



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/2 Shakespeare and Unseen Poetry
Report on the Examination

8702
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General Introduction to the November Series

This has been another 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

Students once again showed understanding of the requirements of this component and managed their time well. There were very few examples of students running out of time this year and in the main they used their time very effectively, including some good examples of brief plans that seem to have been used to gather their thoughts and think about the key words in the questions. Although there was, perhaps inevitably, much less of a spread of response-types than would normally be seen, there were some extremely competent and high-level responses to the texts that demonstrated very high levels of engagement and understanding.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A

The vast majority of responses were to *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*; although responses to all other of the available Shakespeare texts were seen, these were very few and far between. A noticeable feature of this year's entry overall, but in particular with this section, was the focus on task. Students were extremely focused on the key words in the question, in particular the AO3 focus, and showed real determination to ensure that their comments were directly related to the demands of the question.

Students engaged really well with the question on *Macbeth*, and appeared in the main to be very familiar with the extract. At every level, students demonstrated a secure familiarity with the text and were able to cite appropriate references to support their answers. They were keen to write about the nature of the relationship between the Macbeths and many used the nature of the exchange between them in this scene to discuss the nature of the control being demonstrated and how this changes later in the play. There was consistent evidence of a real understanding of the extract. Many contrasted Macbeth's feelings of guilt with Lady Macbeth's preoccupation with destroying the evidence and showing no guilt at all. Many students also dealt with details of the extract itself effectively: the structure of the conversation between the couple, the fragmented rhythms, and also the use of commands, as illustration of the power dynamic in this moment. When talking about the play as a whole, students made some convincing connections exploring how the relationship changes. This included contrasting this moment to the beginning of the play, providing clearly explained responses of the ways Shakespeare demonstrates the close initial bond between the couple and how this is shown to fragment during the course of the play.

Many students talked about the switching of gender roles as a contextual factor, but this was not as successful as those who concentrated on Lady Macbeth's ambitious manipulation of Macbeth by calling his masculinity into question. Quite a lot of responses argued that Shakespeare was showing how women should not be in control and how this upset the natural order. In the main, this was not handled as convincingly as those who simply focused on the key word 'relationship'.

The question on *Romeo and Juliet* elicited similar levels of engagement, and there were some stunning responses focusing on how Juliet demonstrates strength and power in this extract, and in the play overall. It was really fascinating to see the way students dealt with AO3 so effectively with this play. In particular, considering the expectations of Juliet's age and gender and how she subverts these expectations due to her love for Romeo as well as her own pragmatism and strength of character.

It was really interesting to see how students had considered structure and plot as a means of addressing AO2 for both this question and the *Macbeth* task, using the structure of the play as a means of tracking the respective character / relationship development very effectively. There was evidence of being comfortable with both of these texts and therefore selecting appropriate, useful moments from elsewhere to illustrate their ideas.

Question 7.1

There were some wonderful responses to 7.1 which demonstrated that the poem was clearly accessible to students at every level. Responses were original, varied and showed a lively level of engagement with ideas. Many students discussed the idea of the speaker being lonely, but some developed an interpretation rooted in the poem being a comment on modern society. There were some discussions about nature being overpowered by human activity, some alluding to refugee experience related to 'alien', fear of the night as a strange and mysterious time or the ecological impact of human activity on the natural world. Some students focused on how fascinating the city at night was with bright lights and constant movement and busyness. There were some interesting treatments of AO2, for example by talking about personification of the moon, the simile 'like a slow-moving river' and the alliterative 'squalid' and 'sinister'. They identified the speaker's ambivalent feelings towards the city contrasted by a clear identification with the moon. Overall, it seems as though this poem was understood by all students, and the range of ways in which they chose to interpret meaning was fascinating to see.

Question 7.2

All responses seen showed students finding links or points of comparison between the presentation of the two cities. Many looked at the difference in perspective of the two speakers and made interesting comments linked to this about the attitudes towards the cities at night. The use of imagery was a strong comparative factor, as well as comments on one poem embracing nature whereas the other was trying to escape its harshness. Many talked about the night as sleepless and awake with energy with night walkers and bright lights in the first poem whereas in November Night it is presented as cold, dull, and empty with everyone hibernating from the harsh weather.

Once again there was evidence of students understanding the remit of this task increasingly well and knowing that they needed to link their comments on writers' methods to meaning, as this remains the most important word in the AO2 descriptor. It was also evident that students understood that the wording of the task provides the link between the two poems. Those who had spent a moment gathering their thoughts were able to provide a more focused response to this task in particular.

Concluding Remarks

- Overall, those 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.
- Students who used the key words in the question for the Shakespeare task performed much better for AO3 than those who attempted to make generalised comments about the role of women in Shakespearian society.
- Those students who thought about plot and structure were enabled by this approach to achieve higher marks for AO2.
- As in all years, those students who had thought carefully about the question demonstrated this through an opening thesis statement that gave them a structure and focus to their overall response.

Once again, the examining team were impressed with the way students responded to this very unusual series and had the privilege to read some extremely impressive pieces of work.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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