
GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/1 Shakespeare and the 19th century novel
Report on the Examination

8702/1
June 2023

Version: 1.1

Further copies of this Report are available from aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2023 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Introduction

GCSE English Literature returned to its standard format, with students responding to questions on Shakespeare and the nineteenth century novel. Students have clearly risen to the challenge and tackled the paper with great focus and determination, demonstrating a reassuring readiness to engage with these challenging texts and find resonances in the world in which they find themselves today.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the Summer 2023 exam for teachers, and 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 responded well to the paper, showing a clear understanding of the expectations of the questions. There were very few examples of rubric infringements, with students now appreciating that they need to respond to both the extract and the whole text. The only notable rubric infringement are the occasional cases where the student attempts to answer all the questions on the paper. There are clearly situations where students get carried away with their response and spend far longer on one section than the other, therefore it is worth reiterating that each question carries the same number of marks, and the best approach is to give broadly equal time to each section of the paper.

In terms of answering the questions, there appears to be a greater number of students who are writing clearly structured responses which begin with a thesis, and this is becoming increasingly apparent at various levels of response. Whereas in previous years, this has been noted as an indicator of a higher level response, increasingly students who are getting marks in level two and three are offering some form of thesis, and in many cases this is effective in moving them towards higher levels of achievement.

It is also notable that some students arrive with ready prepared opening paragraphs, sometimes indicated with stock phrases such as “the eponymous hero” and “in the didactic novella”. Whether this is the most effective way of starting an extended response to a particular question is debatable. While such an approach may offer a means to get students writing and help to settle them, it can sometimes be the start of a lengthy opening, and because they are not specifically addressing the question it can be an unnecessary preamble before students really start gaining their marks by focusing their attention on the specifics of the particular task.

In a similar vein, there are responses where students are clearly following a set model for every paragraph. Typically, these will begin by picking out a quotation, then focusing on a specific word from that quotation and finally end with a very generalised contextual statement, for example “A Jacobean audience would...” While it is clear to see this type of approach and structure is targeting the mark scheme, it rapidly becomes very limiting for some students who repeatedly follow the same approach to each paragraph rather than exploring the text and developing their ideas.

Common factors of successful responses include having a clear focus on the question. For example, once students had identified either change, or masculinity, or both, as central concepts of the Macbeth question, they then had clear sense of direction which not only enabled them to select relevant details from the text to support and illustrate their responses, but which also ensured they were discussing relevant ideas. There was no specific requirement to write about both of these elements and it's important to stress that the questions should be seen as an open invitation for students to take whatever direction they choose when responding to a particular task.

Students were using references effectively at all levels of response. Often these were certain key words which encapsulate ideas, and which allow students to explore concepts in depth. One particularly fruitful use of references is where they are paired across the text – another example from Macbeth, coupling “Give me my armour” or “hacked” from the extract, with ideas of “brave”, “valiant” Macbeth and “unseamed” from the start of the play, gave students not only avenues into discussing the effects of language choices, but also aspects of structure and characterisation.

Ideas and context have long been a feature of these reports, and we continue to see a significant amount of spurious detail related to historical and/or biographical background, which does not develop an analysis of the text itself. However, one really welcome approach which was increasingly evident this year, possibly because of the focus of the questions, was students relating the ideas of the text to their present day context. For example, we saw examples of responses where Macbeth was considered as a selfish warmonger satisfying his own ends, clearly related to the world we live in today; the question on the effects of greed in A Christmas Carol elicited responses where the poverty of the Victorian era was still apparent in the rise of foodbanks in the present day; and the prompt of isolation and loneliness in the Frankenstein question drew comparisons with the effects of the pandemic. It was clear that these were not pre-prepared statements on context, but emerging from the students' analysis of the text in relation to the question.

Examiners have reflected on the role of online revision material. Clearly this is an important source of revision and support for students, and many are accessing it to help them prepare for the exam. It may be useful to encourage students to reflect on the value and relevance of the material they are accessing, and that it should not be used indiscriminately. There were certainly common details and references that appeared with similar phrasing in many responses, sometimes at length, which did not add anything to the student's answer to the question and in some cases acted as an impediment to them developing their own ideas.

Overall, it is an agile, focussed response to the question which perhaps most characterises the highest quality answers.

Section A: Shakespeare

Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet continue to be the most commonly seen texts, with Macbeth probably extending its dominance this year. Much Ado About Nothing and The Merchant of Venice have a small presence, and there has been very little seen on either The Tempest or Julius Caesar. Observations and reflections are drawn from Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet responses, but are applicable to all the questions.

The questions proved very accessible, enabling students at all levels to engage with the text and demonstrate their understanding. What was interesting was how students approached and used the extract in their answer. For Romeo and Juliet, the majority of students found the extract, where Juliet reflects on Romeo's banishment, to be an excellent starting point for exploring Juliet's feelings. There were some interesting trajectories from this such as consideration of Juliet's

evolving relationship with Romeo, linking it to the start and end of their relationship, or Juliet's feelings in relation to her family and her situation, both of which proved fruitful. With Macbeth, the extract came from the final act of the play, and some students started there and then looked at what Macbeth had been like earlier, whereas others began their response with the start of the play, and worked chronologically towards the extract. Another approach was to look at different aspects of the extract and make connections to Macbeth's character at other points in the play and how it had changed – Macbeth as a fighter, Macbeth as husband, Macbeth as a man in a position of power reflecting on his life. All of these worked perfectly well, and perhaps demonstrate that there is not a single, set way of approaching the task, and that a good knowledge and understanding of the play enables students to respond flexibly to the ideas in the presented extract and the key focus of the question.

As already mentioned, those students who started their response with a thesis generally did very well, because they had established a conceptual line of enquiry for their response. Not only did this give structure and purpose to the answer, but it also meant that the arguments made were more coherent, and rooted in a more holistic view of the whole text and the entirety of the character, rather than the character at the specific point of the extract. Once a thesis has been established, it is clearer to see how the argument is being developed. A thesis also helps to ensure that the student is answering the question, because it has been developed in response to that. There were occasions where students drifted from the question, for example, writing about Lady Macbeth rather than Macbeth, which might well have been avoided with careful planning and an opening statement that sets out the focus and direction that their response is going to take.

It might be useful for students to think carefully about where in the play the extract comes from, and use this to guide them in their broader interpretation. The extract from Macbeth came from the end of the play, but a lot of responses focussed tightly on very specific aspects of the extract – most notably Macbeth as a fighter – without placing this in the context of a of Macbeth's wider sense of despair and desperation. The better responses recognised that at the end of the play Macbeth is no longer fighting loyally for his king but, while he is still a powerful warrior, his motivation and attitude to battle has changed.

Students' response to the extracts was very confident. At all levels, students were able to identify details that they could use to help them with their answer, and these often generated productive lines of enquiry. With Macbeth, students commonly responded to "the yellow leaf", the list "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends", "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked.", "Give me my armour.", "Hang those that talk of fear." And "patient" / "her". Students' ability to engage with the text should not be underestimated, and all of these proved fertile material for explanation and analysis.

A further point of note was where students were able to match details from the extract with other references from the play, so, for example coupling references to "patient" / "her" with "dearest partner" and "chuck" gave students a way into Macbeth's evolving relationship with his wife, which enabled them to explore change and the reasons behind it. Similarly, "hacked" and "unseamed" worked well as examples of brutal graphic imagery, and this was then used by students to argue that Macbeth's nature was essentially unchanging and violent, or that Macbeth remained inherently violent, but the audience could see that the moral direction of his violence had shifted.

With Romeo and Juliet, it was most usually the case that the extract was used to establish the intensity of Juliet's feelings at this specific moment, which was easy to place in context because it followed a specific incident in the play. Again, students were able to confidently select references from the extract to support their interpretation. Once this was established, students were able to go in many directions, backwards and forwards from this point, exploring the nature of Juliet's

relationship with Romeo, or with her family, or with both. There were some extremely insightful and heartfelt responses exploring Juliet as a young woman trying to be true to her own feelings in a society which didn't want to permit that.

Overall, it is the themes and ideas which capture students' imagination and drive their responses, and students need to think carefully about the references, or moments, they select to support their interpretations as this can also be a helpful means by which they can discuss writer's methods. There appears to be a growing understanding that "writer's methods" encompasses anything the writer is doing deliberately to convey their ideas, so students are engaging, as ever, with language, but increasingly with structure and characterisation as a means of doing this. Recognising that certain resonant images are extremely powerful, and can be interpreted in a number of ways, can also be very helpful. So, for example, Juliet's death was frequently analysed as an indicator of the intensity and sincerity of her love, with all kinds of approaches to the "happy dagger" that allowed students to demonstrate their appreciation of effects of methods and therefore achieve marks for AO2.

A clear focus on the question also helps students to target AO3 effectively. The Macbeth question asked how far Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a male character who changes and students who thought about and focussed on masculinity and/or change, automatically engaged with ideas and context, reflecting on a myriad of reasons that could be argued as causing that change. Ideas that were less successful were those of sweeping historical generalisation or not really relevant to the question being asked. Discussions of the Gunpowder plot, or of Shakespeare's desire to gain the approval of James I, made answers longer, but did not offer more insight into how far and why Macbeth changes. Responses which explored notions of power, violence, loyalty, morality, greed, weakness, insecurity, guilt or violence in relation to Macbeth and what prompted his downfall were much more appropriate, and enabled insightful interpretations of his character.

With Romeo and Juliet, explorations of Juliet's feelings of love and its ramifications – either romantic or familial or both - meant that students were engaging with the ideas and context established by the question. At times this extended into the position of women in society at the time, which was frequently appropriate and worked as a clear aid to an interpretation of Juliet as a character who felt trapped by her circumstances. Here it was relevant, because it was directly relevant to explaining Juliet's feelings rather than extraneous information that did not develop the students' interpretation.

As a general guide, focussing squarely on the question, and responding directly to that, ensures that the response addresses the mark scheme.

Section B: Nineteenth century novel

A Christmas Carol continues to be the most popular choice, and even seems to be extending its reach further than in previous years. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde maintains a strong presence, but The Sign of Four may be waning in popularity. The other texts retain their small foothold, generally eliciting strong responses from the students who have studied them. This report will draw largely on the most popular texts.

The structure of the question and the mark scheme are, of course, the same for both Section A and Section B, so the comments made there are reflected in what we see in the answers on the nineteenth century novel. Establishing a thesis lays a strong foundation for an effective exploration of the text that clearly addresses the question set. Consciously selecting references that enable students to demonstrate their appreciation of the writer's methods is important in terms of

addressing all parts of the mark scheme. And again, judicious selection of appropriate contextual material is necessary to avoid unnecessary digressions into historical deadens.

Students approached the extracts confidently and used them well in their responses. They were clearly familiar with the incidents and characters involved, and were able to integrate them effectively into their responses. Again, there is no one way of doing this. With *A Christmas Carol*, many students opted to start with the extract as an example of Scrooge's greed and moved outwards from there, selecting other examples to develop their response. Others started at the start of the novel, with Scrooge being established as a greedy character, and then followed a largely chronological path through the novel. The commonest conclusions moved either the end of the novel and Scrooge's redemption arc, recognising that greed is destructive, or examined Ignorance and Want and reflecting on the effects of greed in a universal way rather than through the individual.

With *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the extract came from the early in the novel, and students were clearly familiar with it, so it formed a natural jumping off point for the vast majority of responses from students, who were able to pick out various references which also enabled them to address AO2, such as "trampled calmly", "damned Juggernaut" and "really like Satan". There were rich pickings in the extract, and students frequently also examined the murder of Sir Danvers Carew – targeting their responses very much on Hyde as the question indicated. Others looked usefully at aspects of setting, the impact on Lanyon and interestingly at Jekyll being more dangerous than Hyde.

One of the purposes of the extract in this closed book exam, is to provide students with material for AO2 analysis, and this was clearly understood by students. As has already been noted, selecting material and references which enable students to explore and explain writer's methods in their answers is crucial. The texts are rich in appropriate and relevant detail, and students mined language for meaning very productively. We have repeatedly stressed in these reports that "writer's methods" encompasses a breadth of possibility for students to discuss and analyse. With *A Christmas Carol* this was notably done effectively by exploring Dickens' use of the Cratchits or Fred as a foil to Scrooge, and how these characters are used to exemplify a different set of values. The characterisation of Ghost of Christmas Present was also frequently interpreted as the antithesis of greed. Dickens' use of motifs such as fire and food also offered rich rewards. In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, some students examined settings in precise detail, motifs of secrecy led to interesting analysis of character and the symbolism of light and dark was explored in great depth.

In terms of AO3, general historical information on the Victorian era is often of limited value in extending analysis of the text. We continue to see biographical details about Dickens unlinked to the focus of the question. A relatively new aspect this year were lengthy digressions on the original cost of *A Christmas Carol* and the rationale for this. There are frequently substantial accounts of Malthus and the Poor Laws, which would be far better summarised in a sentence, rather than developed to a paragraph or even a page in length. Far more effective in terms of AO3 was a careful focus on the implications and impact of greed – the focus of the question. Whether students examined the effect on the individual, through Scrooge, in terms of loneliness, isolation, bitterness, selfishness, lack of morality, or as an understandable, protective response to straitened circumstances, or on society, in terms of division, inhumanity, misery and suffering, they were far more focussed on Dickens' themes and ideas in the novella.

This is equally the case with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Although the contextual detail may be different, favorites for lengthy explanations are Lombroso's theory of criminality and Darwin's theory of evolution, but students would be far more effective in their analysis if they prioritised and explored the claims Stevenson is making about human nature in the novel. Students were very good at exploring how Stevenson makes Hyde appear threatening and dangerous (AO2), they

were less likely to make the connection to why Stevenson makes Hyde threatening and dangerous – often failing to make a connection to the duality of man which is at the heart of the novel, the importance of reputation and the dangers of repression, which would have given them far richer material to address this aspect of the mark scheme. It is clear that there is a rationale for introducing students to some of these broader historical concepts in terms of aiding their understanding of writer's intention and effects, however the challenge perhaps lies in ensuring that students do not see this 'information' as having inherent merit and value merely by virtue of its inclusion. In other words, by all means discuss Malthus, or Dickens' family experiences, or Darwin – these are of course relevant to a wider understanding of the text in a classroom context - but only where these can be helpful to an answer to the actual question being asked.

This was less obviously the case with the other texts where students used the texts themselves to provide the material necessary to address the question, rather than drawing heavily on extraneous information. An understanding of class informed analysis of Lady Catherine's behaviour in *Pride and Prejudice*, and guided students to other examples of this in the novel, but there were not lengthy accounts of Regency manners. Similarly, an appreciation of feminism, independence and morality underpinned answers on *Jane Eyre's* happiness, but students avoided unnecessary sweeping explanations of the position of women in society at that time.

Assessment Objectives

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

In the exam it all begins with the question and a focussed response to the task set is at the heart of an effective answer. Identifying and understanding the steer in the question sets the direction for the answer, and students who appreciate this will do well. The effectiveness of the response is frequently manifested through a thesis which offers the student's interpretation of the text in relation to the prompt in the question. Thought has then been given to where the extract is going to be integrated into that response. Where we see evidence of planning, this often leads to effective answers, because the student has considered their argument and given thought to what they are going to include in their response.

References are an integral part of the mark scheme, we are looking for students to support and illustrate their understanding and interpretations by giving examples and details from the texts. These may be quotations, but they do not have to be quotations – they could be identifying a character, an incident, an image or something else which is relevant to the point being made. What is important is choosing the right and best references to support and develop the argument. It is also important to ensure that the references selected allow students to explore the writers' methods. References might be usefully considered as showing the students' command and control of the text, being able to pick out the moments that help them the most, rather than just learning lots of quotations.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

Increasingly, we are seeing the broader approach to writer's methods, which has been advocated since the start of this paper, being apparent in students' responses. This gives students a wider range of material to draw upon, and in many cases allows them to discuss methods in a more natural way. An example of this would be the way many students discussed how Shakespeare introduces *Macbeth* to the play; often language formed a part of this, but it was an effective example of methods being led by - in this case - structure. Understanding the use of contrasts and foils is usually a very rewarding area to explore, because they necessarily are where the "how"

(AO2) and the “why” (AO3) of the text meet. Similarly, motifs allow students to track ideas through the texts.

The biggest issue with writer’s methods lies in the misuse of terminology. There is far less of the performative labelling of obscure rhetorical devices, which merely identified and didn’t explain, but this has been replaced to an extent by a prevalence of identification of word class, often incorrectly. It is noticeable that the message is starting to get through, and some students are just referring to “the word” the writer has used that they have chosen to discuss, and this shifts the emphasis to the student’s analysis of this word and the effect it has, which is where the marks for AO2 lie.

AO3: ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

Many students write about the texts without mentioning the Elizabethan era, the Jacobean era or the Victorian era and they do very well, reaching the highest levels of the mark scheme, because they are focussing on the ideas in the text, and exploring their interpretation of what the writer has to say. Every question has a prompt within it for students to focus on, and if this is being clearly addressed – perhaps in the universal context of human nature – then students will be addressing the writer’s ideas.

Light and shade can be given to an interpretation by making wider connections, but this is an English Literature exam rather than a History exam and the focus is the text itself, therefore references to the historical context should be succinct. Explaining Malthus’ theory of population growth adds little, if anything, to demonstrating an understanding of how Dickens has presented something. Interestingly, far more pertinent to an appreciation of context, were students who linked the character or ideas of the text to their own situation – one student wrote hugely perceptively about how the Elizabeth Bennet is an inspirational role model today because she refuses to be judged, not just by class but also by gender.

Advice for Students

The internet is a valuable resource of exam revision and preparation, and one which is accessible and understandably popular. As with everything, it should be approached thoughtfully, and with the understanding that not everything on the internet is true or useful. The examiners are looking for your interpretation of the texts you have studied, not some stranger’s views on social media. Make sure you think carefully about what you watch, and use it to help you develop your own ideas.

Read the question very carefully. It is directing you to a particular idea or theme of the text, and understanding this is the first step to writing an effective, focussed response. A few minutes thinking carefully about this should give you lots of ideas of things you could discuss in your answer.

Read the extract carefully, and think about how it links to the question. The extract has been chosen to help you to answer the question. Think about how the extract illustrates ideas in the question. Think about how you can use parts of the extract in your answer.

Think carefully about where you are going to refer to the extract in your answer. You do not have to start with the extract. If the extract comes from the end of the text, it might be better to start with something from earlier on, before you discuss the extract.

Starting your answer with a thesis is the most effective way to begin. A thesis is a brief outline of your argument or point of view. If you begin by saying briefly what you think, you can then go on to explain this in detail, giving precise examples, in the body of your answer.

When you choose details from the texts that you are going to discuss, try to make sure that some of these details allow you to explore and explain how the writers are presenting their ideas. There are lots of things that are considered as writer's methods, and you need to make sure you have given yourself the opportunity to write about some of these.

We want you to explain how the writers have created their texts, how they have communicated their ideas to you – the reader. This involves discussing the effect of the writer's choices, explaining why they had made particular decisions and what this reveals about the characters or ideas in the text. We are interested in your explanation – how detailed and precise is this, and the extent to which it shows an appreciation and understanding of the writer's choices.

Don't get bogged down in subject terminology. Use words which you are comfortable and confident with to express your ideas. The writer uses the word "... " could be the start of a sentence that is in level 1 or in level 6. It is the quality and precision of your explanation that is important and which determines the level the examiner decides you are working at. Subject terminology can be useful in identifying aspects of the writer's methods quickly, but it is not the most important aspect of your answer.

Recognise that virtually all the information and detail you need to answer the question is contained in the text itself. English Literature Paper 1 introduces you to a small sample of great writing that is very rich and dense and full of powerful ideas expressed by writers who are in complete control of their art. There is plenty in the texts you are reading to fill a 50 minute exam essay, without lengthy digressions into the social attitudes and history of the time. This can be useful to explain and develop your understanding, but it should be kept brief, and your focus should primarily be on what the writer is doing and why they are doing it.

Finally, trust yourself. View the question as an invitation for you to give your opinion on something – most students are very keen to do that! The examiner wants you to tell them what you think about the texts you have studied, and how the writer made you think this.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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