



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/2 Shakespeare and unseen poetry
Report on the Examination

8702
June 2022

Version: 1.0

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Introduction

This was the first full examination series since 2019. Students and teachers have experienced a great deal of upheaval in this time and have faced many challenges. It is perhaps therefore even more important to credit, and commend, the efforts to prepare for these exams and to see the levels of engagement with the literary texts studied in preparation for them.

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

- give an overview of general reflections that arose from the experience of marking the exam papers this year
- discuss some of the key points of each section of the paper
- provide clarification of the assessment objectives within the context of how these are assessed in this qualification
- offer some suggestions that might be useful for students to consider.

General Overview

Students managed their time extremely well overall, with only a relatively small number failing to complete all the tasks, and a large number not only completing the paper, but responding in considerable detail. As we are rewarding qualitatively rather than quantitatively, concise responses were often more effective than very lengthy ones. Students at all levels seemed well organised and, in the main, showed that they understood the assessment objectives and how to demonstrate them.

The more successful responses focused on answering the question and structured their response around it. Relating back to the question throughout the essay worked effectively across all ability levels. Many students understood that a reference does not mean a quotation and that, as long as they were using the text to respond to the task, they were addressing AO1. The integration of apt references, sometimes via a well-selected direct word / phrase and sometimes by reference to a specific moment from the text, was a notable feature of successful answers. Because of the closed-book nature of many of the tasks across the qualification as a whole, there is no requirement to rote-learn extensive amounts of direct quotations. What we are seeking to reward is students' knowledge of the text and how they use this knowledge to answer a question about it.

This reprises a theme from previous years, but there was the sense that students potentially working at higher levels were not always served well by overly-scaffolded, constrained methods of structuring their response. Of course, this approach can help to support some students into level 3, but for others, scaffolding can have the effect of inadvertently restricting responses at lower levels. For explanation to be 'clear' (both in the sense of 'understood' and emphatic), students need to be freed from the shackles of a formulaic mode of expression to sustain a focus on an idea and clearly explain it. The PEE approach can often restrict students into adopting a Level 2 'supported' style, typically by presenting a quotation and then attempting to break it down at word-level rather than linking to deeper meanings and ideas. This can create stilted and unimaginative comment, and can constrain more able students.

There was a noticeable increase in students using very similar words and phrases to begin their responses to the *Macbeth* question in particular. Phrases such as 'the eponymous tragedy' and 'the archetypal Scottish play' appeared regularly. These phrases didn't really help students at all, but do perhaps indicate an increasing reliance on certain online revision channels.

Section A: Shakespeare

Macbeth and *Romeo and Juliet* were the two overwhelmingly popular texts. When seen, there were some outstanding responses to *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*, with *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest* proving least popular. The following comments are relevant to any of the plays but the examples will be drawn from responses to the first two texts.

Many students demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of the plays. Most were able to use the extract as a springboard to their thinking, often moving into higher levels once they were able to exemplify their appreciation of what could be seen in the extract and its correlation to elsewhere in the play. There was a sense that students are not constrained by feeling they need a 'balanced' approach between the extract and the wider play – the majority naturally moved between the two in a way that proved to be very enabling for them.

Those performing at lower levels tended to organise their responses in terms of writing initially about the extract and then moving on to offering more wider-ranging evidence. More able students often favoured a different approach, with many moving seamlessly between the extract and other well-selected moments. These responses often exhibited insight and the ability to use an impressive range of knowledge of the text. An introduction which engaged with the task and outlined a thesis which was then exemplified through the rest of the response was an effective approach.

Working through the play chronologically, including commenting on the extract in terms of a wider understanding of its position in the play, allowed demonstration of understanding of broader ideas, sometimes enabling thoughtful comments on structure. Those who performed best had a thorough knowledge of the text that enabled them to trace character development, show knowledge of Shakespeare's dramaturgy and deployment of structural devices, as well as grasping the significance of the extract to the text overall.

The *Macbeth* task proved to be ideal in enabling students to focus on the question, in particular AO3. Across all levels of response, students recognised fear as a key part of understanding the character and the play. This question seemed to provide students with ample scope for different approaches and foci in relation to fears: Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth; fear of the supernatural; fear of the consequences of his actions; fear of God.

The question on *Romeo and Juliet* was also well-received with students seeming well-prepared for the task. Students were able to approach the extract with reasonable confidence, and it enabled them to address both AO2 and AO3 with relative ease. There were some meaningful comments on the imagery of sun, moon and stars, and on light and dark more generally. Like the fear question on *Macbeth*, Romeo's feelings were a helpful key for students of all abilities to respond to at some level, being such a central theme of the play. Students who explored contextual factors of fate (generally referencing the prologue and the final scenes) or religion (often via references to the importance of chastity or to Friar Lawrence and his role in the tragedy) often fared well.

A number of students used the extract to address AO2. However, those who moved into higher levels often understood that AO2 is not limited to the narrow definition of 'language, form and structure' in the wording of the AO itself, understanding that in our mark scheme we simply refer to 'writers' methods'. Responses moved into higher levels when they explored wider methods, for example characterisation, plot development, setting and tone. A number of students considered the presentation of the development of Macbeth's character, from fearless at the outset of the play to fearful at other junctures. Equally well-explored was the use of setting in *Romeo and Juliet*, where students appreciated the possible significance of the balcony and night-time, linking these observations to Romeo placing Juliet on a pedestal, and the conflict(s) of sun/moon and day/night.

Less successful responses had constrained understanding of what AO3 means in GCSE English Literature. There were a number that spent too much time attempting to deal with historical context, often in quite a muddled, bolted-on manner, making sweeping generalisations about Shakespearian England that demonstrated a lack of understanding of the concepts they were attempting to discuss and appeared more as simple comments on the period, disconnected from the focus of the question. This only served to detract from an argument and weaken an overall response. The best use of AO3 was by students who explored themes and ideas as indicated by the wording of the task, rather than attempting to produce a pre-learned history essay. It's important to remember that our mark scheme refers to ideas, perspectives and contextual factors, and that the key focus for AO3 is presented in the wording of the question.

There is no requirement to discuss historical facts and information except where the teacher feels that a deeper understanding of the ideas and themes in the play can be developed from inclusion of such in their teaching. For example, those students who talked about the concept of power, or position / status in *Macbeth*, linking this to a discussion of Macbeth's fears, fared far better than those attempting to shoehorn some pre-learned material about The Gunpowder Plot or James the First's preoccupation with witchcraft into a question that had nothing to do with either piece of information. However, those who mentioned the Divine Right of Kings, or The Great Chain of Being seemed more able than in previous years to link these concepts to the focus of the question. Rather than merely 'offering up' these contextual factors, almost as if by the very mention of them they are achieving marks, it is far more beneficial to include such an idea when the concept can be effectively used in relation to the specifics of the task.

For *Romeo and Juliet*, students who could 'place' this extract used it well as a springboard for developing Romeo's feelings in love and there were some useful contrasts made with his impulsivity versus Juliet's maturity and awareness of obstacles. This led to some usefully linked AO3, which worked far better than disconnected generalities about women's roles in society and courtly love / Petrarchan lovers. More useful approaches to AO3 occurred when students moved in via AO2 and the shared sonnet to explore portents of a more equal love whereby the tradition of the male sonneteer was shattered by the shared sonnet and Juliet having a more equal voice. This was then helpfully contrasted to the unrequited love for Rosaline which also allowed for some debate about the true nature of Romeo's feelings; again, very productive AO3 focus on the key concept in the task.

Section B: Response to Unseen Poetry

Students responded very well to the unseen poetry and their answers were a pleasure to read. The 'story' in 'Shoulders' was understood by nearly all, and the wider message was interpreted by most. Responses highlighted a humbling level of empathy for people and humanity in general. In light of the turbulence experienced in the pandemic, this was uplifting and often moving to read and there seemed to be something in this poem for every student to respond to.

The relationship between a man and his son was universally appealing. Even at the lowest levels, students were able to recognise the relationship, and the question was a useful nudge into the key themes of the poem. The mostly chronological structure at the beginning of the poem also enabled many to trace the progression and the actions of the man. Whilst some wrote successfully about the poem's structure, there were also some confused and less convincing attempts to write about, for example, enjambement and caesura, with some students keen to include comments on structure, but unclear about how to explain how these methods impacted upon meanings. Those who considered the closing lines were rewarded with the ideal opportunity to broaden their analysis from the micro to the macro, with many commenting on the cyclical use of 'rain'. The increasingly didactic tone with the shift to the first person plural inclusive pronoun was usefully employed by some, as well as the force of the enjambement connected to this in the penultimate stanza, coupled with effect of the emphatic ending.

Many students were quick to pick up on the more metaphorical meanings of the first poem and its wider significance and message to its readers. The use of capitalisation, the metaphors of the cargo and 'hum of a boy's dream' were enabling to students of all abilities to at least begin to address AO2. An approach that worked well was when students thought of the poem as an extended metaphor or saw it as dealing with the concerns many young people have about mental health, or as the poet helping us to see issues like racism, refugees and socialism.

For 7.2, there were many shared as well as differing methods for students to compare and only very rarely was no response made to this task. Environmental issues were clearly understood for the second poem. The overwhelming majority were able to connect the main shared idea that linked the two poems. Most understood the need to address methods and how those methods create meanings, with many writing at some length and in substantial detail. Writer's choices is a perfectly acceptable 'method' and many clearly understood this. Realising the symbolic and metaphorical significance was a marker of more successful responses. There were some thoughtful comparisons about people being selfish, or people being put in a position where they have to consider those other than themselves. Many commented on the size and enormity of nature against the fragility of humans with points being made about the size of the mountain in contrast to the size of the child being carried, or the idea of the endless rain, as metaphors for problems in life that can be overcome via humanity and a focus on community responsibility.

Assessment Objectives

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

An opening thesis statement demonstrating understanding of the demands of the question was very helpful. There was a welcome move towards discussing the extract as it appeared chronologically in the play. This proved to be really liberating and useful, as well as demonstrating an overview of the text as a whole and being able to shape and construct a confident answer to the question. Adopting a more 'free form' attitude to extract and whole, utilising evidence from within and without as suited the line of argument at any given moment, benefited many.

As previously mentioned, 'references' does not mean 'quotations'; it *might*, but it does not have to. However, it was clear that many students had learned some key references to the Shakespeare text and some used these effectively as illustration of their confident grasp of the text as a whole. There is a difference between the response that is peppered with extraneous, 'remembered and revised' direct quotations and the response that selects an appropriate moment, or word, or phrase, to exemplify a good point that they want to make and thereby illustrates their ability to use the text to answer the question.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

There is no requirement to write about structure. The decision to do so did not always benefit students, especially when they chose to, for example: count lines; identify stanza formation; state that 'there is no rhyme scheme' – but had nothing to say about these observations. The identification of particular features of poetic construction, such as tercets, quatrains and so on, is often an impediment, interrupting a student's focus on examining words, ideas and meanings. Previous reports have commented on the difficulty students have with saying anything meaningful about rhyme schemes, and the same is often true for discussion of stanza formation.

Structure was handled much more effectively by students who explored structural elements through, for example, the cyclical structure or the volta in 'Shoulders', shifts in tone or narrative perspective, the threads that run through the texts (such as the motif of blood in *Macbeth*), or the ways in which changes in character are presented (Romeo's change from 'boy' to 'man' during the course of the play).

The use of literary critical terminology remains problematic. There is little value in employing this terminology when there is no discussion of its effect on meanings. Too often, this lapsed into technique spotting rather than meaningful comment or analysis. In these instances, students would have been better off exploring the impact of particular words or images. Subject terminology means ‘the language of the subject’ and students clearly writing about a literary text, using character / scene / line / setting are doing fine, as long as what they say demonstrates understanding of meanings. Furthermore, students still seem to want to label parts of speech in their responses and again, this often has no significance at all.

AO3: ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

There was less evidence of AO3 being addressed solely as social and historical context, separated from and often bolted onto the ends of paragraphs (which is the definition of Level 1 ‘explicit’ AO3). Teachers have evidently encouraged students to consider context in a much wider sense: in the context of ideas; in the context of the whole play; in the context of the genre, or themes, or influences on ideas and how they have been shaped. This approach was welcomed: it exemplifies the students’ appreciation of the whole text and led to some perceptive, convincing discussion that was directly linked to the focus of the particular question. After all, there is no definitive, objective and perennial account of history. An over-simplified understanding of the historical record as fixed, objective and beyond debate can hamper achievement rather than develop it. Often students with information like this to share, did not understand it themselves but felt it was important to include in their answer, even if it had nothing to do with the AO3 focus of the task.

Advice for Students

Spend a few minutes thinking about the question before starting to answer it. Remember that the question gives a guide to how to answer and gives you the AO3 focus that we want you to consider.

Revision websites and resources can offer some reassurance and last-minute tips, but they do not replace the work you have undertaken with your teachers during your GCSE study or your ability to think for yourself, which is what we want to see in your responses.

An introduction that demonstrates your understanding of the question can be a really helpful way of starting your answer and can provide a strong foundation for your essay. Keep referring back to the question as you go, and aim to give a conclusion that consolidates the big ideas you have been discussing. It shows that you are ‘in charge’ of your essay and that you know what you think.

When you read the extract, read the contextualising statement first of all so you understand where it fits into the overall play. Remember that we have chosen the extract deliberately because it will help you to understand the question. You don’t have to understand every word of the extract and you can refer to as much or as little as you want. It isn’t a ‘hurdle’ to jump over, it’s a ‘ladder’ to help you to respond to the task. Then, take a moment to think. Why have we given you this moment from the play to read? How does it connect with the key focus of the question? Where does this moment fit into the play as a whole and can I use this information to start my thinking about the question?

Similarly, read the questions to the two unseen poems before you start to read the poems. These questions help you to understand what the poems are about. We know you’ve not seen them before and we are trying to use the questions to help you to understand the poems.

AO3 is ideas, themes and perspectives and not ‘history’. Answer the question and you are addressing AO3. Take a moment to think. What makes the ideas in this text relevant to human beings? What key concepts about being human, or part of society, or a part of a relationship, or alive in the world, are being presented in this text? If you have information about ideas related to the time that the play was written, such as The Divine Right of Kings, or The Great Chain of Being,

or Petrarchan lovers, what can you say about these ideas *that is related to the question*? Are you absolutely sure that ‘everyone at that time’ would have been religious, or anti-feminist, or terrified of witches? In other words, try to make sure that you are answering the question, and writing about the human beings that are being presented to you in the play. They’re not very different to the human beings that we are today. After all, that’s why we study English Literature; it gives insight into our world by looking at other people’s lives and considering how those lives have been presented to us.

Whilst film adaptations can add much to classroom study of a Shakespeare text, you do not achieve marks for analysing cinematic or directorial decisions in isolation from your focus on the text itself. Spending time talking about costume or setting decisions made by a particular director are not relevant to your response to GCSE English Literature.

You get no marks for naming techniques. Talk about what the writer has done to make meanings – that is all you need to do. Notice the words being used, and how characters are created by writers, and how interesting places can be presented, and the sequencing of events. All of these things have been done on purpose and you can say some really useful and interesting things about them.

Sometimes the well-understood technical term affords a useful shorthand, such as ‘this is Macbeth’s anagnorisis’ is quicker to write than ‘this is the moment in the play where Macbeth realises that his actions have led to his downfall’. However, the term on its own serves no purpose. Labelling parts of speech is not necessary. We don’t need to know that the word being used is ‘a noun’ or ‘an adjective’. Discuss grammatical terminology only if it is relevant and useful to ideas.

If you want to talk about structure, please feel free to do so but only when you’ve got something useful or interesting to say about it. The ways that a writer has organised a text can be fascinating, in particular when it is a novel or a play, structure does not have to be limited to talking about poetry. Sometimes it can be really interesting to think about what is going on at the beginning, the middle, and then the end of a play or novel in order to think about how characters have been set up for the reader, and how people, and their relationships with others / the world, change during the course of it.

Perhaps this is the most important piece of advice we could give you, so it has been saved until the end. Do you understand what this play, or novel, or poem, is *about*? Do you understand what meanings it has, and what ideas the writer might have been exploring when they wrote it? If you don’t know what the text is *about*, you can’t write an effective response to it. When you are studying the text, think: *what* is the text about, *how* has the writer communicated meanings, and *why* do you think they have written it.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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