



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/1N 19th-century novel

Report on the Examination

8702

June 2022

Version: 1.0

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Introduction

This year's series has seen a welcome step back towards normality following the Covid enforced break in external examinations, although the effects of this do linger on in the adapted format of the papers this year. Students were answering just one question on the nineteenth century novel on this paper.

On the whole, students have engaged actively and thoughtfully with the texts and the questions in the exam paper and have acquitted themselves well. There was a sense of "business as usual", and it would be difficult to identify how students have been affected by pandemic-related loss of learning on the basis of the responses alone, which have shown a determined approach to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2022 exam for teachers, and will:

- offer an overview of some reflections that arose from the experience of marking the paper this year
- discuss some key points from some of the more popular texts
aim to clarify how the assessment objectives relate to approaches to the examination
- offer some suggestions that might be useful for students to consider.

General Overview

Students' responses overall demonstrated a confident understanding of the text they had studied, coupled with a clear awareness of what they needed to do to answer the question effectively. For example, students are clearly using references and quotations to support and illustrate their responses, they are clearly discussing aspects of the writer's methods and they engage readily with the writer's ideas, as prompted by the questions.

Rubric infringements were few and far between. The cases where a student either fails to refer to the extract, or solely focuses on the extract, are very rare. It is clear that the format and expectations of the questions are clearly grasped and managed by students. Where students can seem less confident is in how they structure and develop their responses. Obviously, there is a complete range of abilities taking the exam, and many produce carefully constructed and focussed responses. 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. These often took the form of an opening sentence linked to the keywords of the question, supported by a quotation, followed by a sentence or two which zoomed in on a specific word in the quotation, often explaining its meaning, and then providing a sentence broadening the comment out, and perhaps linking the chosen word to the character's feelings or actions. It is clear that this does address aspects of the mark scheme, but careful thought should be given to providing students with rigid models for their responses. Clearly, sentence structures can enable some students, offering support and the reassurance they need to express their ideas. Equally these sentence structures can become quite limiting and potentially something of a straitjacket for others, and consideration should be given to how necessary and appropriate they are.

Some things which might be worthy of consideration in helping students to construct complete responses would be to consider planning, establishing a thesis or line of enquiry for the essay, and thinking carefully about the order in which they explore the text: specifically, how and when they use the extract in their answer.

There is some evidence of planning by students in the answer booklets, but it is impossible to establish the extent of this, because many students will probably have begun their thinking by annotating the question and the extract in the question booklet. However, where there is evidence of planning, there is frequently a well-constructed answer that follows. Plans commonly identify a number of references or examples that the student is going to use in their response, and this often provides a sense of direction and coherence for the student.

One benefit of planning is that it encourages students to think about how they start their response, rather than just leaping straight into writing. Students do need to use the extract as part of their answer, but there is no expectation to begin with the extract. A common opening is “*In the extract [writer’s name] shows...*”. Often this leads to a discussion of quotations from the extract but fails to place them in the context of the novel as a whole.

The question is written “*Starting with this extract...*”, but it might be helpful for teachers to clarify this as “*start by thinking about this extract you have been given...*”, or “*start your answer by reading this extract and then explain...*” There is no expectation that students have to begin their response by addressing the extract immediately. It is, of course, perfectly acceptable to do this, but it is not obligatory.

For example, with the *A Christmas Carol* question, the extract came from Stave 2 and many students began with this and explored how it illustrated Scrooge’s loneliness and isolation. This was a clear and sensible way into an answer. This approach was particularly effective when the student related this to the structure of the novella, and recognised that by beginning there, they were dealing with Scrooge’s life chronologically, so saw a bigger picture. They were then able to engage with the effects of isolation: how Scrooge’s childhood had formed the man, in a clear and effective manner.

Others started at the beginning of the text itself, exploring how Scrooge’s character was initially established by Dickens, and then moved to the extract to explain the reasons for this, and how Dickens sought to change the reader’s perceptions of Scrooge. Again, this was a very effective approach.

What is important is that students consider how they are starting with their answer; where they choose to begin, either with the extract or elsewhere in the text, lays a foundation and helps them to construct a response which addresses the focus of the question. Much less effective is a series of very similar paragraphs picking out a series of quotations from the extract, followed by some references to the whole text, and essentially making the same point about each one.

Many students begin their response with a thesis, which effectively established a good focus on the question and engaged with the text in terms of themes and ideas. This often proved to be a very solid foundation for exploration of writers’ methods, as well as serving as a springboard to further develop their understanding of the ideas outlined briefly in the opening of their essay.

The Texts

A Christmas Carol appears to have become even more dominant this year, followed as ever by *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Sign of Four*. Responses on the other texts were relatively few and far between, but when seen frequently showed impressive levels of engagement and thought. It is evident that where they are studied, *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* do draw very considered and insightful responses from students.

Students addressed the questions effectively and found a variety of ways to respond to them. The question on *A Christmas Carol* focussed on “loneliness and isolation” and by far the most common route to answering this was to examine Scrooge’s development as a character through the novella, which does, of course, allow the student to engage fully with the question. Scrooge dominates the novel, appearing on virtually every page, so it is to be expected that this is a common approach, and the extract focussed on Scrooge’s schooldays, so this was a natural stepping off point, often to consider his life in chronological order.

Where students moved beyond Scrooge, they frequently started to engage with the text both in an interestingly structural way, considering other characters as foils to Scrooge and what this revealed about loneliness and isolation, and also in a more conceptual way. There were interesting conceptual responses built around the figures of “Ignorance and Want” as isolated and neglected figures who embody these important themes of the novella.

With *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the focus of the question was on Jekyll as a mysterious character and students wrote confidently about him, many being able to make perceptive comments about Stevenson’s choice of language in relation to the character. The strongest responses came when students explored not only how Stevenson presents the character, but also the ideas he is exploring through the character of Jekyll, considering the character’s attitude and motivation, and indeed the lessons he has learned. As ever, it is through the marriage of why and how that the most sophisticated responses are developed. Students found lots to tackle in terms of individual, societal, scientific and religious values as ways of discussing the mysterious aspects of Jekyll’s character.

The Sign of Four question prompted many impressive responses, with the prompt of Holmes as an “extraordinary detective” being particularly fruitful as it allowed students to explore the character in a particular context. Again, it is perhaps noticeable that the best responses see the question as a stepping off point to discuss this aspect of the text. So while Holmes is mentioned in the question, many students also considered his relationships with Watson and Watson’s role as narrator, and with Athelney Jones as his rival, as a means of demonstrating Holmes’ genius.

The facility to make connections and comparisons like this also equips students with a wide range of material to draw upon to support their analysis and develop their argument. Once they consider other characters, students are thinking about the text structurally by looking at contrasts and their effects.

Assessment Objectives

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

Students could readily identify the focus of the questions and were able to draw upon the texts to discuss them. The vast majority wrote with a determination to show their understanding. As has already been stated, they demonstrated an appreciation of what was expected of them in terms of the content of their answers – using references and quotations, discussing the writer’s methods, considering the themes and ideas of the text – and worked to address these areas in their responses.

The area for development, as outlined in the general overview, would be the more holistic essay writing skills, which would begin to equip students with some strategies they can use to construct a coherent response. This would help, in many cases, to move them towards the “clear, explained” of a Level 4 response.

References were used confidently and effectively across the range of responses. In many cases these took the form of quotations, but this does not have to be the case. For example, many used the Cratchit family as an illustration of the opposite of isolation and loneliness, which served as a perfectly appropriate reference to develop their argument.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

One of the most noticeable aspects of marking this year was the absence of arcane subject terminology to identify aspects of a writer’s methods. This has been a persistent theme of examiner’s reports since the start of this specification and it is pleasing to see that this is being acted upon. Complex technical terminology may identify a literary device, but on its own it says nothing of its impact and effect. Removing this type of terminology seems to help the student to focus on explaining the effect, rather than identifying the feature. It also leads to clearer, more fluent writing, without shoe-horning these terms into the response.

The continued use of word classes, frequently incorrectly applied, was still a noticeable feature. *“Dickens uses the noun / verb / adjective / adverb “oyster” to suggest...”* seems curiously unsympathetic to the idea of English literature, and it might be more natural to write something like *“Dickens uses the image / simile of an “oyster”, or “Dickens’ choice of an “oyster” to describe Scrooge suggests...”*.

‘Writer’s methods’ in the mark scheme is an all-embracing term for anything the writer does deliberately to make meaning and convey their ideas. There were many excellent and perceptive analyses of specific words and of literary devices. As has already been alluded to, broader structural areas also make for a fruitful area of exploration, allowing students to explore and analyse ideas from different perspectives, which also perhaps allows for a greater variety and depth in the response.

Examples of this being done very effectively were where characters are used as foils for each other, so there was thoughtful analysis of characters like Fezziwig, Bob Cratchit and Fred, in contrast to Scrooge, which gave the students who followed this route another perspective on isolation and loneliness in relation to Dickens’ message. Others examined the characterisation of Scrooge across the novella, considering how the character changes, and analysing the contrasts between the opening and closing staves, in relation to Dickens’ themes and ideas.

This idea of contrast can be effective even at extract level. Many saw the juxtaposition in the two paragraphs of the Jekyll and Hyde extract, between the effusive Jekyll and the reclusive Jekyll, as indicative of his “mysterious” character, giving them an excellent opportunity to consider the relationship between structure and ideas.

AO3: ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

As with subject terminology, the incidences of irrelevant and unhelpful historical information are now, fortunately, few and far between. Similarly, there is far less biographical information about Dickens evident in answers, though this did sometimes appear, perhaps because students could easily draw parallels between Scrooge’s schooldays, which were the focus of the extract and Dickens’ childhood. This rarely demonstrates an understanding of the text, and thus rarely gains much credit.

The understanding that if the student clearly addresses the question, then they will be writing about the ideas of the text, is becoming increasingly embedded in responses, leading to better, more fluent answers to the question that engage more thoughtfully with the writer’s ideas and the student’s interpretation of these. So, for example, there might be the acknowledgement that Scrooge, at the start of the novella, embodies Malthusian values, rather than a lengthy paragraph about Thomas Malthus and his theories about population growth. The student can then explore why Dickens has done this, and what he is suggesting about society’s attitudes, which demonstrates their thinking about the novella’s ideas far more effectively.

Advice for Students

Take time to think about how you are going to answer the question. Don’t just jump straight in and start writing. This might well take the form of a written plan, in which you think about what you are going to use and include in your answer and the order in which you will write about things.

Think about your introduction and how you start your answer. A thesis is the standard way to start, in which you set out the argument you are going to make. This is powerful because it engages with the question, the big ideas of the text and your interpretation of the text. A good thesis is a solid foundation for the rest of your essay, giving you a sense of direction and purpose.

Think about where you begin your answer. You do not have to start by writing about the extract. Think about where might be the most sensible place to begin. This may be the extract, but it may be somewhere else in the text.

Consider the full range of things you can discuss to demonstrate your understanding of the writer’s methods. Writing about characterisation, particularly about how the writer contrasts different characters, and the qualities and attitudes they represent, can be a very fruitful line of enquiry.

Be thoughtful in your choice and use of subject terminology. Often using word classes to identify types of words (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) is not very helpful or interesting in English literature. Word classes are aspects of grammar, but Dickens isn’t choosing a word because it’s an adjective, he’s choosing it because it helps him to describe something in a way that develops the character or the ideas of the text or the atmosphere. Focus more on why the writer has chosen the word and image, and not on what type of word it is.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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