GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/1

Report on the Examination

8702

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General Introduction to the November Series

This has been an unusual exam series in many ways. Entry patterns have been very different from those normally seen in the summer, and students had a very different experience in preparation for these exams. It is therefore more difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the range of student responses seen in this series and those seen in a normal summer series. The smaller entry also means that there is less evidence available for examiners to comment on.

In this report, senior examiners will summarise the performance of students in this series in a way that is as helpful as possible to teachers preparing future cohorts while taking into account the unusual circumstances and limited evidence available.

Overview of Entry

The entry for this particular series was much smaller than usual for this subject, with just under 2000 students taking the paper. Student responses covered all the questions, but there were very few responses seen for texts other than those most commonly studied. However, the quality of responses spanned the full range of the mark scheme, with questions eliciting some excellent thought and analysis.

Overall, examiners noted that this series there was a greater proportion of brief and undeveloped responses. Despite the small candidature, there were also a number of rubric infringements, notably students attempting all the questions, particularly in Section A. Inevitably, these responses were brief, undeveloped, and built mainly around the question stem.

Generally, students seemed to demonstrate a stronger grasp of AO1 and AO3 than they did of AO2, with responses rooted more in plot and character, than in analysis of writer's methods. There was also some evidence of students using film versions of the texts as the basis of their analysis, with specific references to guns and petrol stations. Another common feature of less developed responses was a heavy reliance on the content of the extracts to provide the bulk, if not the entirety, of the answer.This was seen in both Section A and Section B of the paper.

Nonetheless, there were many insightful and thoughtful responses which showed a confident engagement with the texts.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A: Shakespeare

Examiners have seen responses to all questions this series, but as would be anticipated, by far the most common texts continued to be *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

The focus of question one proved very accessible to students, who engaged thoughtfully with the character. Better responses identified the focus of "change" in the question and responded to that prompt, often starting with the extract and then working back to what Lady Macbeth used to be like. This approach often worked well, but it might be useful to mention here that it is not compulsory for students to begin their response with the extract. On the whole, students were able to effectively contrast Lady Macbeth's actions and attitudes at the start of the play with her condition at the end.

There was some evidence of responses which were much more like generic character studies, and which failed to look at the change and development of the character over the play as a whole. It is important to address the question specifically to reach the higher strands of the mark scheme.

One area which did give cause for some concern was the language used to describe Lady Macbeth. The extract came from Act 5, Scene 1, in which Lady Macbeth is losing her mind because of the guilt she is suffering. It was noted that labels like "mental" and "psycho" are not conducive to a thoughtful and sensitive consideration of the character, nor are they very helpful in terms of broader attitudes and understanding of mental health in the modern world.

The *Romeo and Juliet* question asked students to consider the effects of conflict in the play, which again proved rich in opportunities for enquiry. Most students started with the extract and the impact, in particular on the citizens of Verona, before widening their answers to both the prologue and the feud between the two families, and specific incidents of violence, notably Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo, with some also considering the fighting between the servants in the opening scene. There were fruitful opportunities for students to explore attitudes to masculinity here. Some students made connections with the impact on Romeo and Juliet's relationship and drew subtle conclusions about the effect of the conflict on the two families involved.

There continued to be evidence of the issues that have been addressed in reports from previous series', the most obvious of these being the use of unnecessary historical detail and sweeping generalisation as a means of trying to address AO3 context. For example, the view that all Jacobean women were solely engaged in domestic duties. There continues to be evidence of a "model" paragraph which ends with a random or repeated sentence containing explicit contextual information: "In Jacobean England…", and then gives some generalised information about the era. This seldom adds to the quality of the preceding paragraph, because it does not link to the focus of the paragraph. When students tie context into the themes and ideas of the play, the focus of the question or ground it in specific details, they do much better. Students who reflected on Lady Macbeth's attitude towards her femininity generally fared well, because their interpretations were firmly grounded in the text and the themes and ideas it generates.

Section B: Nineteenth century novel

A Christmas Carol continues to hold sway amongst the nineteenth century novels, with *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the most frequent alternative, and *The Sign of Four* also appearing regularly.

Students were seen to respond well to the question on *A Christmas Carol*, using the extract effectively both for AO2 and AO3 and drawing confidently upon the rest of the text, particularly the portrayal of the Cratchit family, to focus on the suffering of the poor. Many succesfully challenged the question, arguing that while the Cratchits did indeed suffer, Dickens also presented them as a close knit, happy family who demonstrated that the poor were not morally inferior people, but rather were deserving of the same dignity and respect as anyone in society.

The vast majority of students focussed on the figures of "Ignorance" and "Want" and what they represented, which proved to be a very effective route into AO3, allowing students to consider the position of the poor in society, how they were perceived, and the conditions and attitudes which created the problems inherent in poverty. This is much more purposeful and effective than biographical information about the writer (most commonly details about Dickens' childhood), which continues to appear regularly in responses.

The question on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* asked students to examine how Stevenson presented ideas about good and evil in the novel, and while this was addressed, it was

often approached in a generalised manner, which could lead to rather vague reflections on good and evil. The stronger responses went beyond musings to identify much more specific details in the extract and the novel as a whole, where Stevenson illustrates ideas about good and evil: such as the respective appearances of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the effects of the phrase "trampled calmly" and the murder of Sir Danvers Carew. The more open focus of the question allowed some impressive analysis of other characters besides Jekyll and Hyde, most notably Utterson. Some students also used the settings very effectively to support their examination of good and evil.

The question on *The Sign of Four* generated some really engaged and enthusiastic responses, which suggested the character and the story remain vivid and appealing to students today. Students used the extract well to identify aspects of AO2, but also broadened their consideration to the characterisation of Holmes, the relationship between Holmes and Watson, and the use of Watson as a narrator. It was also pleasing to see the variety of places in which students found tension, not just the chase scene of the extract, but also in the rivalry with the official police, in the sub plot of Dr Watson and Mary Morston, in the night ride through London, and in the exoticism of some of the characters.

Of the remaining texts, there were just a handful of responses to each of these, and there was evidence of strong responses to all, showing all the questions gave students the potential to succeed.

Concluding Remarks

- Although there was evidence of a larger proportion of brief responses, across the paper there was ample evidence that some students were able to show a deep and engaged understanding of the text and the task.
- Generally, AO1 and AO3 were comparatively stronger than AO2. The best responses integrated analysis of writer's methods through careful selection of references and quotations which enabled them to explore both AO2 and AO3.
- AO3 is addressed most effectively by recognising the focus of the question and responding directly to this. There continues to be evidence of a lot of unnecessary and extraneous historical information.
- Careful thought should be given to the terminology used to explore sensitive issues – this was particularly the case regarding Lady Macbeth's condition at the end of the play.

Overall, students' responses once again demonstrated a willingness to explore and empathise with some challenging texts, characters and ideas, showing a thoughtful and genuine engagement, which was acknowledged by all who examined this series of the paper.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.