

GCSE (9-1)

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

J352

For first teaching in 2015

J352/02 Summer 2024 series

Contents

Introduction	3
Paper 2 series overview	4
Section A overview	5
Question 1 (a)	6
Question 1 (b)	7
Question 2 (a)	8
Question 2 (b)	10
Question 3 (a)	11
Question 3 (b)	12
Section B overview	13
Question 4	14
Question 5*	17
Question 6*	18
Question 7*	19
Question 8*	20
Question 9*	21
Question 10*	22
Copyright information	23

Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from OCR.

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Paper 2 series overview

The Poetry and Shakespeare paper assesses candidates' knowledge and understanding of the anthology poems in their chosen cluster and Shakespeare play. To do well on this paper, candidates need to know their texts and be confident in using textual references to support their ideas. They should be given regular opportunities to practise identifying the focus of each question, planning and writing responses under timed conditions. In Section A, Part A, candidates read unseen texts, swiftly identifying key ideas and techniques with which to make connections with the given anthology poem. In Part B of Section A, they require sufficient knowledge of their chosen anthology poem to incorporate AO2 analysis and support their ideas with relevant textual references. In Section B, Shakespeare, their knowledge of context must be relevant to the question, rather than being bolted on, and they need to refer to at least two moments in the play, one of which will be the extract where that option is chosen.

Examiners continue to report a significant number of scripts which are difficult to decipher, even when the scanned script is magnified. Where candidates are allowed to type their response, these scripts need careful labelling, appropriate font size, spacing and margins for ease of marking. This year, there were more typed scripts which were extremely long, in some cases 15–17 sides, where the quality was compromised by quantity. Some of these responses were very repetitive, with a wide range of textual references and commentaries being used to make the same points.

The new poems in each of the clusters had been well received by centres, and candidates chose them for Section A, Part B and were confident in their analysis of them in Section A, Part A where this was relevant to the question. There were very few candidates who chose a poem from the 2023 anthology in error.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> showed clear knowledge and understanding of the anthology poems and Shakespeare plays engaged confidently with unseen poems, making relevant comparisons in a structured response made analytical comments on language, form and structure, showing understanding of the genres of poetry and drama wrote detailed personal responses, focusing on the wording of the task and, using relevant textual references, made commentary on the context of Shakespeare's plays relevant to the question. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reproduced imperfectly understood interpretations of the anthology poems and Shakespeare plays made limited or no links with the unseen texts, often assuming the poets' ideas were the same explained the meaning of selected references or made generalised comments about techniques either repeated the wording of the task so that it became intrusive or ignored it entirely explained some aspects of context without direct link to the question.

Section A overview

The questions posed the candidates an appropriate level of challenge, regardless of the cluster chosen. They were confident with their understanding of the new poems, with 'Songs for the People' enabling candidates to perform to their potential across the levels. Many chose 'Flirtation' (Love and Relationships), 'Thirteen' and 'We Lived Happily during the War' (Conflict) and 'Equilibrium' (Youth and Age) as their choice for Section A, Part B. The unseen texts were of appropriate length and complexity and every candidate found something to say. In many cases, they engaged in a more focused and analytical way with the unseen than the taught text as they did not feel the need to tell the examiner everything they knew, which often happens with the anthology poems. Rubric infringements in Part B were very rare. Fewer candidates this year chose a poem from a different cluster in Part B than Part A, although there were a minority who selected a poem that had been removed from this year's anthology. Less successful responses again came from candidates who tried to compare Part A texts with their chosen poem. Comparison is not required in Part B and candidates must write on a different poem, of their choice, from the given anthology text in Part A.

In general, Part A of this section was answered in more detail and at more length than Part B. Part B could be a little brief, and it felt that timings had sometimes been forgotten in the pressure of the exam. Two poems offered more potential for comment than one and the opportunity to compare yielded a more analytical approach. In Part A, the more successful responses identified a comparative point, and then explored the ways the poets created and conveyed these similar, or different ideas within their poems. Most candidates used comparative discourse markers to structure their responses. This allows for more interwoven comparison than the approach of looking at the poems separately with some comparative points in the introduction and conclusion. Less successful responses made use of connectives such as similarly or likewise where the following point or chosen technique bore no relation to the structural logic suggested by the candidate.

Assessment for learning



Comparison is a key skill for Section A Part A, and at Levels 5 and 6, a sustained (and sustained, interwoven) comparison is required. Teachers should model effective ways of writing comparative paragraphs with their students, adopting an 'I do, we do, you do' approach. For some students, a chart is a swift way to plan a comparative response. Using an unseen text, without teaching it, as a starter to a lesson can help students to swiftly unpack its meaning, identify some of the writer's methods and choose an anthology poem to link it with. This can lead to a 5-minute planning exercise to help candidates cope with the pressure of constructing essays under timed conditions.

Candidates need to be aware that the unseen poem will not necessarily take the same approach and viewpoint to the anthology poem. Some assumed that 'Holy Thursday' and 'Lunch' provided the same views of old people and missed the differences, even though they were all able to a degree to comment on differences, for example, in the imagery, form and structure. Less successful responses made a point, followed by an assertion that this was relevant to the demands of the question even when this was not the case. However, an area of improvement from last year seemed to be in the quality of comments on the writer's use of language where the emphasis was on effect rather than feature spotting.

The broadening out of the question for Part B gave candidates a wide choice of their prepared anthology texts. More successful responses showed signs of planning, with the candidate establishing a thesis, the message that the poet is communicating, before exploring the methods in which they do so. AO1 and AO2 are assessed in Part B. Where responses lacked textual support or misquoted references, it was difficult to achieve the higher-level band criteria, particularly in AO2 analysis of language, form and structure.

Question 1 (a)

1 Love and Relationships

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

(a) Compare the ways in which these poems present how a person feels about themselves.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Most candidates showed understanding of the ways in which the speakers show a desire for self-love. They commented on the nature and the extent of how the personae in the poems feel about themselves. They identified the sense of delight and contentment in the relationship with oneself, and a feeling that this has come relatively late in life and after unsuccessfully looking for fulfilment with a partner. Most candidates could see that both poets use words and phrases linked by a sense of contentment, self-discovery and excitement. Better responses explored the ways in which both poems are clearly structured to represent the recognition of self-knowledge and a sense of happiness with the quality of the life they have lived. They developed some of the key images from the poems, such as the taking down of the letters to signal a need to move on from failure with relationships. They explored the extended metaphor of feasting to signal a renewed enjoyment of life and 'Give bread. Give wine' was often seen in terms of religious faith. Many candidates commented on how the speaker in 'Love After Love' uses the future tense to create a sense of certainty that they will come to love themselves, using imperatives to command actions which will restore dignity. While there was some uncertainty about the reference to the 'stranger', many saw this as being the speaker's hidden self or the one who had been lost in an unsuccessful relationship.

Candidates made some very effective comparisons with the unseen text, 'Bride', exploring the extended metaphor of being their own bride. While there were differing explanations of the speaker's marital status, some seeing 'married less/to the man than to the woman' as a general rejection of being committed to a partner rather than a failed relationship, candidates supported their interpretation with textual references. Many candidates compared the form and structure of the poems, analysing the differing effects created by the poets' use of caesura and enjambment. The use of a mirror in both poems was seen to reflect how the speakers now view themselves.

Question 1 (b)

(b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents a satisfying relationship.

[20]

Most responses to this question took advantage of the broad scope of the satisfying nature of a relationship. Those candidates who wrote more about a relationship that was satisfactory were not disadvantaged. Candidates responded on a broad range of texts, with popular choices including 'Flirtation', 'Morning Song', 'Lullaby', 'Bright Star' and 'In Paris with You'. 'Flirtation' was a particularly apt choice with candidates recognising how the language contributes to the writer's intended effects: one commented perceptively, 'The stanzas are written in couplets, perhaps detailing how each journey is taken together, and suggests how they are inseparable from one another'. The verb 'walking' suggests a leisurely activity, which is carried out by choice for relaxation, emphasising the satisfaction and room for discovery the relationship brings. Of the candidates who chose this poem, all showed good understanding. The imagery of the orange, unpeeled was commented on by all, and explained as representing a 'sweet and refreshing' new relationship, or as symbolising the couple peeling back their own layers to 'see what is on the inside'. The wedgwood plate was mostly seen as being something of high value but also fragile, 'easily breakable' like a new relationship. Several also discussed the poem's structure as representing two people becoming one by the end, supported by the final single line, and all understood the salt to represent stars but none explored this metaphor further. The responses to 'Lullaby' showed secure understanding and argued that the poem contains two satisfying relationships in the form of the deceased parents and the sisters supporting each other. The love of the parents was seen as powerful enough to move the whole earth and last beyond death, with enjambment suggesting their 'everlasting love'. The mention of crooked smile and mole suggested not only the sisters' memory of their parents, but the parents' 'love and accept[ance of] each other despite imperfections'. Several candidates who chose 'In Paris with You' argued that this poem fitted the task as it shows a relationship in which the speaker is 'satisfied for now', or at least sexually satisfied, or had in fact found love again through a supposition that both people were 'broken souls' finding comfort in each other. Several students saw the speaker's reluctance to leave the sleazy room as being so satisfied with his love(r) that he simply wants to be with them, wherever they are, rather than exploring Paris.

Question 2 (a)

2 Conflict

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

(a) Compare how these poems present a demand for a conflict to end.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Most candidates were confident in decoding the unseen and used their knowledge of a new anthology poem to construct an argument about the ways in which both speakers demand an end to conflict. It is worth reminding centres that the section is Conflict rather than War, as some candidates tried to discuss both taught and unseen poems as a demand for war to be ended. Most candidates were able to comment on the central shared concepts of a sense of urgency. They explored the use of the first-person pronoun with its suggestions around depth of feeling and personal engagement, the idea that conflict leads to physical war between countries and the identifiable and empathetic voice in both texts. Most candidates were able to see the key differences: the call in Harper being directed at the universality of human life and people set against Hughes's sense of the need to fight racial profiling; Harper's distanced and observational sense of conflict set against Hughes's closely invested and involved feeling of direct oppression. Many candidates linked the joyful call to song in the taught poem with the presence of a wished-for light in the unseen.

Candidates who didn't see the racial messages of the unseen weren't disadvantaged, and often commented to good purpose on possible resonances and associations of the word black. The wall of oppression was related by one student to the Berlin Wall, while some understood racial segregation as informed by black face, although one candidate read black face to suggest Hughes as the covert leader of a military operation or revolution (comrades). Most candidates commented on Harper's inclusion of all types of people to suggest that everyone is affected and were able to draw some links between the structure and Harper's intent of a song. Only a few students attempted to tackle 'Girdle the world with peace', however of these, only one interpreted this as 'hugging the world', while several related girdle to babies (either as some kind of rocking action, with no further explanation of relevance, or relating this to breastfeeding, with the world being 'nurtured back to health'). As there is no relation between any definition of girdle and babies/motherhood/child-rearing in OED, these candidates are commended for trying to apply this misunderstanding appropriately; however, more meaningful interpretations of surrounding, supporting (inferred by corset), or confining and restricting the world to peace are appropriate.

Some potentially higher-level responses would benefit from being more specific about how devices create specific effects as they tended simply to assert that the structural devices created the meaning they had identified in the poem. An example of effective commentary was that in 'Songs for the People', the regular rhyme scheme creates a sense of musicality and order which counteracts the chaos and disorder of conflict.' Another stated that the sibilance in 'to soothe all its sorrow/Till war and crime shall cease' is mimetic of the soothing of the world to counter the 'jangle' from earlier in the poem.

Exemplar 1

One of the main reasons that both Harper and Hughes ~~call~~ ~~upon~~ demand for an end to conflict is because they both present ~~the~~ conflict as something that blinds people to the joys and beauty of life. ~~Indeed, both poets want~~ ~~people to look past conflict and celebrate life.~~ Yet, this is also presented differently across both poems. In Harper's poem, there is a sense of hope and optimism - Harper is keen on the power of her 'songs for the people' to show the wonders of life to people, allowing them to step away from conflict. ~~However, in Hughes' poem,~~ Hughes is much more pessimistic and paints an almost dystopian world in which conflict deprives people of joy.

This exemplar demonstrates sustained, interwoven comparison of the poems.

Question 2 (b)

(b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents the wish for an end to conflict.

[20]

It was very encouraging this year to see that as well as the expected choice of the Douglas, the Agard and the Dharker, this question elicited responses on texts that have not been automatic or popular choices to write about in previous years ('There's a Certain Slant of Light' and 'The Destruction of Sennacharib') along with the new poems, such as 'Thirteen'. Using the Byron certainly gave candidates ready access to the possibilities of writing successfully about metrical form as well as structure. There was a tendency in this question for some candidates to spend precious time writing an extended context introduction, which is not required. Most candidates grasped the central idea of 'Flag', but only the strongest candidates were able to analyse the language, form and structure in a complex enough way to achieve at the higher levels. Candidates showed understanding of 'Lament' although this often became an explanation of the facts behind the imagery rather than an examination of language. Most also were able to comment to some degree on the extensive listing used by Clarke to highlight the extent of the damage. Many responses commented on the gradual zooming-out of perspective, progressing from a lone turtle to the earth and the sun, with some higher-level candidates commenting on the repetition of sun and ocean to highlight how damage to these through conflict presents a threat to the planet's very survival. Candidates engaged thoughtfully with the racial prejudice in 'Thirteen', with most exploring the supernova image and commenting on the sense of violation of a young child's right to walk home safely, without being 'cornered' by police. Many commented on the speaker's realisation of the injustice in life, as he reflects on the visit of the police to his school and understands how the supernova metaphor applies to his life.

Exemplar 2

In Gillian Clarke's 'Lament', she presents her wish for an end to conflict primarily through the threat of further environmental degradation and loss of life if her wishes are not met. Furthermore, she paints a picture of an apocalyptic, dystopian world which we could very soon be living in if ~~we do not~~ Clarke's demands to put an end to conflict are not met.

Last year's report gave an example of an effective introduction to an essay. Here the candidate neatly summarises the writer's intentions in *Lament*, maintaining a direct focus on the question and avoiding simply repeating material already covered.

Question 3 (a)

3 Youth and Age

Read the two poems below and then answer **both part (a) and part (b)**.

You should spend about 45 minutes on part (a) and 30 minutes on part (b).

(a) Compare how these two poems present contrasts between young people and old people.

You should consider:

- ideas and attitudes in each poem
- tone and atmosphere in each poem
- the effects of the language and structure used.

[20]

Although this was the least popular cluster, there were some excellent responses, showing that candidates had responded to 'Holy Thursday' and engaged appropriately with the unseen. The general idea that in both poems there was a young person's perspective and a contrasting older person's perspective was grasped by nearly every candidate; as was how both poems deliver a clear verdict on what the response of the reader should be and where our sympathies are meant to lie: in the Blake, with the innocent flowers; in the Kramer with the old lady in the light of the judgemental line, 'Are these the only words each day.....?' Candidates who read the poem with the old lady being the waitress grown up were still able to make relevant comments about the experiences of young and old.

Most candidates showed understanding of Blake's critical view of the control exerted by the 'grey-headed beadles' who are literally and metaphorically seated below the children. Very few commented on his injunction at the end to 'cherish pity' or recognised the biting sarcasm in his description of the 'wise guardians' all of which portray old people in a negative light. While many explored the simile 'wands as white as snow' as indicating physical chastisement of the young, seeing snow as cold and chilling, a few mistakenly interpreted it as innocence. Candidates gave contrasting interpretations of the old lady in 'Lunch', some finding her a rather menacing or unnerving figure, potentially struggling with a mental disorder and others seeing in her the dignity she had preserved in her 'height and bearing'. Both interpretations drew on the harsh extended metaphor of her bones and beauty, many referring to the alliterative 'b' sound.

Virtually all responses commented on the metaphors of flowers, lambs and angels as reflecting the innocence of the young, many picking out the power of their voices and primary colours of their clothing. The comparison with 'Lunch' often saw the young, represented by the waitress, as reflected in the inconsequential nature of her dialogue showing 'slight' concern for the well-being of the old lady,

Many candidates explored the differences between the poems' form and structure, most stating that Blake's use of rhyming couplets showed the control over the children. The strongest considered how this reflected Blake's views of society at the time, with the rich and powerful – represented by the church and monarchy – determined to keep the poor in their place. Some mentioned the half rhymes of 'town/own' and 'song/among' as subtle challenges to this control. Candidates contrasted this structure with Kramer's triplets, often suggesting that the way they become shorter indicates the decreasing level of concern for the old lady's welfare.

The strongest responses identified the façade of caring between the generations and the challenge posed by each writer, from Kramer's questioning 'Are these the only words each day' to Blake's demand to 'cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door'.

Question 3 (b)

(b) Explore in detail **one** other poem from your anthology which presents differences between youth and age. **[20]**

Candidates found no difficulty in selecting a poem which fitted a question that is at the heart of this cluster. The new text, 'Equilibrium' was very popular, exploring the poet's memories of her brother's birth and naming ceremony as marking the stages of her grandfather's decline. Candidates understood the links between birth and death, the start and end of life, that are explored in this poem, with most commenting on the metaphor of the stopwatches which mark the way her grandfather's life is ticking away. A few responses dealt with the nostalgic feelings Bronte presents about being young, with its contrasts between a time when 'heart and soul were free' and an adult life of 'toil and strife.' Most of these referred to the central metaphor of the bluebell as symbolic of innocence. A minority of candidates chose 'Baby Song', and engaged thoughtfully with the perspective of the baby as it confronts the less welcoming world beyond the womb.

Section B overview

Most candidates showed a strong sense of engagement with their chosen play. There were very few instances of candidates unable to comment on a second moment to accompany the extract-based question or to offer two moments for the discursive question. Successful responses demonstrated understanding of dramatic conventions, audience response and, in some cases, knowledge of alternative contemporary presentations. More successful candidates put forward more than one interpretation of the play before concluding as to which interpretation they found most convincing. This was particularly noticeable in the discussion of Lady Macbeth and whether she is deserving of sympathy and considerations of whether Shylock is a domineering, or just protective, father. Many candidates engaged in intelligent and meaningful discussion of themes such as fate, horror, gender relations and prejudice. The strongest linked these concepts to specific incidents or quotations. Context comments often also sprang naturally from such discussion although at the weaker end, there was still an element of tacking on of context as an afterthought with very general, sometimes slightly confused comments about the patriarchy, the church and the divine right of kings.

Less successful responses tried to include obviously pre-prepared material, often when this had been relevant to questions from previous series. For example, some candidates went off on a tangent about ambition in *Macbeth* despite its limited direct relevance to a question on horror. They are reminded that the mark scheme assesses their 'personal response to **both** text and task'. The weakest responses resorted to a narrative retelling of the plot with quotations placed randomly in the essay with very little relevance to the point being discussed. Examiners noted that there is still little evidence of planning and this disadvantaged even the most knowledgeable candidates who lost control of their line of argument. These responses lacked a coherent structure, with paragraphs starting 'another way in which Shakespeare presents fate/Shylock's relationship with his family etc' without a connection to the previous point. Discursive questions that ask, 'How far do you agree?' elicited responses that moved between agreeing and disagreeing in a seemingly random manner. Candidates would benefit from being taught how to plan their ideas; quality not quantity is the hallmark of the highest-level responses.

Quotation was largely well-handled and, outside the extract, mostly well-recalled. Although there were fewer responses to this question, Question 9 tended to generate the best-quoted responses. There was a sense that some strong candidates had been exploring the Prologue in *Romeo and Juliet* and Lady Macbeth's speeches in a practical dramatic context and had an excellent recall of the text. In this series, there were fewer problems in embedding quotations. Some candidates still lost control of syntax, with overzealous use of square brackets to correct pronouns, verb tenses, etc, rather than adapting their own phrasing around the reference. Trains of thought were often hard to follow as a result. Very few students understood the convention of using forward slashes to indicate new lines – this was also an issue with poetry responses. Candidates are not penalised for misquoting, especially where the reference can still be recognised and supports their argument, however some went on to analyse language which was not Shakespeare's own and could therefore not be given.

Terminology was accurately used to evaluate the ways in which Shakespeare creates meanings and effect with most common terms employed effectively at all levels. Many candidates employed AO2 analysis of language, form and structure as confidently in their chosen moments in the rest of the play as in the extract, and this was particularly evident in the discursive questions. There remain some misunderstandings surrounding the use of tricolons with any three phrases separated by commas offered up as examples of such, even if the context of the full quotation negated this. Several candidates struggled to comment on blank verse accurately, and there is still some confusion about rhyming couplets and the ways in which Shakespeare uses them.

Question 4

4* Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents fate in this tragedy. Refer to this extract which is the Prologue and elsewhere in the play. [40]

Most candidates showed clear understanding of the function of the Prologue in setting out for the audience the ways in which fate and chance shape the lives of Romeo and Juliet, leading directly to their deaths at the end of the play. The strongest showed a grasp of the sonnet form of the Prologue and the dramatic structure of *Romeo and Juliet*, making confident connections to well-selected moments elsewhere in the play. While many stated that the action of the play is determined from the start, some analysed 'misadventur'd piteous overthrows' with varying degrees of success. The majority appreciated how the feud could only have been ended with the deaths of the two lovers, commented confidently on 'star-crossed' and 'fatal loins' with a number also exploring the reference to 'civil blood' making 'civil hands unclean.' Some responses were confused by the way the Chorus speaks directly to the audience at the end of the Prologue, asking them to pay careful attention to the events that the play will unfold.

Most candidates moved beyond the extract to consider other moments in the play, with many referencing the first meeting of Romeo and Juliet in Act 1 Scene 5, with Juliet's, 'My grave is like to be my wedding bed', Romeo's cry 'O, I am fortune's fool' in Act 3 Scene 1 and the death of the lovers in the final scenes of the play to show the hold fate has over the play. Successful responses saw the significance of the extract as a pivotal scene and how Romeo and Juliet's 'death-marked love' foreshadows the final act. Candidates generally started their response by exploring the extract, the strongest returned to it as they referred to moments elsewhere in the play, genuinely creating links. They often evaluated the end of the play and how each family faced their own despair in losing their children, but also the sense of hope – as referenced in the Prologue – that the feud would now be over.

A number of responses also questioned the extent to which characters were entirely governed by fate, referring to Juliet disobeying her father's wish for her to marry Paris, Friar Lawrence's warning, 'These violent delights have violent ends' and Romeo's challenge 'I defy you, stars' being used as evidence that Shakespeare's lovers have some agency over their lives. For some candidates, this led to a confused line of argument or showed misunderstanding of the dramatic function of the Prologue.

Most candidates made explicit reference to contextual understanding of beliefs about fate, referring to the Elizabethan's love of astrology. There was some confusion around the relationship between Fortune and God, which are not the same thing and confused ideas about defiance of the social order being Shakespeare's message. Responses also mentioned the literary context, for example Romeo as a Petrarchan lover, or how Juliet is punished for going against the patriarchal expectations of the time.

Exemplar 3

		Fate is also presented as a consequence for taking risky actions which go against societal norms as expectations, as well as family expectations. For example, the wise, old figure of the Friar powerfully states that "violent delights have violent ends." The repetition of the adjective "violent" is extremely powerful in creating a tone of warning for Romeo and how his "delights" will lead to a "violent [end]." This makes the Friar seen as a figure of immense wisdom as he foreshadows the ending of the play so accurately. The Friar was an old, religious figure of wisdom, which portrayed to Elizabethan audiences that he was almost an omniscient figure as he's a symbol of Christianity and religion in the play, who Elizabethans perceived to be wise and prophetic. This further emphasises the effect of his existing wisdom in the play, portraying how he was as he predicted that the conflict of both families was a huge obstacle between
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		their love. Also, the fact that Romeo compares their love the obstacles of their love to "thick orchard walls" is extremely powerful & in portraying how he knew the obstruction between his love for Juliet would be near impossible to overcome, but he ignores it anyway, portraying a sense of immaturity. The fact that he ignores this warning sign of fate shown by the metaphor of "orchard walls" further presents fate as a punishing force as Romeo ignores this and the Friar's warning, ultimately leading to his death.
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This extract from a response to Question 4 on *Romeo and Juliet* shows consideration of context emerging naturally from the exploration of fate in the play.

Question 5*

5* 'The death of Mercutio completely changes the play.'

To what extent do you agree with this view? Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

Most candidates approached this discursive question confidently, showing their knowledge of characters and thematically linked events. Common among candidates for this question was a focus on Mercutio's final speech with reference to 'a plague on both your houses', and in some of the most sensitive and insightful responses, candidates noted how this was a pivotal turning point for Romeo. Often candidates would use Mercutio and his death to relate to the wider motifs of light versus dark and the overwhelming sense of death that accelerates in the play. Less successful responses narrated events that started with Tybalt's death, referring briefly to Mercutio near the beginning. Some took the approach of stating what would have been avoided if Mercutio had not died. Examples of these included Romeo not being banished, the message reaching Romeo in time and the tragedy of the lovers' death being averted.

There were several excellent responses that not only looked at the dramatic function of Mercutio, but the character himself, with very good supporting quotations. Most responses were able to understand how his death triggered a chain of events, with stronger candidates arguing that, whatever Mercutio did, fate would have acted anyway. There was a useful trigger from the extract question to explore Mercutio and his death from the thematic standpoint that fate is in control. Strong responses considered how the death of Mercutio changes the play from comedy to tragedy, some referencing his wit being apparent even as he dies, citing 'Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man.' These responses saw how his death does remove a lot of the fun in the play and any chance of the play ending in marriages was gone.

There was less direct reference to context in this *Romeo and Juliet* question. Some candidates considered male pride and honour which lead to Mercutio's death since he challenges Romeo's apparent weakness in not confronting Tybalt, calling it 'calm dishonourable, vile submission'. They saw this rebuke as directly leading to Romeo's decision to kill Tybalt and spoiling the Friar's hopes that a Capulet/Montague marriage would end the feud.

Question 6*

6* Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents Shylock's relationship with his family and servants. Refer to this extract from Act 2 Scene 5 and elsewhere in the play. [40]

The extract question on *The Merchant of Venice* proved to be the most popular option, especially as it centred on Shylock and family. Candidates demonstrated a solid understanding of the play and were able to navigate both the extract and wider play with confidence. Interestingly, some of the most insightful takes on Shylock and family argued that Jessica was in some ways more of a villain than Shylock himself, while others argued she attempted to detach herself from a very suffocating existence, referring to her statement that their house 'is hell'. Others saw the relationship between Shylock and family as more ambiguous in that Shylock is protective of his daughter and family, while equally obsessed with material possessions. Outside the text, it was Salanio's reporting of Shylock's reaction to Jessica's elopement that was most commonly quoted. However, it is becoming more and more inaccurately used. It is invariably always attributed directly to Shylock and therefore there is no consideration of the reliability and purpose of the account, being used at the expense of the potentially much better 'I would my daughter were dead at my feet' passage. Candidates also conveniently omit 'My daughter' from the start of the line to assert that 'O my ducats! O my daughter!' is significant because Shylock says ducats first.

While many candidates focused exclusively on Shylock's relationship with Jessica, some considered the servant/master stereotypes, and explored Shylock's – potentially justified – criticisms of Launcelot being 'snail-slow' and his desire to be rid of him. A few confused Launcelot with Lorenzo and were unable to make sense of Launcelot's instruction to Jessica to 'look out at window' to see her lover.

Most candidates considered the context of Shylock being a Jew and anti-semitic views at the time Shakespeare is writing. They explored Shylock's disgust at the 'Christian fools with varnished faces' and his attempts to protect Jessica from their 'shallow foppy' by keeping her safe in his 'sober house.' A few talked about the humour at Shylock's expense, some expressed sympathy for the way Launcelot and Jessica conspire against him in the extract and elsewhere in the play. Patriarchal attitudes to father/daughter relationships were considered, with many stating that fathers had the right to determine their daughter's husband at the time Shakespeare is writing and contrasting this with modern expectations and responses to Jessica.

Question 7*

7* How does Shakespeare present the young lovers in this play?

Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

There were few responses to this discursive question, however many provided a clear exploration of the relationship between Portia and Bassanio, often arguing that Bassanio's love is much more artificial than it seems, alongside Portia as potentially more manipulative than first viewing. The strongest responses explored the casket scene in depth and the ring test Portia sets Bassanio; some of these questioned how likely it is that their relationship would succeed given her strength and intelligence. While most understood how Bassanio's need to impress Portia led to Antonio's life being at stake when he lends Bassanio money, some candidates took the opportunity to offer new ways of seeing Antonio and Bassanio's relationship and the potential jealousy that Antonio has surrounding Bassanio's relationship with Portia. A few candidates confused Antonio with Bassanio, believing it was Antonio who is in love with Portia. In some responses, Jessica and Lorenzo were explored and some thoughtful personal responses saw the play as showcasing the value of love over the value placed on money. Nerissa and Gratiano's status as young lovers was rarely mentioned and, when it was, they were seen as making up the tradition of three marriages at the end of Shakespeare.

Contextually, some candidates noted the negative influences of fathers in a possessive patriarchy on the relationships between the young lovers, particularly Portia as a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Several used Antonio and Bassanio's relationship as part of their argument to good effect. Interestingly, despite trends where extracts from previous series are quoted, most responses did not refer to the Jessica and Lorenzo exchange used in 2022. A few candidates considered whether Antonio and Bassanio would be considered 'young lovers' in the context of the time when Shakespeare is writing. The strongest questioned how a modern audience would see the integrity of the actions of the Christian lovers, and how Jessica abandons her Jewish faith to be with Lorenzo.

Question 8*

8* Explore how horror is presented in the play. Refer to this extract from Act 2 Scene 3 and elsewhere in the play.

[40]

This was a very popular question, and its focus on the very easily understood concept of horror meant many relevant, knowledgeable and well-supported responses. It could be argued that, with very few exceptions, absolutely everything that happens or is voiced in the play is horrific in some way. Less successful responses often fell into the trap of simply describing or retelling horrific moments at length, without exploring the impact of the language or thinking about how very different types of horror are explored or portrayed in the play.

Most candidates took the opportunity to explore the language and structural features of the extract, appreciating Macduff's horror in discovering the dead body of Duncan. Contextual discussions of the Divine Right of Kings, religious beliefs and attitudes to treason emerged naturally from analysis of 'sacrilegious murder' although there was some confusion regarding 'The life o' th'building' which some candidates took to mean the castle. Many candidates referred to the repeated use of exclamatives and the urgency of Macduff's orders, as well as his being lost for words to describe the murder of the king.

Successful responses explored the way Macbeth feigns innocence, some linking it to Lady Macbeth's earlier command to 'Look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under it'. A number connected Macduff's instruction to 'Shake off this downy sleep' to Macbeth's reaction to carrying out the murder of Duncan that 'Macbeth shall sleep no more' and saw the loss of sleep for him and Lady Macbeth – in the sleepwalking scene – was their true punishment for committing regicide.

Some candidates made fewer analytical points on the extract, often neglecting some of the rich language within it and the structural significance of the bell at the end, however many of the stronger responses made succinct language, structural and form comments and then navigated to the rest of the play where they would typically explore regicide, the brutality of murder of Banquo and Lady Macduff and children. Some of the very best responses interpreted horror in a different way, arguing that what makes the play an example of 'horror' is the transformation of Macbeth and signals that appearance versus reality can be misleading. Many candidates focused on the motif of blood, considering which acts of bloodshed were committed onstage and which were reported, and the impact on the subsequent perception of 'horror'. These included reference to the conversation between Ross and the Old Man, which explores nature's reaction to the murder of Duncan.

This question demonstrated clearly the importance of planning. Candidates demonstrated a great deal of knowledge and understanding of the play but wrote unstructured responses which made connections from Lady Macbeth's actions to the witches to the supernatural, all of which were summed up as horrific without clear analysis of why. The very best responses were tightly structured and consistently relevant, linking the horror of the play to its tragic genre. A number concluded that Shakespeare's desire to please James I was behind the presentation of horror, showing the consequences of regicide and the breakdown of social order.

Question 9*

9* To what extent does Shakespeare encourage the audience to feel pity for Lady Macbeth?

Explore at least two moments from the play to support your ideas.

[40]

This was the most popular of the discursive questions, with most candidates providing a detailed personal response that argued both for and against feeling pity for Lady Macbeth before coming to a balanced conclusion. Candidates who had a secure grasp of the character development of Lady Macbeth or her influence on Macbeth or the general question of blame in the play were easily able to make that knowledge and level of preparation relevant to the set task. Equally, most candidates organised their response with an awareness of the structuring of the character's presentation – the early driven, ambitious and scheming fiend-like queen set against the later guilt-ridden blood-spotted and haunted suicide. Knowledge and insight into the ways Shakespeare presents the character of Lady Macbeth was evident across the mark range. Candidates explored Lady Macbeth as a manipulator, some stating that Shakespeare uses her as a construct to show the dangers of transgression. Some candidates appeared to re-write learnt practice essays on Lady Macbeth without linking specifically to the question.

Candidates confidently ranged through the play and quoted to support and develop their argument. Lady Macbeth's goading of her husband, 'when you durst do it, then you were a man', her initial lack of guilt at the murder of Duncan, 'A little water clears us of this deed' and the sleepwalking scene which shows the impact on her mental state, were often cited. Some considered how she is unable to kill Duncan herself as evidence that she is not as strong as she would like to be. While her assertion that she would 'dash the brains out' of a child rather than be unable to carry out an act was seen as brutal, candidates often countered this with the possibility that she had lost a child in her 'I have given suck' speech. This interpretation was used to support a more sympathetic reading of her character.

Many candidates explored the changing nature of her relationship with Macbeth, seeing her as increasingly sidelined by him when he plans the murder of Banquo. There were differing interpretations of the ways in which he addresses her, moving from 'my dearest partner of greatness' to 'chuck', some seeing 'chuck' as warm and protective and others as degrading. Strong responses considered Macbeth's apparent lack of concern at her death, some seeing it as significant that it takes place off stage, and cited his soliloquy, 'She should have died hereafter' as having no time to mourn or care about her suicide.

Most candidates used their knowledge of context, for instance the perception of women in Jacobean society, to inform their response. Those who saw Lady Macbeth as a 'fourth witch' or evaluated her call on the spirits to 'unsex me' made natural connections with the supernatural and the interest of James I in witchcraft. A number of these saw Shakespeare using her tragic ending to appeal to the king as it demonstrates the evil of dabbling in the supernatural. A number of candidates referred to Malcolm's final comment on Lady Macbeth as a 'fiend-like queen' to support their judgement that she was undeserving of sympathy, however most felt that she suffered from the tragic consequences of her own ambition.

Question 10*

10* How does Shakespeare present surprises in this play? Refer to this extract from Act 5 Scene 4 and elsewhere in the play. **[40]**

There were relatively few responses to *Much Ado About Nothing*, and virtually all were on this extract question. Most candidates showed understanding of the extract, the moment in the play when Beatrice and Benedick accept their love for each other, even now exchanging banter. In moving elsewhere in the play, the majority focused on Beatrice and Benedick, with only a few choosing to consider the less pleasant elements of surprise which affect the relationship between Hero and Claudio.

Candidates were able to draw on the June 2023 extract which overlaps with this passage, having practised in a mock examination writing about the ways in which Shakespeare makes the banter between Beatrice and Benedick so amusing. Many commented on the dramatic irony at work, seeing how the humour at the couple's expense comes from them being the only people to whom the revelation of their love comes as a surprise.

Contextual understanding was shown, explicitly and implicitly, through the exploration of gender expectations and male attitudes to pride and honour. Many saw the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick as successfully challenging these expectations, whereas those who wrote about Claudio and Hero saw the worst side of these expectations as evident in the reactions of Claudio and Leonato to Hero's supposed disloyalty.

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