



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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

8702
June 2017

Version: 1.0

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Lead Examiner's Report 2017: GCSE English Literature 8702/1

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

The design of our new GCSE English Literature assessment focused on enabling students of all abilities to demonstrate their skills within the context of the level of demand created by a closed book, un-tiered paper. It has been a genuine pleasure to see firm and consistent evidence of students' engagement with this qualification and how well they have demonstrated their skills when given a new level of challenge. Students not only coped successfully with the demands of the paper, but seemed to be liberated in many ways.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2017 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 'headline' 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 advice for students moving forward.

General Overview

The overwhelming experience of the exam has been that the new exam and mark scheme has enabled students to explore the texts they have studied and has recognised and rewarded students' thought and understanding.

Students have responded positively to the new paper, they engaged actively and thoughtfully with the new texts, producing detailed and insightful responses which demonstrated, in most cases, a confident grasp of character, plot and ideas. While the texts are undoubtedly demanding, students showed a readiness to consider the events of the text and often used these as a springboard to explore the complex and challenging ideas behind them. Many students showed a willingness to discuss the demanding vocabulary of the extracts and the ways writers have used language and structure throughout their works to convey their ideas.

The provision of an extract gave virtually all students at least a starting point on which to build their answers. There were some extremely brief answers and some answers where students had confused the text with the film, but overwhelmingly, students had a grasp of character and plot from which they could begin to construct a response. It was heartening to see that many students were able to go beyond the extract and make connections relevant to the focus of the question, which indicated a grasp of themes and ideas.

The closed book style of the exam has, if anything, enhanced students' responses. The absence of the text has encouraged students to make their own connections and construct their responses from their own ideas. Many students knew enough references and quotations to support their responses. Their selection of quotations demonstrated their independent understanding, and their ability to make connections within the text and to the focus of the question.

Careful, attentive reading and understanding of the question is a vital skill to enable students to answer fully and effectively. The questions are written to ensure students are able to access all of the assessment objectives. Those students who appreciate the text as a means of considering and expressing the writers' ideas are those that are the most successful. Students who were led by the

question, rather than having a preconceived essay structure for their answer, were generally more flexible and responsive to the task.

Following the exam, there was some concern from teachers regarding the perceived demand of various questions compared to others. However, all questions and extracts were in line with the assessment strategy and made use of a similar range of characters, themes and question formats that have been previously exemplified in the specimen assessment materials. All extracts were chosen to enable students to respond to the set question. Students can best do this where they have knowledge of the whole text and can see how the extract provides them with opportunity to support their response. It was pleasing to see this borne out in students' responses. Analysis of student performance across the optional questions indicates that all questions were of comparable demand.

Section A: Shakespeare

It was a pleasure to read the work of many students who had written vibrantly and thoughtfully about Shakespeare. Students approached the questions and the texts in many ways, indicating that students were engaged by the study of Shakespeare and that teachers had found a multiplicity of ways to bring the texts to life. Students explored complicated ideas and emotions with care and understanding which implied that, not only had they studied the plays, but that the plays had resonance for them as well.

By far the most popular choice of text was *Macbeth* with 60% of students answering on this play, followed by *Romeo and Juliet* at 33%. Interesting responses were seen on all the texts.

The extract based question is new style of question, and the extract itself proved a useful and effective starting point for the majority of students. For many students, it seemed that the presence of the extract was reassuring, and helped them to find a foothold with the text from which they could then develop their responses. The presence of the extract gives students something concrete to build their response on. It is also a useful source for examples of language analysis, with many students using the extracts effectively to identify aspects of Shakespeare's method which they could then explore.

Much interesting and thoughtful analysis was also demonstrated in relation to the structure and dramatic impact of the text. The better students wrote effectively about where the extract appeared within the text and could use this to explore character development. There was, for example, much considered analysis of the respective ambition of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at the start of the play, and how this evolves and how the characters develop over the course of the play. Similarly, many students recognised that the extract from *Romeo and Juliet* was drawn from the start of the play, and explored the dramatic impact of this and the messages it gave to the audience.

While language analysis is an essential part of studying and appreciating Shakespeare, it needs to be recognised that there are various routes, within the limited time available in the exam, for students to show their understanding of Shakespeare's methods and their effect (AO2). One reason structure and dramatic impact were fruitful avenues of exploration may have been because they encouraged the avoidance of unnecessary and misplaced subject terminology. Examiners found subject terminology being used which was often unhelpful and, in some cases, obstructive. Merely identifying features is of limited interest and value. Subject terminology might more helpfully be seen as the language of English Literature, the language which allows a candidate to write clearly and fluently about the text. This can be very straightforward because it is the thoughtfulness and validity of the ideas expressed through selecting appropriate subject terminology which is significant, not the subject terminology in itself.

One particular issue regarding subject terminology was the often contrived use of parts of speech in discussing Shakespeare's language. Identifying verbs or nouns in the extracts rarely led to particularly fruitful analysis of Shakespeare's language. This was a situation exacerbated when such terms were used incorrectly.

The importance of understanding and addressing the task was also apparent where the question steers students towards addressing the ideas and context of the play. The mark scheme recognises a broad interpretation of context, meaning that the text does not exist in isolation, but the context within which it can be understood and interpreted is wide and varied. For example, the context of the text itself – placing the extract within the larger context of the play, of a literary form or genre, of the student's own contemporary context as well as historical context. Sweeping assertions did little to improve answers, whereas reasoned responses to specific details showed understanding and careful thought. Statements of historical detail "bolted on" to a response did little to demonstrate any real understanding of the text in relation to a context. So claiming "All Elizabethan women were..." was vague. On the other hand suggesting that "Lady Macbeth is a disturbing example of womankind because she denies her gender" indicated a willingness to move outwards from the text and place the text in a wider context.

Students found numerous ways of exploring context by exploring the focus of the question. Answers on ambition in *Macbeth* often reflected on the value of ambition as well as its negative consequences, drawing a contrast between Macbeth's selfish ambition and the noble ambition of Banquo and Malcolm. Some responses to *Julius Caesar* drew fascinating contemporary parallels regarding rhetoric and manipulation. Answers on *Romeo and Juliet* frequently made very pertinent and perceptive observations on aggressive, male behaviour and what motivates it. Responses such as these took the big themes and ideas of the play, identified in the question, as their starting point and showed their understanding and appreciation by developing their interpretation of the play and its message for them.

Section B: 19th century novel

As with Section A, students rose to the challenge of the texts, producing extensive, considered responses which demonstrated a readiness to engage with the texts and their ideas. The style of the questions and the mark scheme are the same as in Section A of the exam, and as such what has been said there holds true for this part of the exam paper as well.

In Section B there was a broader spread of text choices. The most common texts were *A Christmas Carol*, followed by *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. There were also many responses to both *Frankenstein* and *The Sign of Four*. Least common were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, but responses to these texts were often very impressive.

As has already been discussed, students who focused carefully on the task and the text produced effective responses. Students selected images and techniques confidently, and arguably language analysis was stronger here than in Section A. On Q7 for example, many students explored the weather imagery, light imagery, the idea of the window being "half-open" or the simile "like a disconsolate prisoner", related these to Dr Jekyll as part of the focus of the question, and established a solid foundation on which to build their responses. This was apparent in all extracts where students were able to select appropriate details to develop their ideas.

As with Section A, the vast majority of students were also able to select references and quotations from across the whole text, showing a confident grasp of the text and its ideas. Again, the care and precision with which these details were selected had a significant bearing on the quality of the response. Students who brought in references to the children Ignorance and Want in their responses to *A Christmas Carol*, for example, frequently moved up the mark scheme because they

were linking the portrayal of the Cratchit family to the ideas and context of the novel and the focus of the question.

The same issue of identifying word classes, and incorrectly identifying word classes persisted in Section B, which tended to limit responses, rather than liberate students to discuss the meaning and effect of specific words and images.

It was clear that students were very aware of the need to bring context into their answers and this was often done very effectively. However, there remains a significant amount of rather clumsy and ineffectual historical context which doesn't necessarily contribute to demonstrating an appreciation of the text. A good example of this would be biographical details of Dickens' life which frequently formed part of responses to *A Christmas Carol* (but very seldom to *Great Expectations*), but which added little to the response. Responses on *A Christmas Carol* were much more effective when they alluded to the conditions the poor suffered in Victorian Britain, or the gulf between rich and poor, and the suffering that resulted from this situation.

Impressive work was done with the context particularly of *Frankenstein* which lent itself well to reflections on the nature of good and evil and the role society plays in determining this. Similarly, students writing about *Jekyll and Hyde* explored society's expectations and the motivations behind Jekyll's actions. Responses to *Pride and Prejudice* explored the reasons why female characters behave in the way they do in relation to marriage and society's expectations. There was some very effective contrasting of Elizabeth with Charlotte Lucas. Answers on *Great Expectations* often dealt with considerations of class as a means of addressing context. Students should be aiming to use the text to lead them to discussion of relevant ideas, in relation to the task, and this will ensure they are addressing "ideas/perspectives and contextual factors".

Assessment Objectives

Examiners are looking to identify the student's understanding and appreciation of the text as a whole, of the writer's ideas and methods and their ability to demonstrate their engagement with this. Seeing Shakespeare or a nineteenth century novel through a prism of identifying the verbs or asyndetic lists is not the most effective way to show appreciation and understanding. Likewise, a rigid and formulaic attitude to context tends to show students have been taught some contextual information and have learned and recalled this, but have not necessarily used this to develop their understanding and appreciation of the text.

AO1 Response to task and text – Students generally fared well here. There are clearly generic exam skills to highlight in terms of careful reading and understanding of the question. Planning often helped students formulate thoughtful and coherent responses to the question. There is no prescribed or preferred structure for answering the questions, but a frequent indicator of higher level responses was that of beginning by responding to the focus of the question using the whole text, and then dipping in and out of both the extract and the whole text throughout their response. This helped to indicate a strong, confident grasp of the text and its ideas. It was clear that many centres had suggested students start with the extract and move from that to the whole text, and this is a perfectly acceptable means of successfully answering the question, but it is worth pointing out that it is not the only way. Responses that were led by ideas, rather than a specific structure to the answer, were more likely to reach the highest levels of the mark scheme.

AO1 References – This was in many ways a strength of responses. Students understood how to build their responses around evidence from the text. Virtually all students were able to select evidence and quotations from the extract to form a response to the question. This was usually extended into references to the whole text. It is worthwhile pointing out that examiners are looking

for references, which covers a number of things; references to details of the text (incidents, characters, settings); paraphrasing; quotations.

Some students had learned an impressive number of quotations and used them effectively. Having quotations to use certainly seemed to give students both material and confidence to answer the question well. Some examiners reported almost excessive use of quotations, as though students had learned lots of quotations and were determined to include them, whatever the focus of the answer. The skill is to choose the quotations that are apt, and use them to support an answer that explores the focus of the question. It is not about the number or length of quotations.

Some issues that arose with references include copying of large chunks from the extract - this is not helpful. There was some evidence of quotations being shoehorned into a response, with little concern for their relevance to the answer as a whole, rather than selected to support a response or an exploration of ideas. Lengthy quotations often seem to offer minimal returns as students are rewarded for how the student uses the quotation, not how much of the text they can recall.

AO2 Writer's methods This was perhaps the less confident area of responses as a whole, with students being more comfortable discussing the ideas and context of the text. Students were aware of the need to address methods, but for some it was clearly challenging. This is partly because students are tackling difficult and dense texts, with demanding vocabulary and grammatical structures, but also partly because they are trying to meet the needs of the mark scheme in rather artificial ways.

Too often subject terminology became an artificial barrier to a fluent and confident discussion of methods. It might be more useful to consider whether the student is equipped with the terminology they need to discuss the text fluently and confidently. It is this meta language which shows they understand that the text has been deliberately created by a writer to convey their ideas to their reader / audience. Terms such as: character, structure, contrast, scene, image, speech, soliloquy, tone, are all examples of appropriate subject terminology. Subject terminology is not included in the mark scheme to encourage technique spotting or promote the unnecessary use of rarefied jargon. It seems a rather new phenomenon to identify Shakespeare's nouns or verbs in an attempt to demonstrate an appreciation of his achievements. Too often, this approach got in the way of fluent analysis of language, frequently by misattribution of word class, but also because there isn't very far to go necessarily once a student has identified the verb. Compare "*Shakespeare uses the verb "bite" in "bite my thumb" to..."* with "*Shakespeare creates an aggressive tone through the insult "bite my thumb" to..."* It is the quality of the explanation which determines the student's level rather than the inclusion of a 'term'.

It is well worth noting that subject terminology does not have to be linked to linguistic analysis. In Section A, all the texts are plays, and students who engage with these as plays, noting for example their structure, and the dramatic impact of where the extract appears in the play, will necessarily be engaging with the writer's method. So, discussing the impact of the *opening scene* of Romeo and Juliet, and how it *introduces* the *theme* of violence, or looking at how Anthony's *speech* in Julius Caesar *contrasts* with Brutus' *earlier speech*, with which it is *juxtaposed*, would involve using subject terminology to discuss the effects Shakespeare is achieving. In Section B, it is perfectly legitimate to address aspects of form and structure of the novel as well as characterisation as an effective AO2 route.

Students are rewarded for what they can say about how the writer's techniques work and reasons for the writer's choice. The student who focuses on discussing how the writer's methods develop the characters and the ideas in the text and why the writer has used a particular method in this way will be addressing AO2. Understanding the text as being deliberately created by the writer, and the characters as constructs within this to convey the writer's ideas, is at the heart of doing this

effectively. The question stem refers to the writer for this reason, and students who explore the writer's achievements are engaging with the text as a work of literature.

AO3 Relationship between texts and their contexts – Students who have engaged with the focus of the question have done well as this directs them towards certain ideas and themes in the text and implicitly relates to this descriptor in the mark scheme have done well. Context can be historical context, but only where it is directly relevant to the focus of the question. So a consideration of Poor Laws is relevant to a question about poverty on *A Christmas Carol*; less relevant are chunks of biographical information, random historical facts or sweeping generalisations, along the lines of “All women in Elizabethan England were...”

There is arguably a place for scaffolding the work of less confident students with sentence starters such as “Contextually...” or “In Victorian Britain...”, which does remind them to engage with this aspect of the mark scheme. However, this becomes a rather restrictive and limiting device, with perhaps too much focus on remembering how to structure the response rather than focusing on exploring their ideas about the text and answering the question.

Advice for students

- Know the text. If you know the text well you will be able to demonstrate this knowledge and understanding in the exam. The text should be the focus.
- Answer the question. Perhaps underline the key foci before you start. Make sure you've read the question accurately.
- 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.
- Appreciate the big themes and ideas of the text. Think about what the writer wanted their audience to understand after watching the play or reading the novel.
- Recognise that there are various ways in which you can show your appreciation of writer's methods. While language analysis is perfectly valid, analysis of structure or characterisation can also be very effective means of showing an understanding and appreciation of what the writer has done.
- 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.
- Time spent planning an answer can be very helpful in organising your ideas and helping you to build an argument.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.