candidates are offered the following advice.

### Section A

- **Assessment Objective 1: Shaping an Argument.** Effective paragraphing is crucial for readability and is a hallmark of well-structured arguments, which typically score higher marks. Stronger responses clearly outline their approach at the beginning, avoiding a meandering style. These answers tend to reject overly simplistic interpretations, adding layers of complexity to their analysis, which is characteristic of top-band responses. In contrast, mid-range answers often use qualifiers like "arguably" without presenting genuine alternative readings, or describe elements as "skilful" without demonstrating why. Weaker responses tend to list features or examples and attempt to derive an argument from them, whereas stronger responses start with an argument and use examples to support it.
- **Assessment Objective 2: The Writer's Craft.** Many candidates neglect the dramatic nature of the texts, often failing to consider stagecraft. There is a tendency to assert Shakespeare's intentions directly rather than using tentative language. Understanding of the writer's craft is frequently confined to word-level analysis, which shows a limited appreciation of the texts as plays. This suggests a need for deeper engagement with how Shakespeare's techniques contribute to the overall dramatic effect.
- **Assessment Objective 3: Contexts.** While most candidates incorporate context, their treatment is often simplistic, such as general statements about the oppression of Elizabethan women. Although contextual placement is common, many comments are overly generalized, particularly regarding gender roles. Sometimes, context is irrelevant or overly detailed, such as biographical information about Shakespeare or extended summaries of source materials. There is also a tendency to inappropriately apply Freudian concepts, which can detract from literary analysis.
- **Assessment Objective 5: Critical Reception.** The best responses seamlessly integrate critical perspectives throughout their essays. Generic feminist or Marxist perspectives are generally unhelpful. Mid-range answers often list critics' views in a mechanical way, while stronger responses use critics to support or challenge their arguments, enhancing fluency and sophistication. Some candidates misuse critical quotations, either by shoehorning them in without relevance or failing to engage with them meaningfully. High-scoring responses, however, thoughtfully incorporate a range of critical views, linking them directly to specific parts of the text and using them to deepen their analysis.

## Section B

- **Assessment Objective 1: Shaping an Argument.** Many candidates struggled with timing, particularly in Section B, leading to numerous unfinished answers. A common issue was the unnecessary inclusion of AO5, which did not contribute to higher marks and detracted from time that could be better spent revising the text. The key barrier to achieving Level 4 was the inability to construct a coherent argument and provide a meaningful personal response regarding the writers' intentions with the themes or devices in question. Time management issues resulted in many brief responses. While speculative language like "perhaps" and "arguably" was often used, it did not always lead to nuanced interpretations, suggesting that these phrases were taught as stock phrases rather than tools for deeper analysis.
- **Assessment Objective 2: The Writer's Craft.** Successful responses focused on stagecraft and considered the play as a drama rather than a novel, but many candidates failed to recognize this distinction, discussing the text as if it were a novel and addressing reader response instead of audience reaction. However, responses now rarely involve mere feature-spotting and candidates often communicated thoughtful ideas about characterisation. However, some analyses leaned too heavily on psychoanalysis rather than viewing the text as a construct. It was impressive when candidates could expand from character presentation to speculate on the dramatist's broader aims.
- **Assessment Objective 3: Contexts.** Generally, AO3 was handled well in Section B responses. Candidates are clearly very well prepared on context for the plays they are studying. The best answers, particularly to the *Streetcar* questions, demonstrated strong knowledge of the historical context, such as the tension between the 'Old South' and 'New South', and effectively embedded this context in their essays. Less successful essays made generalized comments and awkwardly introduced the concept of the 'Southern Belle'.

## **Grade boundaries**

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/results-certification/grade-boundaries.html>

