
GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/2

Report on the Examination

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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

This was a very small entry in comparison to a normal series, with just under 2000 students being entered for the examination. In the main, students appeared to have an understanding of rubric in terms of how to navigate their way through the paper; the majority responded to all four required responses and overall they used their time appropriately, although there were many examples of scripts where students had not written very much and therefore possibly not used the time available to their best advantage. Examiners did note that there were a higher proportion of rubric infringements than normal with Section C Unseen Poetry, with students either not attempting this part of the examination or merging their responses to the two questions in this section. There was also a proportionate increase in rather brief, unformed responses with students demonstrating their knowledge of the texts and responding to the tasks in quite minimal, relatively shapeless ways and therefore not being enabled to move into the higher levels of the mark scheme. This rather unformed approach was also demonstrated through the lack of planning; whilst a plan is by no means essential to an effective response, it is increasingly common to see some evidence of brief preparation prior to starting a response to task and the lack of this in this series, combined with the relative brevity and sometimes rather unfocused nature of some responses, was noticeable. However, there were also some vibrant and highly competent responses to some of the questions that demonstrated enthusiasm for the texts and a thorough grasp of the ideas within them.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A

The vast majority of students responded to An Inspector Calls. Both tasks elicited answers that demonstrated understanding of the play and were focused on the demands of the task. In Question 1 the quotation acted as a useful springboard for students to analyse Birling's character. At the upper end of the ability range, students focused on Birling as a device used by Priestley for dramatic effect, and were able to give many examples of his selfish behaviour as well as the reasons for Priestley presenting the character in such a negative light. Focusing on the purpose of the construction and presentation of this character allowed students to integrate contextual knowledge quite seamlessly. These responses picked up on subtleties to give a rounded overview of Birling's role in the play, although in the lower levels there was a tendency towards narrative responses that pointed to things he did and/or said. Question 2 was also quite a popular choice. In the lower levels, students tended to list the male characters, perhaps add a supporting quotation, and offer some comments on how they demonstrate irresponsibility, often supplementing this with moments of explicit contextual knowledge about the position of women / factory workers / suffragettes. These responses in particular tended towards the descriptive approach. In the better

responses, students used the moments they had selected to illustrate wider ideas about irresponsibility and again, were focused on the idea of character as conscious construct.

Of the other possible responses to Section A, *Blood Brothers*, *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm* were the most commonly-used texts with a few students also responding to *DNA*. Overall the responses to Question 3 and Question 13 demonstrated extremely effective integration of AO2 and AO3 and were a delight to read. Students responded very effectively to Question 3, in particular in the way that they used the focus of the question to demonstrate their contextual understanding of ideas. A number of different approaches were used, not just limited to the school scenes and education in its narrow sense, with some producing quite sophisticated responses about the impact of social class and upbringing on education in its broader sense. These responses in particular also dealt with AO2 via the presentation of the two boys as constructs to illustrate ideas. For *Lord of the Flies*, Question 13 was the more popular choice and provoked some excellent responses, eliciting a judicious blend of textual reference, contextual speculation and subtle insight. For *Animal Farm*, Question 17 was the more popular choice and generated some strong responses of a pleasing multivariety of types. This text is still where AO3 tends to be more bolted-on and less integrated into a view of ideas about power and control at a wider level. However, it was noted that students seem to be getting better at integrating such contextual information into their responses and tailoring it to the demands of the task. For example, those who concentrated on Napoleon in terms of what kind of leader he was and how he dealt with power did better than those who focused heavily on Napoleon as representative of Stalin. The former approach is to be encouraged as it enables students to talk more widely about the text's universal ideas rather than rooting their contextual focus completely on the allegorical perspective, which they sometimes struggle to manage effectively.

Section B

This section of the paper was less successful for the candidature when compared with responses seen in a normal series. The examining team noted that a larger proportion of students found it harder than usual to provide a treatment of an appropriate second poem and in some cases only responded to the named poem. AO2 was also not perhaps as confident or successful as the approach seen in a normal series. Lots of responses described the poem(s) and made some comments that demonstrated response to text and ideas, but demonstrated less engagement with the specifics of the task or with methods used to create meaning.

The most popular cluster by far was Power and Conflict. Students responded with enthusiasm to 'Remains' and the vast majority had a clear understanding of this poem and its ideas. 'War Photographer' was used by many students and most were able to connect the poems in terms of the focus of the task, regardless of the comparative approach that they took. 'Exposure' and 'Bayonet Charge' were also popular selections, with clear connections made in terms of PTSD and the immediate effects of war on the individual. There were some interesting responses seen to less immediately obvious selections, such as 'Kamikaze' or 'London'; some of the best responses took a wider approach to the task focus and wrote very effectively about how two poets explore ideas about the lack of individual power as their interpretation of 'difficult experiences'.

The responses to Question 25 were very few, but those that were seen produced some thoughtful ideas about 'Walking Away', many using 'Mother, any distance' as their selection of second poem. There was a distinct lack of range to the selection of second poem with the majority using either this poem or 'Before You Were Mine'. The question was focused on 'family relationships' and this was generally treated with quite a tight focus on mothers and children.

Section C

Some students chose to respond to this part of the paper first. For those who selected this approach, in the majority of cases it limited the amount of time they allowed themselves for the other sections and compressed their responses to Section A and / or Section B.

In this section, the students who responded effectively to Question 27.1 often focused on how methods impact on meaning (AO2). In many cases these were the same students who didn't do this as consistently or successfully in Section B. The vast majority talked about the use of repetition and the imagery of warmth and protection. There were some lovely ideas expressed about how the speaker viewed love as the most important metaphorical protection from the world and how the imagery is used to present this idea. The majority of students understood the key message of the poem and were able to link some of the methods to meaning. In the less successful responses, there was a tendency towards generalised responses about love rather than rooting comments in the poem itself.

Some examiners noted that responses to Question 27.2 were sometimes more detailed and lengthy than responses to Question 27.1. There was a sense that students had a clear understanding of the demands of this task and an improvement in the ways that methods were being linked to meaning in both poems. Many students demonstrated that they had read the question carefully and understood that the wording of the task provides the link between the poems for them.

Concluding Remarks

- Overall, students who spent time thinking about the focus of the question performed better than those who provided a response just to the text rather than to the text through the lens of the task. The better responses were very focused on the task and therefore were able to achieve well for AO3 as well as for AO1.
- There was an improvement in terms of AO3 by those students who understood that they needed to focus on the task and frame their response in terms of the ideas and themes suggested by the question.
- Students who considered characterisation, symbolism and plot development performed well for AO2 in Section A.
- There was some evidence of formulae-driven paragraph structures, and generally these students don't perform as well because these paragraphs tended to become self-contained 'mini-essays' rather than enabling an holistic approach to the task. These approaches also tended to encourage bolted-on context rather than focusing on ideas.
- Students who began their answer with a thesis statement that they could develop / explain / illustrate during their response, and perhaps return to at the end, tended to be more successful with AO1.

In summary, there were as always some thoughtful, engaged and quite delightful responses to the texts that were an absolute pleasure to read and students are to be commended for the way they have undertaken this examination and the engagement they have demonstrated.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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