



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 2 Modern texts and poetry
Report on the Examination

8702
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Lead Examiner’s Report 2018: GCSE English Literature 8702/2

This report should be read in conjunction with the report for 8702/1.

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 majority of students approached the paper this year with confidence and clarity. There was an improvement in the ways in which all aspects of the paper were managed, in particular question focus. Responses were much more tightly allied to the particular demands of each question, and as a result students were able to demonstrate their knowledge of the texts very effectively. Where plans were used, the responses tended to be of better quality as the thinking time enabled the response as a whole to be more crafted and purposeful. As AO1 is ‘response to task’ as well as ‘response to text’, it is important to remember that part of the assessment is driven by the way in which the student has crafted their response. The overwhelming impression was that responses were streamlined and focused, demonstrating that most students were aware of the expectations and of the skills requirements within each task. The potential damage of over-reliance on acronyms and mnemonics was less prevalent, although it was still noted by many examiners that where these structures were relied upon too heavily they tended to prematurely halt productive lines of enquiry.

Students continued to flourish with the closed book nature of the examination; their references were often aptly selected and judicious. There was a marked improvement in the way that relevant references were selected to support their ideas, rather than the focus being on the inclusion of a quotation per se. As a result references were more refined and more embedded. Students who evidenced thorough knowledge of the whole text, rather than of a bank of quotations, were the most successful because they were focused on answering the question rather than reproducing lots of learned direct references. It is the quality and relevance of the reference (direct or indirect), and the applicability of the reference to illustrate the ideas being expounded, that examiners are looking to reward, rather than the amount. In the most successful cases, students referenced the

text flexibly, exemplifying their points via pinpointing specific moments in the text rather than relying on extended, often unnecessary, quotations.

There were very few cases of students not attempting an element of the paper, which demonstrates increasing confidence with the scope and purpose of the assessment strategy, as well as improved management of time. However, one concerning trend was a marked rise in rubric infringements with regards to both optional questions on Section B, where there was a noticeable increase in the amount of students only writing about the named poem, with a large proportion of these not appearing to have come across that poem before. A significant rubric infringement penalty is applied to these cases which can be damaging to the overall marks for these students.

Another improvement this year was the handling of AO2 writers' methods. Where specialist terminology was included, it was far more relevant and assured, rather than the tendency towards naming of parts and feature-spotting that so many examiners noted last year. This has had a very positive impact on responses, with students being more fluent and relevant in their approach to analysis and thinking more holistically about writers' methods linked to meaning and purpose. Many examiners noted that characterisation, plot construction and setting were an increasing focus of student responses; this was an approach to AO2 that proved to be very enabling, in particular with responses to Section A.

There was also an improvement in terms of AO3. This worked especially well when students considered the context of the text itself rather than the experiences of the writer. The most successful approaches incorporated AO3 in their responses and focused on linking their contextual points back to the question throughout their response, rather than bolting context on to the end. A large number of students did achieve credit for AO3 through a demonstration of their understanding of the ideas explored within the text, which often assisted with their demonstration of the skills required for AO1 response to text.

In terms of feedback on the paper itself, the questions were generally well received. However, there was some concern about Q26 Power and Conflict in Section B and its similarity to a question on an AQA specimen paper. It is important that students know exam questions can't be predicted by ruling out topics that have appeared in the past. For this reason, similar questions to those used in previous papers or sample materials are sometimes asked. Q25 Love and Relationships was also similar to a question on an AQA specimen paper where the focus was 'romantic love'. Please see the Section B part of the report for further information on how these two questions were approached by students and how AQA monitored the marking to ensure there was no advantage or disadvantage.

Section A: Modern Prose and Drama

Although all of the texts in this section were represented, *An Inspector Calls* remains the most common selection of text, followed in order of popularity by *Blood Brothers*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm* and *DNA*. Many examiners noted that the question choices catered for all abilities, allowing the top end of the ability range to do well whilst equally offering an accessible question for the lower end.

Some points on particular questions and texts:

For *An Inspector Calls*, responses to Q1 tended to show individual, reflective responses to the specifics of the task and there were some very thoughtful considerations of Eric's role and function in the play. Students quite often built their response from the initial stage direction, 'half-shy, half-

assertive', which stitched Priestley into the fabric of their answer and allowed for structural points to be made successfully. There did appear to be an increase in references to the televised versions of *An Inspector Calls* – particularly quoting Eva as an evident character – which led to some points being made that were difficult to award marks for. The 'how far' nature of Q1 encouraged and enabled students at all levels to consider the nature, process and cause of Eric's change of attitude and there were some remarkably astute analyses of both Eric as a character in a context, but also of how he is used by Priestley to demonstrate the possibility of change.

Of the two *Blood Brothers* tasks, Q4 was the most popular. Students did not focus as much on AO2 or AO3 with this text in comparison to some of the other choices, and tended towards narrative recount rather than dealing with the play as a literary text. There were some tendencies to bolt on context about Thatcherism and also some biographical detail about Russell, rather than taking the cue from the contextual focus of the task. Some students also seemed to struggle with AO2 with this text and it would be helpful for them to focus more on the text in terms of its genre, as well as the effects of characterisation. For example, those who selected Q3 were able to deal with AO2 quite effectively as they were being invited to consider the importance of Linda as a deliberate construct. For those who selected Q4, the comparison of Edward and Mickey's family life allowed some students to address AO2 via a treatment of Russell's staging of the police officer scene. Many examiners this year commented on the ways in which AO3 seemed to be an aspect that students struggled with. It was observed that students often wrote about the 1980s and Thatcherism as if it was the Victorian period and showed no awareness that the ideas, conflicts, and inequalities of that era have not vanished. More successful responses focused on more general areas such as poverty, low expectations and equal educational opportunities rather than a potted history of Liverpool in the 80's.

Both questions on *DNA* were popular choices, and examiners noted how well students were dealing with this text in particular as a literary work. There were some excellent examples of AO2 in terms of the use / effect of particular characters, the significance of setting, and the purpose / effect of plot structure. The most notable feature of responses to this text was the integration of AO3; close focus on the ideas suggested by the respective tasks (leadership and gang membership) enabled students to explore and develop thoughtful ideas and produce really successful responses.

Many responses to *Lord of the Flies* were of an extremely high quality, with both tasks eliciting some superb analyses of the respective functions of Simon / the Beast. There was evidence of a very clear understanding of the symbolism in particular, with confident treatment of the wider contextual ideas related to humanity and morality. Of the two tasks, Q13 was the most popular, prompting many successful responses and examiners saw some startlingly competent analyses of how Simon is used to represent ideas and themes.

For *Animal Farm*, responses to Q17 were frequently successful, with some treatments of Squealer that showed a solid and clear understanding of the function and purpose of the character. One examiner commented that 'it was a real pleasure to encounter absolute indignation at Squealer's lies and deceit and these students were able to recall all the ways in which he had manipulated the truth. It was really heart-warming to see less able students thoroughly outraged by Squealer's perfidy, and these students clearly knew the text well and had thoroughly engaged on an emotional level.' There was a tendency to ally AO3 very much to the particulars of the allegory in this text, which is understandable, although it is worth mentioning that those students who moved away from the particulars of the Russian Revolution and considered aspects of the corruption of power and the use of truth / lies / propaganda tended to be more successful. In some of the most successful responses to this text, students understood that Orwell was not criticising communism, but the

abuse of power under any banner, and that the events in Russia are mere illustration of this idea. There were some extraordinary treatments of the purpose of his selection of form in terms of the desired impact on all members of society rather than the educated elite which were simply stunning to read. However there were also many who tended towards narrative recount and naming the 'who is who' in terms of the Russian political players, and these were inevitably less successful as students found it much more difficult to respond to the universality of the ideas suggested by the text.

Section B: Poetry Past and Present

Responses to both tasks raised varied, thought-provoking ideas and many displayed true knowledge, understanding and passion for the poems. However, as with Section A, the approach that works best is for students to know the texts really well. Information about Rameses II, Stormont and the IRA, or Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's father's disapproval did not help most to answer questions, whereas what did help was thorough knowledge of the cluster of poems. It is really important for students to understand that the context comes from the key word in the task, and that the 'ideas / perspectives' elements of context (power / conflict / love / relationships – all in the widest sense) are vital in dealing with fifteen different individual poems in a cluster.

Power and Conflict was the more popular cluster. Of the selected comparisons, a wide range were seen including Storm on the Island, 'extract from The Prelude', 'Exposure', 'Tissue', 'Kamikaze', 'My Last Duchess' and 'Checking Out Me History'. The range of comparisons demonstrated free thinking and often produced interesting, thoughtful essays. Students seemed to engage easily with the notion of power within each of the texts and through a variety of interpretations. The power of nature was a common connection, but also the nature of human power was explored, both through its ability to corrupt and also its transience. Where students seemed to have been encouraged to view the poems thematically, with a clear emphasis on power and conflict, this often resulted in them having a more successful framework with which to tackle the formal exam. The comparison of 'nothingness' was an interesting connection to 'Storm on the Island' and the responses that made really effective comparisons between the transience of power and the permanence of art as shown by the sculptor and the painter in 'My Last Duchess' were equally engaging. 'London' also worked well for students who took the perspective of political power. There was some beautiful writing about 'Tissue' which proved to have its own powerful effect on the students, and who wrote some sensitive responses on the ways in which humans attempt to achieve permanence.

For Love and Relationships, the most popular choices were 'Sonnet 29', 'Winter Swans', 'The Farmer's Bride' and 'When We Two Parted'. Where students had focused on the key element of the task (romantic love) they produced thoughtful responses, often considering the different ways that this attitude towards romance presents itself. There were some stunning ideas about the manner by which the prosaic nature of the speaker's day-to-day life is presented, and how this is contrasted with the imagery of romance in the shared dialogue of the final stanza. In the most successful cases, this was connected really skillfully to the similar contrast in 'The Farmer's Bride', often with the link of admiration for their lover (in 'Singh Song' the repetition of 'my bride', the admiration for her rebellious nature shown in her attitude towards his parents and her creation of a dating site for other Sikhs, connected to the growing admiration for his young wife, her affinity with nature, and the final repetition of 'her hair'). Also, those who were confident in their exploration of speaker did particularly well with this question.

Where comparison was treated as a thinking methodology explicitly linked to the task rather than an inherent way of structuring the responses, students did seem to fare better. Treating comparison as a 'connection' enables students to make more judicious selections of second poem.

Where students outlined their choice of a second poem in their introduction with a clear overview of the over-arching themes within both poems, well-developed and insightful comparisons often followed. Approaches that worked well were where students didn't overcomplicate the structure of their response. Some responses offered an overview rooted in the theme of the question, and moved between both poems to provide the material to illustrate their consideration of the task. This integrated approach works very well for some students but is not suited to all. Many responded to the named poem for the first part of their essay before referring to the second poem and linking ideas back to the named poem. This worked really well for many, as comparison was embedded and ideas for both texts were developed. However, some examiners felt that dealing with one poem at a time seemed to be equally enabling for many, as it meant they were able to explore ideas in depth. Sometimes the focus on a comparative methodology meant that answers lacked exploration or depth, apart from where students were clearly able to manage an integrated, conceptualized approach. Comparison is not a discrete AO and therefore students can come at this task in whatever way is most useful and effective for them. As per the mark scheme, examiners do not give additional marks for the manner in which students have structured their response.

An integrated comparison rooted in AO2 methods proved to be quite problematic for some, particularly in those cases where they were struggling to link the method to the meaning of the poem. Students who focused on the relevance of the method to the ideas in the poem/s, rather than trying to deal with some kind of pre-learned list of methods that they think must be covered when writing about poetry, fared better. For example, where students made comments such as 'both Ozymandias and Storm on the Island have no rhyme scheme' and then followed this with quite a detailed attempted treatise of what they thought this shows, clearly struggled. Various structural techniques can, seemingly, be made to have any chosen effect, (make the poem memorable, slow it down, speed it up, make it flow) often without any coherent explanation as to why – and the same technique is often able to produce totally opposite effects. Students often address structure at the end of a response, as though they feel they must mention it; all too often, it adds absolutely nothing to what they have already achieved. There is no specific requirement to write about any particular method, and those students who selected *relevant* methods, based on their clear and obvious understanding of how the writer was making meaning in those instances, fared far better than those who were trying to shoe-horn irrelevant comments into their responses. Rooting their responses and their connections in ideas and themes (in other words, the key focus of the task), was much more enabling.

AQA closely monitored students' performance on question 25 and question 26 during marking and there was no evidence of any students being either advantaged or disadvantaged by question choice. The nature of responses from students were typical for GCSE English Literature and in line with those seen in the 2017 series. As previously noted, a wide variety of approaches were taken and the choice of second poem was broad and wide ranging across the two optional questions. There was no evidence from the student responses or concern from examiners to suggest any advantage or disadvantage to students and statistical analysis showed that there was no significant difference in performance between the routes across the whole of the mark scale.

Section C: Unseen Poetry

Examiners felt that responses to 27.1 were a real pleasure to read in terms of the levels of engagement with the ideas in the poem. Many felt that, freed from the burden of a prepared poem, the unseen poem actually enabled some lower ability students to write with empathy and understanding and outperform their section A and section B responses. Students on the whole demonstrated engagement and empathy with the two poems, understanding the ideas with

conviction. There were a huge variety of approaches, with many understanding the irony and humour and handling this with deftness and maturity. Some interpreted the tone as more angry and resentful and didn't grasp the more subtle nuances, but again were able to present credible evidence to support their views. Whilst some struggled with the indicative mood and sarcasm of the poem, they were still able to write meaningfully about the ideas. Many focused on the imagery of the 'sack left on the shelf' and some explored the nature of this in stunning levels of depth. Those who fared better kept their comments firmly rooted in the text rather than producing overly long responses that speculated about the speaker's family, their situation, and what could be done to help them. There was sometimes the tendency to digress to personal viewpoints about aging not supported by evidence from the poem, however in the main students wrote confidently and in detail and there was much evidence of it proving to be a liberating means by which they could demonstrate the skills they had learned. In particular, responses to this section seemed less restricted in terms of the selection of methods to consider, and there were fewer examples of forced, unnecessary and often irrelevant points on structure and form.

For 27.2, many more students than last year focused on AO2 (methods to create meanings) and were able to write a concise and well managed response. However, often students wrote some lovely responses to the ideas in both poems but neglected to mention anything that either writer had done on purpose to make meaning. Students would really benefit from remembering that this task is all about the 'ways' as stipulated in the question. With this in mind, the following might be useful:

Angelou resents the idea that just because she's old, people might feel she is useless "like a sack left on a shelf" while Judy Williams sees her grandmother as fragile rather than useless: "wet head felt delicate as a birdskull". This is an AO1 response.

Angelou uses the image of a "sack left on a shelf" to show her resentment at people's perception of the old as useless, while Judy Williams presents a gentler picture through the simile "wet head felt delicate as a birdskull", showing her grandmother to be fragile and vulnerable. This is "effects of methods to create meanings".

Possible methods could include:

- the creation of a mood / tone
- the use / effect of particular word choices
- the use / effect of description
- structural elements
- titles
- sound patterning
- imagery
- perspective / voice
- tense
- punctuation.

Assessment Objectives

The assessment strategy for this qualification requires that every question must address the assessment objectives being assessed within it. Therefore, in Section A, 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 - Responses to task were more streamlined with much more focus on the question. Students who knew their text were able to respond with confidence and detail to the specifics of the particular question that they had chosen, and therefore there were fewer examples of students attempting to manipulate their response into writing about a question that they would have preferred to see. Where the student demonstrated that they had planned and carefully thought about the task, a clearer focus was easier to identify throughout the response and therefore marks could be awarded for identification of a Level 5 ‘thoughtful’ thread. Where students had been taught about the text as a whole and had carefully considered the ideas and the questions that the text raises, they secured AO1 far more easily.

AO1 References - There was significant improvement this year in relation to how students used references from the text, demonstrating their knowledge of the text adeptly, utilising and exploring ‘moments’ from the text, rather than interweaving superfluous quotations. The majority of examiners noted the improvement in the ways that students were making reference to the text, and the pertinence of these references demonstrated an increased level of confidence in knowledge of the text. This inevitably has an overall benefit also in terms of ‘response to task’ as the students are liberated to be able to think, and therefore respond, when they know their text well. Those who came to the exam with a comprehensive working knowledge of the text, rather than a long list of quotations, were the most successful. Examiners reward the student’s ability to reference (point to) moments in the text as illustration of the ideas they are exploring, rather than how much of it they can remember verbatim.

AO2 Writers’ Methods – The improved focus on ‘methods’ in a truer, holistic sense proved to be extremely enabling. Rather than attempting to respond to a pre-conceived list of techniques such as those suggested by the narrowest interpretation of ‘language / structure / form’, or focusing on naming micro-features of the English language, there was a notable focus on characterization, tone, dialogue, imagery, responses to characters by other characters, plot development, setting, and so on. Reference to word class is often a complete distraction. Students might think they are offering something worth saying with comments such as ‘the noun ‘statue’ shows’; ‘the definite article ‘the’; ‘the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’; but get no marks for the naming of parts. Similarly, linguistic terminology used without genuine insight remained an issue for higher ability students who seemed to believe that some terminology held inherent value regardless of whether it supported analysis. Conversely, where some genre-specific terminology had clearly been integrated into study of the text, these terms were often effectively used as they were both relevant and helpful to the students’ understanding of the text: morality play, stage directions, exposition, turning point and so on were some good examples of terminology used ‘effectively’ (in other words, effective to the students’ understanding of the writer’s purpose). Also, a large proportion of responses dealt with characterisation linked to writer’s purpose very well indeed, especially with *An Inspector Calls*, *DNA*, *Lord of the Flies* and *Blood Brothers*.

AO3 Relationship between texts and their contexts - The word ‘implicit’ in the mark scheme refers the ability to integrate appreciation of ideas / contextual factors into overall understanding of the text. ‘Explicit’ (in Level 1) refers to bolted-on, extraneous context that is not linked to the ideas in the text. Therefore students get no marks for bits of biographical information or historical facts. In Section B, if students are addressing the focus of the question then they are addressing AO3. There is no need, and absolutely no value, in attempting to incorporate biographical information about the poet or learned facts about the progeny of the particular poem into their responses.

Some students did attempt to access AO3 via bolt-on pieces of information on the writer's background/beliefs. However, many responses integrated AO1 and AO3 seamlessly, allowing for a much more holistic and less prescriptive response. The most successful of these were the ones who simply answered the question. Where the AO3 emerged from the text, this was very enabling for students. There were some fantastic treatments of how characters, settings, events and plots embody / demonstrate ideas and perspectives, and these were far more successful than those who presented extraneous pieces of historical information not rooted in the text. Another real success was the way some students considered differences between modern and contemporary reception, perhaps most notably with *An Inspector Calls*. Another purposeful and productive method was to consider themes and universal ideas that come out from the study of the text. Perhaps the most useful way of thinking about context is that it the type of context needs to be particular to the text being studied.

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.
- 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.
- Try to allow some time to do a short plan. It gives you the time and space to gather your thoughts and think about the direction and shape of your response.
- Focus on the range of things that the writer might have done on purpose during the process of putting the text together.
- Perhaps take some time to consider genre and form. A focus on the key elements of genre and the writer's choice of their particular form in relation to how, and why, they made the choices they did when crafting the text, could be really helpful to your consideration of relevant methods that the writer has used.
- Using the writer's name can help you to think about the text as a conscious construct and will keep reminding you that the author deliberately put the text together.
- 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.
- For Section B, perhaps start your response with an opening statement that thematically connects the two poems you are going to use to answer the question.
- Read the unseen poem and make sure you get a sense of the overall point first. Select three or four key methods to focus your attention on that stand out for *you*. You don't have to write about everything.
- Manage your time effectively. Don't spend too much time on the final question as it is only worth 8 marks. Remember that this task asks you to compare methods, so make sure you focus your attention on the similarities / differences between what the two poets have done to make meaning.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

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[UMS conversion calculator](#)