
GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 1 Shakespeare and the 19th-century novel
Report on the Examination

8702
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Lead Examiner’s Report 2018: GCSE English Literature 8702/1

This report should be read in conjunction with the report for 8702/2.

This qualification is now in its second year of assessment, and once again the overwhelming view of the examining team is that the majority of students are responding extremely successfully to its demands. Much has been developed since 2017 in terms of the ways students are approaching the requirements of the exam and the vast majority of responses were not only a pleasure to read but demonstrated genuine engagement with the studied texts and increasing levels of confidence with the requirements of the assessment.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2018 exam for teachers. It has been compiled from the views of the entire examination team and will:

- Provide a general overview of the examination with some key messages
- Exemplify some strengths and key points for each specific section of the exam
- Provide clarification of the assessment objectives (AOs) and how they are assessed
- Suggest some possible approaches that might have a positive impact upon student performance.

Examiners are very mindful of the fact that this is an un-tiered examination and therefore the following comments will give feedback and suggestions that could inform progress at different levels of attainment.

General Overview

The changes that were introduced with the new specification, (closed book, removal of tiers, new mark scheme etc) have become part of the standard process, and it is clear that most students and teachers have adapted to the demands of this examination. The overriding impression of senior examiners was of a candidature which was growing in confidence and engaging thoughtfully and effectively with demanding texts.

Examiners reported a sense of a growing confidence and fluency in responses, much of which seems to be developing from a greater appreciation of what the exam seeks to assess. It is hoped that the examiner’s report and AQA feedback meetings are reinforcing the principle that we want students to think about and explore the texts. It is worth quoting from the Statement of Importance, which appears at the start of the Mark Scheme: “GCSE English Literature aims to enable students to appreciate [literary] qualities, developing and presenting informed, critical responses to the ideas in literary texts and the ways writers present these ideas.” A general impression is that a better understanding of what is expected by “subject terminology” and a greater appreciation of how context is being assessed has contributed to many responses being more fluent and integrated in their discussion and understanding of the texts.

There was a very strong sense that the questions on the paper were clear and fair and invited students to engage thoughtfully and thoroughly with the texts. Indeed, it was observed that there were very few brief responses, which indicates that the vast majority of students have been interested, stimulated and challenged by the texts they have studied and the ideas they contain. References to film versions of the texts were extremely rare this year.

Section A

The most popular Shakespeare text by far was *Macbeth* followed by *Romeo and Juliet*. Of the other available choices, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice* were the next most popular, with just a few centres opting for *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*.

The *Macbeth* question asked students to look at the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural. An effective approach taken by many students was to contrast their attitudes, as this not only gave a structure to the answer, but also frequently led to students exploring how Shakespeare had deliberately created this contrast to explore themes of integrity, loyalty, power and ambition.

Many responses offered historical detail on James 1 and Daemonologie and the divine right of kings in an attempt to address the context, which was used with varying degrees of success. As basic factual information, it doesn't contribute very effectively to an explanation of the character's attitudes which is the focus of the question. Students were more effective when they tried to use this information to explain the rationale for the characters' choices and the import of Macbeth's ability to even contemplate killing Duncan. Students were just as able to access marks for context by exploring ideas about superstition, moral choices and moral disintegration which showed they were engaging with the situation Macbeth and Banquo found themselves in and the different ways in which they responded to it.

For *Romeo and Juliet* the focus on relationships between adults and young people proved fruitful and the extract was effective in stimulating discussion. This led to significant focus on Juliet and her parents, but many students broadened this out to explore Romeo's relationship with his parents and relationships with the Nurse and the Friar. Once students started making comparisons between characters, they demonstrated a confident knowledge of the play and were able to discuss the themes and ideas insightfully.

Some students attempted to discuss Juliet and Romeo's relationship as one between an adult and a young person, based on the fact that Romeo is older than Juliet. This approach did not really address the demands of the question, and wiser choices might have been made if students had spent a little time deciding who they were going to discuss in their response and what that relationship showed to them.

As noted, there were considerably fewer responses to the other texts making it harder to generalise about answers. The question about justice in *The Merchant of Venice* prompted much thoughtful discussion of law, justice and prejudice and the relationship between these ideas, showing how the play can resonate powerfully with students. The use of the quotation "a merry war" in the question on *Much Ado About Nothing* gave students a strong focus, and allowed them to explore the evolving relationship between the couple. Recognising the arc of character development within the play and how the relationship evolves allowed students to engage with structure and aspects of the writer's methods as well as language.

Section B

While there is a greater diversity of text choices for the 19th century novel, the picture remains similar to last year with *A Christmas Carol* the most popular, followed, relatively closely by *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. A significant number of centres are teaching *The Sign of Four*, *Great Expectations* and *Frankenstein*. *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* are the least common but responses to these texts were often extremely thoughtful and impressive.

Students found the extract for *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* a rich source of writer's methods to explore ideas of mystery and tension. There was considerable focus on Stevenson's use of fog and pathetic fallacy, of light imagery and the setting in Soho, as was to be expected. Stronger responses linked these aspects to ideas of the duality of man and the key themes of the novel.

It is perhaps the case that students find the prose of the 19th century novel dense with powerful language and are clearly well drilled in analysing this, but are less confident in making connections to the broader themes of the texts. The reverse tends to apply, in Section A where they have a strong grasp of character, plot and the themes they embody, but find the language more challenging. Thought and planning time given to considering how students are going to use the details they choose, not only to explore writer's methods, but also to discuss writer's ideas, would be beneficial here. Without planning there can be a discussion of a number of examples and quotations which repeat the same skills, rather than developing an argument and taking the student to the higher levels in the mark scheme.

The question on *A Christmas Carol* focused on Scrooge's fears, and it too proved a rich source of language, with many students choosing to analyse Dickens' presentation of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come and Scrooge's reaction to it. This was followed by varying interpretations of Scrooge's fears – from fear of the silent ghost, fear of destitution in Victorian England to sensitive and convincing explorations of Scrooge's retreat into himself because of his fear of loneliness and rejection. The character and themes clearly continue to exercise a powerful grip on the imagination.

Of the remaining texts, students engaged confidently with the extract from *The Sign of Four*, effectively pinpointing the various ways in which Conan Doyle mocks Athelney Jones in the extract, allowing students to explore writer's methods well. Less convincing here was context, with many discursions into Jack the Ripper which didn't really engage with the question. Students were more successful in engaging with context when they reflected upon the contrast between Holmes and Jones as representative of a contrast between eccentric independence and stuffy officialdom.

Students who read the questions carefully on *Great Expectations* and *Frankenstein*, identified the "how far" prompt, which enabled them to construct evaluative responses which demonstrated their appreciation of those texts. The question on *Frankenstein* allowed students to reflect thoughtfully on both the monster and the society that created him, meaning that they frequently addressed context with clear understanding and consideration. There was some comment from teachers and students about the contextual statement for question 11, because some did not feel that it was explicit in the novel that the monster killed Victor. As always, examiners were instructed to reward any valid interpretations in response to the set question. AQA monitored performance on this question and there was no evidence from the scripts nor the statistical analysis to indicate the rubric introducing the question had created issues for students. There seemed to be an increased number of *Great Expectations* responses, and students were well equipped to write about one of the central characters of the novel.

Assessment Objectives

The assessment strategy for this qualification requires that every question must address the assessment objectives being assessed within it. Therefore there is no such thing as a 'character' question or a 'theme' question – all questions need to address AO2 (methods) and AO3 (ideas / perspectives / contextual factors) via a response to the text and the task (AO1).

The mark scheme is at the heart of assessing all the scripts, and it is useful to think about how students can demonstrate the skills that the mark scheme is looking for and evaluating.

AO1 Response to task and text - At all levels, students are doing this, and it is clear that the vast majority of students have a good grasp of plot and character, which enables them to access the questions and write about the text at some level. Probably the most noticeable aspect of students' work in relation to this bullet point is the absence of any obvious planning. Students have lots to say, are clearly well prepared for the exam, have a lot of knowledge of the texts and want to communicate this. Where students have written a plan, there is often a sense of a coherent and organised response, for which references and quotations have been selected to support the student's argument. Of course, it is possible to write an excellent, thoughtful or conceptualised response without any written evidence of planning and some students demonstrated this. However, it also seems that a lack of planning is potentially limiting some students who could progress through the mark scheme if they developed a clear and sustained interpretation of the text. There is certainly evidence of students contradicting their own arguments, claiming one thing in one paragraph and then the opposite case later on, which might have been avoided if they had planned an answer and were clear about their view of the text.

AO1 References - Students demonstrated an impressive knowledge of the text, both through references to it and direct quotations from it. The extracts are designed to support and this is clearly well understood by many students who confidently select quotations from them and use them for language analysis in particular. Students are also clearly able to draw on useful quotations from elsewhere in the text. Occasionally, a student will select a surprising or unusual quotation which is deployed powerfully to support their argument. Apt references and quotations are a strength of student responses.

The quality of responses are often determined by the apposite selection of examples and precise details from the whole text. Nearly all students respond to the extract, so how they establish links to the rest of the text frequently becomes a determining factor in deciding a student's level. It is the quality of the student's knowledge of the text which allows them to select references effectively. These do not necessarily have to be quotations, and there were fruitful areas to be explored in looking at contrasts and parallels in characters and situations at different points in the text. This is particularly useful as students have to respond to both the extract and the whole text, and this approach can help to structure their responses.

The extract provides something concrete for students to build their responses on and is also a useful source for examples of language analysis. One thing that is worth pointing out is for students to read the extract carefully and place it within the context of the text and the question. Occasionally, taking quotations out of context can skew a response, for example, arguing that Banquo trusts the witches because they "tell us truths" shows that the whole speech has not been understood.

Pleasingly, there were fewer unnecessarily lengthy quotations this year which don't serve much purpose. However there was still evidence of students determined to shoe-horn in irrelevant quotations - and at times accompanying comments - to their answers, which again, does not demonstrate a real engagement with the task.

AO2 Writer's methods - Last year's examiner's report noted that subject terminology often became a barrier to fluent discussion of the texts. It was pleasing to see a marked reduction in the unhelpful and obstructive use of subject terminology which was a feature of responses last year. Last year saw students identifying Shakespeare's choice of nouns or verbs (often incorrectly),

which frequently limited their ability to discuss the power and impact of his imagery. This reductive view of a literary text, reducing it to parts of speech, has been clearly identified as unnecessary and unhelpful, and fortunately is on the wane.

Overall, however, AO2 remains an area with room for improvement. There is recognition of the need to discuss the writer's methods, but often this is in isolation from the bigger ideas of the text. While students may discuss aspects of how methods are used, they don't always develop this discussion into why the writer has used these methods. Many students discuss specific images or words from the text, often in detail and exploring connotations, but do not necessarily link these connotations more broadly with the characters and the ideas they embody within the text.

One way to address this is to recognise that writer's methods embrace anything the writer has done to create and develop meaning, so while this obviously includes language, other aspects of the texts also offer fruitful study. The structure of the text, the juxtaposing of scenes and incidents, the use of characters as contrasts or foils all allow students to see the text in a larger sense, linking different parts of it together and exploring the choices the writer has made.

There was a minor change to the mark scheme wording this year (last year the wording was "effects of writer's methods on reader") to ensure the mark scheme mirrors the wording of the assessment objective. Responses that focused on taking a "this makes the reader think..." approach were often less effective. More successful responses acknowledged where the writer's methods developed character or setting or highlighted a significant plot development. Students were rewarded for developing ideas about the writer's methods, and going beyond how they work into why the writer has chosen to use them. This very much supports the points being made above regarding writer's methods and encouraging students to recognise and explore the purpose or intent of the writer's choices.

AO3 Relationship between texts and their contexts - Again, there has been marked change here, indicating an increasing recognition of what the mark scheme is looking for with regard to context. Examiners are looking for evidence that students understand the text in relation to the question, so again, it is about exploring why the writer has presented their ideas in this particular way: why the characters behave in the way they do, why the scene is set in this particular place, why this theme is significant in the text. There are myriad interpretations that students can offer to demonstrate their own engagement with the text, these may relate to historical factors, for example the structure of society in Shakespearean England, but equally they can be seen through a different prism, for example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the universal urge for teenagers to challenge the attitudes and beliefs of older generations, which is not confined to a specific time.

There has been much less evidence of random historical information being used to signal an awareness that the text was written at a specific point in time, but does not materially add to an understanding or appreciation of the text's ideas and meanings. Similarly, formulaic constructions along the lines of "An Elizabethan audience would think.... a modern audience would be..." seldom help the student to demonstrate any real insight into the text, instead they offer generalisations rather than the student's own ideas about the text.

Advice for students

- If you know the text well you will be able to demonstrate this knowledge and understanding in the exam. Learn the text rather than learning possible questions that might be asked on it. Knowing your text will help you to gain confidence in ranging across the play or novel to find the most salient references to support your response.

- Answer the question. Make sure you've read the question accurately. Make sure you are answering the question you have chosen rather than the one that you would have preferred to be on the paper.
- Take time to think about and plan your answer. It gives you time and space to gather your thoughts in terms of addressing the question and selecting appropriate references and details to support and develop your own interpretation of the text.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the text by 'pointing' to particular moments. If you use a direct reference, make sure it's relevant to your answer, and that you can say something useful about it. You don't get extra marks for more quotations, but you do get more marks for making plenty of interesting comments about the references you have selected.
- Read the extracts very carefully. They are there to support your response and offer a way into the question and the text. It is valuable to place the extract in the context of the text it comes from – at what point, what happened before or after, or both, which characters are involved, how does it link to other parts of the text. Make sure that you understand the meaning and context of any quotations you select from the extract.
- Recognise that writer's methods means anything the writer has done deliberately. While this does include the writer's use of language and techniques to present their ideas, it also refers to the structure of the text – the order of events, the juxtaposing of events, the use of characters as contrasts or foils, so that what one character does illuminates and comments on the actions of other characters, characterisation – how characters develop and change over the course of the text and how the writer portrays this.
- Understand the connection between the writer's methods and the writer's ideas. It may be helpful to think about "how" the writer does something and "why" the writer does something. Methods and ideas are inextricably linked – writer's use methods, including language and structure, to form and express their ideas – the choices the writer makes are conscious and deliberate, if they chose different words or techniques, their ideas would also be different
- Link your comments on contextual factors / ideas to the text. Remember that context informs, but should never dominate, your reading of the text. The text comes first. Chunks of biographical or literary/historical detail are almost always redundant.

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