



Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

October 2020

Pearson Edexcel GCE Advanced Level

In English Language & Literature (9EL0\_02)

Paper 2: Varieties in Language and Literature

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October 2020

Publications Code 9ELO\_02\_2010\_ER

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## Overview

In Unit 2 of GCE English Language and Literature (9ELO) “Varieties in Language and Literature”, students are expected to apply the skills of close, contextualised, comparative reading, showcasing knowledge of both literary and linguistic terms and concepts. They need to synthesise their learning, integrating language and literature together, in order to analyse both short unseen prose texts, and studied literary works. Their work in both areas is organised thematically: students pursue one of four topics (‘Society and the Individual’; ‘Love and Loss’; ‘Encounters’; ‘Crossing Boundaries’). They are expected to demonstrate evidence of wider reading in, and thinking about, the topic they have studied in their examination answers.

Section A demands the analysis of one unseen extract. Candidates are expected to present an organised, fluent commentary on the writer's choice of structure, form and language, making inferences on how these authorial choices are shaped by the attitudes, values and ideas detectable in the text, and from their wider knowledge of any contextual forces exerting pressure upon the writing. They should show evidence of broad understanding of their chosen theme in their analysis, using it to enrich the specific discussion of the passage presented for analysis.

Section B assesses candidates’ knowledge of the authorial methods used in, and the readerly reception of, two studied literary texts. The texts must be aptly contextualised, using supporting materials relevant to the question focus. The texts must also be compared and contrasted on points of significant relevance. Many aspects of the works are suitable for comparison, including the manifest content (plot, character, theme, setting), the literary and linguistic techniques used by the writers, and the contextual factors shaping the texts’ production and/or reception. All such contextualisations and comparisons must however strive to be relevant to the specific question asked.

It is vital that centres are aware that Sections A and B do not correspond to Language and Literature exclusively. Both the Specification and the Section B Mark Scheme for this unit make it clear that literary texts should be subjected to an integrated language and literature approach.

## Summary of Section A and Section B achievement in 2020

### Summary of Section A

Stronger answers looked at the unseen text as a whole and were able to discuss its qualities as a complete piece of writing, rather than merely containing a quantity of techniques to be identified.

There was, as in previous series, evidence of candidates using the rather limiting approach of working chronologically through the extract, sometimes paragraphing their own work in accordance with the structure of the passage. More successful answers discuss the implications of specific lexical and syntactical choices in the context of their entire passage. They are able to move beyond

feature-spotting and to explore shifts in register, as well as generic conventions and deviations. The use of supporting relevant contextual material also had a significant effect on achievement.

### Summary of Section B

There was again some evidence of candidates assuming that Section A requires exclusively linguistic analysis, and Section B requires literary analysis only. The best answers, however, ensured that contextual materials were judiciously selected to assist the analysis of both linguistic and literary features in the texts. Answers providing fewer contextual factors of relevance outscored answers which included huge amounts of impressively remembered but ultimately irrelevant detail. The contextual material that was produced was once again somewhat unbalanced, however. Contexts for textual production (socio-historical details, intertextual relationships, staging/publishing history, authorial biography, etc.) were more often deployed than contexts of reception (reviews, criticism, cultural influence, personal response). Candidates who can offer both production contexts and reception contexts tend to produce higher-achieving answers.

### **Reflections on student performance on the 2020 questions**

#### Society and The Individual: Questions 1 and 5

This thematic strand proved once again to be the most popular of the four on offer.

For the unseen extract, a charity appeal for funding for guide dogs to assist children with autism, almost all candidates were able to detect several features, linguistic and graphological, that are deployed in the text to enhance its persuasive appeal. There was some thoughtful contextual material about the role of individual mothers, and the status of people with autism, within society. The best answers were able to comment on the text's appeals to not just *logos* and *pathos*, but also to an individual and social sense of *ethos*. Some candidates speculated on the content of the "accompanying images" to the text which were mentioned in the preamble, sometimes lingering too long on this, when textual analysis would have proved more rewarding.

For Question 5, *The Great Gatsby* was, as in previous series, the most popular anchor text. The most popular combinations of texts were *Gatsby/Othello* and *Gatsby/Larkin*, but some of the highest achieving answers in this series were for responses combining *Gatsby* and *A Raisin in the Sun* – texts in which those who display contentment (Tom Buchanan; Karl Lindner) are bitterly and vividly opposed by the discontented (Daisy, Myrtle; Beneatha, Walter, Asagai). Candidates writing on *Raisin in the Sun* tended to have particularly strong contextual support for their discussions. Elsewhere, Iago and Emilia and several of those who populate Larkin's verse featured heavily among the discontented. Although it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from such a small and atypical cohort, it was noticeable that those answering on poetry were more attentive to matters of poetic form than as has been the case in previous series.

### Love and Loss: Questions 2 and 6

There were very few candidates opting for 'Love and Loss' in this atypical series.

Those that answered on the unseen extract from a ballet dancer's memoir readily detected multiple aspects of both love and loss at work in the passage. Almost all noted the rather hyperbolic and melodramatic tone of the piece. The author's allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* and purgatory prompted a variety of speculations as to their significance.

The focus of Question 6, on separations, lent itself to a variety of interpretations (the ending of romantic relationships, the end of life, even split personalities). The small number of responses to this question makes meaningful conclusion difficult, but there was some evidence of improvement in AO3 and AO4 achievement, in comparison with recent series.

### Encounters: Questions 3 and 7

Few candidates opted for 'Encounters' in this atypical series.

Previous series have featured unseen extracts for Question 3 in which individuals try to recreate the experience of fear or joy in an encounter, often using the present tense to lend immediacy to the narrated scenario. Strieber's more reflective tone was duly noted by the more successful answers, but misunderstood or ignored by less flexible candidates. Understanding audience and purpose and context was critical to success with this passage: the best answers were those which realised that, since the piece is the introduction to a book-length discussion of alien encounter, its purpose was to establish credibility for its claims, to win over a skeptical readership. Those who focused only on the dramatic moments describing alien encounter tended, inevitably, to run out of things to say rather quickly.

The focus of Question 7, encounters that are exciting or disappointing, permitted an extremely wide range of evidence to be tendered, since most encounters can be so described, either from the fictional participants' or from the reader's perspective. A key discriminator of success was the extent to which this evidence could be subjected to specifically literary and linguistic analysis, and could be aptly contextualized and compared. In this regard, there was a wide range in the quality of responses seen, and long narrative-driven answers were invariably outperformed by briefer answers which maintained focus on the four assessment objectives.

## Crossing Boundaries: Questions 4 and 8

Few candidates opted for 'Crossing Boundaries' in this atypical series.

The principal boundaries being referred to in the unseen passage were the subdivisions that have traditionally distinguished environmental actors and activists. An understanding that Chris Packham is calling for these various interest groups and specialisms to break through disciplinary lines to work together was demonstrated by all candidates. There were varying degrees of success in identifying the persuasive strategies being deployed, and those that worked through the passage methodically, paragraph-by-paragraph, risked downplaying the crucial final lines of the passage, in which Packham's use of nouns and pronouns offer a vital clue to his audience and purpose.

The phrasing of Question 8 allowed for a variety of interpretations: moral, ethical, social, mental/psychological, gendered, marital, and supernatural transformations occur in the texts on offer. *Dracula* and *Twelfth Night* were the most commonly chosen texts, and all candidates were able to produce textual evidence pertinent to the 'transformation' theme. The preferred contextual evidence was largely gender-based, with references, of varying degrees of detail and specificity, to conventional codes of gendered behaviour in the relevant time periods. There was much less consideration given to the contexts of reception or transmission: little sense was gleaned of *Twelfth Night* as a play to be staged, for example; nor was much consideration given to the effects on a watching audience of that play's many on-stage transformations, and this felt like a missed opportunity for fruitful discussion.

### **Advice to Centres and Candidates:**

Based on performance on this paper, centres are advised to consider the following in preparing future candidates:

- In Section A, candidates should strive to get a clear sense of the passage's purpose, audience, and genre before they begin writing their answer. A holistic approach to analysis is often more successful than the paragraph-by-paragraph approach.
- Answers are often enriched when candidates can show a wider understanding of their chosen theme, and are able to apply it relevantly to analysis of the given passage. Candidates should do as much extra reading around their theme as possible.
- Candidates must be able to deploy appropriate and relevant concepts and terminology from both linguistic and literary study to further their analysis in both sections of the paper. Answers that merely 'feature spot' rarely achieve high marks; analysing how individual features and effects relate to the whole text's purpose and context will tend to be more successful.
- Candidates should have a wide variety of contextual materials at their disposal, and should further be aware that only those which assist in addressing the specific question asked should be used in their answers.

- When writing on fiction, poetry and drama, candidates should display an understanding of the author's craft in shaping the formal qualities of their work: the specifically poetic aspects of poems; plays as texts that are written to be staged in a theatre; novels which have narrators with a voice and an agenda, and who structure their narrations accordingly.
- In Section B, comparison is rewarded most fully where a variety of comparative structures are deployed. Answers which merely compare using the terms of the question (e.g. 'Another text which discusses social constraints is ...') will obtain some reward for AO4, but there is much higher reward for the following approaches: comparing and contrasting the use of specific literary, linguistic or structural devices; comparing or contrasting specific, relevant aspects of the contexts for the two texts; comparing and contrasting subtle and relevant aspects of character/theme/setting.

