

GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/1 – Shakespeare and the 19th Century novel
Report on the Examination

8702
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Lead Examiner's Report 2019: GCSE English Literature 8702/1

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

The third series of this paper saw students becoming increasingly confident and fluent in their responses. The overall impression of senior examiners was that students were well prepared for the exam, that centres are increasingly clear in appreciating what the specification is seeking to achieve and how the mark scheme is applied, and consequently are preparing students effectively.

There is a general sense that observations that have been made in previous examiner's reports are being acted upon. Many of these observations still need to be made, because they remain the biggest issue in terms of students writing fluently and effectively about the texts they have studied. It should, however be recognised that the frequency of these issues arising, while still significant, is clearly diminishing.

It is important to reiterate that examiners are looking for and rewarding each student's own understanding and interpretation of the texts they have studied. The questions are intended as an invitation for students to write about and offer their own understanding, and the mark scheme directs examiners to acknowledge where this happens in each response.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2019 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

Students responded to the paper very well, with examiners reporting consistently strong responses across the ability range. There is a sense that students are increasingly able to explore their responses to the texts they have studied, which is apparent in thorough answers, a good, detailed knowledge and understanding of the texts and increasing fluency and assurance in writing effective exam answers. The questions on the paper were judged to be fair and accessible for all students.

Overall, students appear to be escaping prescribed structures for responses, and instead constructing more effective answers which open with some form of thesis and then develop their argument from this point. The common structure examiners see is a response that begins by addressing the extract, and then, halfway through states "Moving to the play / novel as a whole..." This can be a useful way of approaching the question, but likewise a more rounded and holistic approach to the text and the extract can also be very enabling. A feature of the highest-level responses is their knowledge and understanding of the text, which enables students to dip in and

out of both the extract and the whole text to select details which support their argument as appropriate.

It is worth mentioning that examiners continue to report that pre-prepared structures and sentence starters often seem to hinder students' expression of their views, frequently appearing as tacked-on sentences at the end of a paragraph which add little and appear formulaic. The most common of these are variations on the theme of 'An Elizabethan audience would be / A Jacobean audience would think / A Victorian reader would / In contrast, a modern audience would be...'

Coupled with a greater freedom and confidence in constructing answers was an increasing use of references, as opposed to specific quotations, to support and illustrate students' answers. This was perhaps most marked in the *A Christmas Carol* question, where students picked out details linked to the different ghosts in their own words, and used these effectively to support and illustrate their arguments. It must be pointed out that there was also plenty of impressive use of direct quotations, and that students certainly don't appear to be hampered by the closed book nature of the exam.

In terms of writer's methods, overuse, misuse and inappropriate use of subject terminology continues to be the biggest issue seen in responses as this seldom helps students to illustrate their own thinking about the texts. On a more positive note however, there appeared to be significantly wider consideration of methods other than language and language devices in students' responses. Much more attention was paid to how writers have structured their texts and the impact this has on meaning. Students have also reflected very fruitfully on characterisation. There is a possibility that because terminology related to structure is less common, students are able to discuss structure with clarity and fluency, using simple terminology such as 'at the start / this changes when / in contrast...'

There was also a clear improvement in what is expected and understood about AO3, most apparent in there being far less superfluous and unhelpful information about Dickens' father's financial circumstances and Victorian sewers. Simply by answering the question, which has a steer towards context embedded within it, students will address this assessment objective. Again, this has contributed significantly to more fluent and purposeful answers, as students develop their discussion of character and method, linking this with the writer's ideas and intentions and their own interpretations, rather than incongruous, bolted on paragraphs of biographical details or historical information.

One area of potential concern here is some tendency for students to quote various theories as a means of interpreting the text. Examiners have seen Marxist, feminist, Freudian and Nietzschean theories (amongst others) deployed to demonstrate an interpretation of the text being considered. Frequently these theories are merely cited, appear to be poorly understood and do not contribute to the student's own interpretation of the text. Rather like unnecessary historical context, they generally give the impression of being added in to an essay to suggest wider reading or recognition of alternative interpretations. Such references rarely seem to enhance a student's own interpretation of the text they are discussing.

There was scant evidence of rubric infringements, which suggests students are familiar and comfortable with the style of question, referring to both the extract and the whole text. For many students, the extract proves to be a useful starting point, offering a stepping stone into their response. Virtually all students are clearly capable of picking out other moments and points in the texts which allow them to further consider the question. One area that did provoke occasional concern was the sense of students attempting to reproduce responses they have done in preparation for the exam. Examiners did come across, for example, answers which focused more

on Lady Macbeth, rather than Macbeth's violence, which were difficult to connect to both the question and the extract provided.

Section A: Shakespeare

The most common text by far continues to be *Macbeth*, followed by *Romeo and Juliet*, which together account for the vast majority of responses. There are some centres studying *Much About Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Only a small number of centres are studying *The Tempest* or *Julius Caesar*.

The question on *Macbeth* proved very accessible to students, who were very able to discuss Macbeth's character. The extract, from the start of the play, proved helpful in allowing students to establish Macbeth's character and then consider how this evolved. Students wrote confidently, with the vast majority recognising how violence in battle differed from Macbeth's violence later in the play, but offering differing interpretations as to why this was the case.

It may be helpful to encourage students to take their time to read the extract carefully to avoid misunderstandings. A relatively frequent occurrence was ascribing the characteristics of MacDonalld to Macbeth, for example implying that it is Macbeth who is described as being "merciless". Students made effective links to the deaths of Duncan, Banquo and Macduff's family, exploring how these were different. Many thoughtful responses explored how far Macbeth was responsible for his own fate or whether other factors were at play, for example that he was victim of fate, manipulated by Lady Macbeth or a victim of society's expectations of masculinity. As an illustration of how students could use the structure of the text to powerful effect, many noted the parallels between Macdonald's beheading in the extract and Macbeth's beheading in the final scene of the play, drawing pertinent conclusions to support their own interpretations.

The *Romeo and Juliet* question also focused on the central characters, and students were able to explore Romeo and Juliet's relationship from various angles. There was some surprise that the extract, which is a key moment in the play, when Romeo and Juliet speak together for the first time, was not always entirely securely understood as a key plot-point of the play. A number of students wrote about how the "sin" Romeo and Juliet were committing was a purposeful defying of their families' feud, when they are not aware of their family's identities at this point in the play.

There was also some quite healthy scepticism about Romeo and Juliet's relationship apparent in many of the responses, which showed real engagement with the text and the ideas it is exploring. Students frequently reflected on how fickle Romeo is, having just been talking about his love for Rosaline, and made critical observations on the basis of his judgements in Act 1, Scene 5 as a whole and in the extract itself. Again, much effective discussion centred on the structure of the play, with students making effective use of the prologue and linking this to other points in the play.

Section B: Nineteenth century novel

The pattern of text choice remains constant on Section B, with *A Christmas Carol* far and away the most popular, followed by *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. There are significant numbers of students studying *The Sign of Four* and while there are fewer studying *Frankenstein*, this is a text that seems to encourage excellent responses from students. The remaining texts are studied by relatively few centres, but generally result in excellent, engaged responses, particularly for *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Question 7 on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* directed students to reflect on Mr Hyde, and many students were able to use the extract well to support their consideration of his character. The stronger responses moved from how Hyde is presented into why he is presented in this manner, and the ideas which this embodies. Students were able to select details confidently from the rest of the text to support their arguments, but work still needs to be done in some cases in exploring the idea of “duality” and what Stevenson is suggesting about human nature.

The question on *A Christmas Carol* prompted detailed responses about the ghosts, and students clearly knew the text very well and had lots of material to work with. The issue here was some just giving a narrative account of the novel, rather than focusing on how Dickens uses the ghosts. The vast majority however clearly appreciated Dickens’ themes and were able to link the ghosts to these, and were therefore able to answer the question effectively.

While there were many impressive responses to *The Sign of Four* question, there was also a sense that some responses did not fully grasp the idea of justice in the question. Where this was understood well, students were able to reflect on the different ways people seek justice and the very nature of what justice is, which led to insightful and perceptive responses.

The responses to *Frankenstein* provoked a lot of positive comment, giving the impression that this is a text which engages students and allows them to explore complex and challenging ideas. Students seemed enthused to explore ideas of nature versus nurture, and just what the creature represents. Similarly, responses to *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, where they are seen, show an impressive understanding of the characters and ideas of these texts, and a clear engagement with the themes they are exploring.

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 text and task - One strength of responses this year was an increasing sense of well-constructed responses allowing students to build an argument and demonstrate their understanding of the text effectively. There is not one model approach that we are looking for, but increasingly, we are seeing essays that open with a thesis which establishes the student’s response in relation to both text and the task. This structure immediately establishes some kind of overview of the whole text, which then helps to bring the various strands of the answer together rather than, for example, seeing the extract and the whole text as separate parts of a response.

The best examples of a thesis are where students establish their own interpretation or line of enquiry for their answer. This provides a clear structure for the response, and is a great help in demonstrating a thoughtful or conceptualised response. Equipping students with an understanding of how to construct an effective answer would encourage them to see their response in its entirety, and build an argument which would take them to higher levels of achievement. There are students who produce a number of very similar paragraphs, demonstrating the same level of achievement

repeatedly, rather than moving their argument forward. These students might benefit from an appreciation of how an essay can be built, constructed and used as illustration of a point of view / response to a question.

AO1 References - The use of references and quotations is a perennial issue, particularly with the closed book exam. It should be noted that virtually all students have a grasp of central characters and key events of the texts, and so are equipped to make reference to the text. Most students are able to select quotations which they can use to support and illustrate their arguments. Many students have an extremely impressive store of apt references and quotations upon which they can draw.

Students have successfully used references as opposed to direct quotations to illustrate their understanding of the text. It is the use made of the reference that is being evaluated, so, for example, the fact that the *Ghost of Christmas Past* shows Scrooge a vision of Belle can be the foundation of a very effective analysis of Scrooge's values and feelings without a specific quotation being used.

AO2 Writers' methods - One pleasing aspect of this area of assessment is the increasing flexibility students are bringing to the understanding of methods used to create meanings. There is an increasing focus on the structure of texts, and of characterisation, as a means of conveying ideas and meaning. However, the understanding of what subject terminology means and how this is being used by students remains an issue.

Likewise, students are deliberately considering the structure of the text as a means of reflecting on the writer's methods. Exploring aspects of structure gives students an additional avenue to pursue, and can open the text in a different way, looking at a broader picture, rather than focusing solely on the intricacies of word level analysis.

Many students explored the fact that for Question 1, the extract came from the start of the play, and introduced Macbeth and his violent nature in a very specific context, they were then able to contrast this very effectively with examples of Macbeth's violence from other points in the play. For *Romeo and Juliet*, with the extract taken from Act 1, Scene 5, students went backwards, and noted the contrast with Romeo's attitudes and feelings earlier in the play, drawing varying conclusions from this regarding Romeo and Juliet's relationship.

This pattern was also clearly evident in Question 8, *A Christmas Carol*, where the prompt of 'change' in the question encouraged students to explore Scrooge's character across the whole of the text. Many students effectively explored how Dickens contrasts Scrooge's behaviour at the start and end of the text to good effect. As long as students appreciate that the text has been deliberately ordered by the writer, to avoid a merely narrative retelling of the story, this can be a very productive line of enquiry for them.

There was a huge amount of fruitful and thoughtful language analysis as well, and this aspect of English Literature should not be ignored or overlooked. Many students used the extracts to pursue detailed and thorough analysis of aspects of the writer's language use. There are occasions though where there is an overreliance on word level analysis, and students should be aware that methods means anything the writer has done deliberately.

Examiners continue to see a lot of spurious and inaccurate use of language terminology that does not add to the effectiveness of a student's analysis of the texts. Students who reach the top level of the mark scheme, and indeed achieve full marks on a question, generally write with great clarity

and precision about their ideas and understanding. One hallmark of this is often a confident general vocabulary, which allows them to engage fully with concepts and ideas.

Using parts of speech as a prism through which to analyse literature is generally a reductive exercise, which offers students little by way of insight or analysis. It often seems that the use of “image” would be far more effective, particularly as an image seeks to evoke something in the audience, and is an integral part of literature. Students are then less likely to be tied up in a naming of parts or excessive terminology, and are more sympathetic to the idea that the writer probably wasn’t trying to pick the right noun, but rather focus on looking for the best image to encapsulate their ideas. Shakespeare uses the noun “scorpions” to show..., or Shakespeare uses the image “full of scorpions” to show...

Common terms which are frequently used to enable discussion of texts can be helpful in identifying aspects of the text or methods used, but it should be recognised that it is the student’s comments that illustrate their understanding and appreciation of the writer’s craft. “Dickens uses the simile...” could be the start of a Level 2 response or a Level 6 response - what is important is what the student tells the examiner about that simile.

There was some indication of students using increasingly obscure and esoteric terminology to identify writer’s methods. This is really just an advanced form of technique spotting, and seldom adds any real substance to the student’s analysis of the writer’s methods and the effect they have. One example of this was the term “chremamorphism”; an impressive word, no doubt, but which did not fundamentally add to the quality of analysis that the student was able to demonstrate.

AO3 Relationship between texts and contexts - Examiners have universally remarked upon the improvements in addressing context which have been apparent in this series. The appreciation that this means exploring the ideas of the text, specifically in relation to the question being asked, has been a significant factor in the increasing fluency and assurance with which students are writing about the texts. It is clear that centres are increasingly recognising that an approach which centres on ideas lends itself to a coherent, holistic and developed response to the texts.

Students respond to questions in a myriad of different ways, but as long as they are focusing on the question and thinking about why the writer has created the text they will be addressing ideas relevant to AO3. For example, with the *Macbeth* question, students explored Macbeth’s violence in relation to ideas about heroes, power, kingship, ambition, masculinity and stereotypes amongst other things. All of these demonstrated students engaging with the text and considering what prompts Macbeth’s violence and the effect it has upon him. This allowed students to explore the ideas / perspectives / contextual factors of the text.

It should be noted that there continues to be evidence of unnecessary biographical information, and extraneous historical detail which does not contribute to the quality of the student’s response. Similarly, sweeping generalisations, such as “An Elizabethan audience would have...” and “In the Victorian era everyone...” are not helpful in terms of showing an appreciation of the writer’s ideas.

As has been noted, it seems that “bolt on” statements of historical context are being replaced by similarly “bolted on” statements of critical theory, which show that a student has been told something, but which is not fully understood or explained or integrated into an interpretation of the text being discussed.

On the whole, it is clear that there is an increasingly confidence with the demands of this specification and students are rising to the challenge of writing about difficult and demanding texts with considerable thought and insight.

Advice for students

- View the questions as an invitation to show your understanding of the texts you have read, the examiner wants you to tell them what you think about the texts.
- Read the question carefully and clearly identify what the question is asking you to focus on. Think carefully about what you think the writer is showing you about this aspect of the text.
- 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.
- 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.
- Take time to construct your answer carefully and coherently. Starting with a thesis, in which you establish the broad argument of your answer or interpretation of the text sets you up to answer the question effectively.
- Select details from the texts which support your ideas and arguments, these may be quotations, but they can also be references to details of the text.
- Recognise that '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 conscious constructs, contrasts or foils, so that what one character does illuminates and reflects on the actions of other characters, characterisation – how characters develop and change over the course of the text and how the writer portrays this.
- Think about why the writer has written the text; what do you learn from it about people, human nature, society?
- The best way of approaching the study of a literary text is: **What** (is the writer writing about), **How** (has the writer presented their ideas, and **Why** (has the writer written this text; what ideas are they exploring). If you remember these three words you are addressing all of the assessment objectives for this qualification and learning to think about the text in a way that is going to benefit your ability to write about it. This isn't a formula for a response, but a way of thinking about each of the texts you study.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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