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GCSE

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/2 Modern texts and poetry  
Report on the Examination

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## Introduction

The structure of the GCSE English Literature exam papers returned to its full format for the first time since 2019. In spite of the challenges of the past few years, students have responded with confidence and clarity and produced impressive work overall.

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 and how these are assessed.
- offer some suggestions that might be useful for students to consider.

## General Overview

The overwhelming impression this year was that students have a sound understanding of how this qualification is assessed. Previous reports have offered clarification and exemplification of the assessment objectives in order to illustrate what examiners are looking for in student responses and this understanding is clearly developing traction in terms of how students can demonstrate their skills.

Time management was efficient and the demands of the paper were well-handled. Students were spending an appropriate amount of time on each section of the paper, with fewer examples of missing responses. There was an occasional issue in Section C with some students spending a little more time on 27.2 than is warranted by the marks available, but overall there was a sense of being well-prepared and efficient in terms of using the time available.

The structure and organisation of responses is a markedly improved. Introductory thesis statements worked well at all levels of ability to show engagement with, and understanding of, the demands of the task. Not only do these thesis statements provide an opportunity to settle and focus the student and engage their attention on the demands of the question, but they also enable AO1 task to be clearly indicated from the outset, providing a starting point from which they can then develop their answers.

## Section A: Modern Texts

The majority of responses in Section A were to *An Inspector Calls*, with *Lord of the Flies* being the second most popular choice. *Blood Brothers* and *Animal Farm* also popular although not as much in evidence as previous years. To put this into context, over 60% of the candidature are now studying *An Inspector Calls*, with around 4% responding to *Lord of the Flies* as the second most popular text choice.

The two questions on *An Inspector Calls* were equally popular. Responses to Question 1 focused heavily on the representation of Sheila and Sybil, although some successfully included examination of the use of Eva Smith/Daisy Renton as a representation of the proletariat. Question 2 often opened up a range of debate on the older and younger Birlings as polar opposites, with some consideration of Gerald as a younger character less willing to change.

There was a marked increase in students treating characters, settings, and moments from the text, as particular devices / methods, which enabled really effective focus on AO2. Details about the presentation of the island at the start of *Lord of the Flies*, for example through discussion of the ‘scar’, enabled some very purposeful focus on how the construct of places can link to ideas and themes. Similarly, those who discussed the claustrophobic setting for *An Inspector Calls* related this very effectively to the idea of a microcosmic representation of higher-class attitudes to the world and how heavily-laden interior design was a feature of bourgeoisie attitudes to protecting wealth at the time that the play was set.

In terms of AO2 and AO3, there is a noticeable move towards discussion of writers’ intention. This was particularly evident in responses to Section A where students were considering the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the text and were able to therefore provide a focused discussion of how meanings and ideas have been conveyed to the reader / audience. Conversely, those who interpreted ‘informed personal response’ (AO1) as ‘this makes the reader feel’ are not as successful as they often led to generalised statements that were difficult to support. Interpreting ‘informed personal response’ as the student’s answer to the question is much more effective and is how examiners award marks for AO1 task.

### **Section B: Taught Poetry**

Power and conflict is by far the most popular cluster choice, with around 80% of the candidature responding to Question 26. The open question on effects of power allowed for a wide range of poems for comparison. ‘Ozymandias’ and ‘London’ were the most popular choices and many students chose to take tyranny as their focus, considering the results of this type of power on self and others. Others discussed the effects of power in terms of time, or memory, or control. However, there were some really interesting other selections of second poem including ‘Checking out me History’, ‘Kamikaze’, extract from ‘The Prelude’ and ‘Storm on the Island’. For those who had an informed understanding of the Romantic movement, there were some really insightful essays discussing the Romantics as disrupters / advocates for social change which were inspiring to read.

Many were able to use the poems as starting-points for discussion of wider ideas and considering more universal thematic concepts. For those who stayed within the particulars of the narrative of ‘My Last Duchess’ or ‘Ozymandias’, some of the comments on the Duke of Ferrara and Lucrezia, or Rameses II, were not particularly useful in terms of developing a response to the effects of power in a thoughtful or considered way. Unfortunately, there were a significant minority of students who appeared to be under the misapprehension that the speaker in ‘My Last Duchess’ is grieving the loss of his first wife, which means they missed the point of the poem entirely. However, for those students who didn’t appear to be very sure of themselves with this poem, the open-ended nature of the question enabled them to select a second poem that they were more familiar with and therefore could use to demonstrate their skills.

There was some highly-effective discussion of the impact of ‘the curtain’, the image of the statue of Neptune, and Browning’s use of dramatic monologue to depict megalomania and, by extension, a critique of those who wield their power in an immoral manner and/or for personal gain without consideration of the needs of others. What was less successful was where students attempted to say anything meaningful about Shelley’s use of sonnet form, leading to comments such as ‘he uses a sonnet because sonnets are love poems which shows Ozymandias loves himself’. This isn’t particularly helpful as a line of argument as there isn’t really anywhere to go with this idea once it has been stated. However, consideration of the use of perspective to indicate the passage of time and thereby drawing attention to the ‘antique’-ness of his tyrannical rule and all power eventually turning to dust, was much more effective in terms of developing a close link to thematic concepts.

For Love and relationships, 'Follower' and 'Mother, Any Distance' were by far the most popular choices of second poem with also lots of choices of 'Eden Rock', 'Walking Away' and 'Climbing My Grandfather'. There were some beautiful responses to this question that showcased insightful understanding of ideas. A small minority of students misunderstand 'Before You Were Mine' and think that the speaker's mother has died, which is a shame as it means they can miss the point of the poem. For those who interpreted the poem as the speaker's desire to understand the woman their mother was before she was a mother, with perhaps an undertone of envy / longing, this was a much more effective springboard to discussion of the relationships between parents and children and some of the associated ideas and feelings presented in the poems, such as guilt / regret / the impact of the passage of time / changing dynamic in relationships.

Where students examined the two poems within the focus of the question, this was often a more straightforward means of responding than those who attempted to force an integrated comparative structure onto their response. It is worth reminding students that particular comparative methodologies or approaches are not given explicit reward in the mark scheme; comparison is not a discrete AO. Those who demonstrate the connection between the poems at the start, then discuss each within the context of this, and draw them together at the end, are often more successful.

### **Section C: Unseen Poetry**

The poems were well received, with the vast majority of students showing good understanding of the use of imagery in particular as a method to create meanings and on the whole, the metaphorical meanings were clearly understood. Many responded sensitively, demonstrating excellent interpretative skills. Often students provided stronger responses to the unseen than they had managed in Sections A and B. The freedom to respond without the constraint of trying to fit partially-remembered ideas and learned essays onto a particular question positively supported many. Examiners were impressed by students' level of engagement and insight into these two poems with one member of the team commenting that 'these responses were fantastic! Teachers need to have confidence that students can apply a wide of skills with care and understanding to unseen texts'.

Most recognised the extended metaphor of 'Scaffolding' and offered insightful, mature discussion of the foundations, trials, and tribulations, of relationships. Students wrote convincingly when they explored the significance of 'masons', 'ladders' 'joints' and 'bridges' rather than technique-spotting and trying to write about, for example, alliteration, sibilance and enjambment. They were able to identify these features, but struggled to discuss them in terms of the ideas and effects.

Many get straight into their discussion of the unseen poems rather than offering long preambles, which is a helpful approach to the unseen as it enables efficient use of time. Beginning with a short introduction that demonstrates clear understanding of ideas linked to methods can be useful, as in this example: 'In Scaffolding, the speaker presents their relationship and their attitudes towards it by comparing it to a building process, perhaps suggesting that a relationship can constantly be improved and built on.' This is an effective means of encapsulating the central point that can then be developed and illustrated in the rest of the response.

Most could see the links between 'Scaffolding' and 'Yours'. They used the question as a starting point, with many exploring similarities through the metaphors, and differences through the rhyme, tone and personal pronouns. Students struggled to move out of Level 1 if they pointed to methods without exemplification and discussion of effects.

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## Assessment Objectives

### AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

Those students who begin with an introduction that sets out their understanding of the focus of the question put themselves in a good position to be able to develop a clear response to task. This often worked as a very effective starting-point for their discussion. As has been mentioned in previous reports, there is no requirement to include direct quotations in any part of this qualification, and the mark schemes refer to ‘details’ or ‘references’ rather than ‘quotations’. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that large elements of this qualification are closed book. Examiners are rewarding knowledge of the text and how particular moments or elements have been selected and used to help to develop a response to task.

There is still a tendency from some to try hard to offer alternative interpretations; the ‘it could mean this but it could also mean the opposite’ type of approach. It’s worth mentioning that the phrasing of this in the mark scheme for Level 5 is predicated by ‘possibly’ and also refers to ‘deeper meanings’. Sometimes there isn’t an alternative interpretation – in other words, the first interpretation can be the most fruitful and looking for a forced alternative can lead students up a bit of a blind alley. A move into Level 5 is most usually characterised by an increase in tentative approach, or ‘thoughtful consideration’ – going a bit deeper or considering a bit more thoughtfully. This might seem counter-intuitive for those who want to nail down ‘this is what it means’, however what the mark scheme means by this is a recognition that meaning is sometimes not fixed and immutable and, especially when students are considering character motivations / presentation, this may be complex and multi-faceted. For example, whilst Mrs Birling may be a product of her environment in terms of her dismissal of the words of the Inspector due to his lower social status and her snobbery, there is possibly more to this behaviour. It may also be the influence of her desire to protect her own environment and family from external scrutiny as well as the avoidance of private as well as public shame, especially with regards to understanding her son’s role in events. Another example might be treatment of Sheila’s change of reference from ‘mummy’ to ‘mother’ and how this potentially signifies a growth in maturity. Perhaps it might be helpful to also consider that the use of ‘mummy’ is a feature of higher class sociolect as well as a childlike attitude to the world and, whilst it might indicate Sheila’s relative immaturity in the early stages of the play, the change to the more formal ‘mother’ is also indicative of her desire to distance herself from her parents and their attitudes as she develops a social conscience.

### AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

Increasingly, students are successfully exploring characterisation, settings, atmosphere, motifs and symbolism, all of which are valid methods used to convey meaning. When discussion has labelled parts of speech as the AO2 focus, students find it more difficult to explain effect(s) and to link writers’ choices to meanings and intention. This can lead to some stifled, formulaic discussion. Even in questions that appear to be thematic in focus, those who discuss the presentation of character as construct achieve marks for AO2 with ease. There was also interesting and convincing consideration of settings in a number of the texts, for example, Priestley’s presentation of the ‘substantial, heavily-comfortable’ dining room, linking to the ‘wall’ Sheila accuses Mrs Birling of erecting, or discussion of the symbolism of the different parts of the island in *Lord of the Flies*, or the significance of the windmill and the farmhouse in *Animal Farm*. Increasingly, those who have taken a genre-based approach to the disciplinary knowledge of GCSE English Literature are able to discuss features of form with confidence. The increasing prevalence of schematic knowledge organisers focused on content knowledge (quotations, biographical / historical ‘facts’) can be a limiting factor in student performance, whereas those who focus study on the discipline of the subject tend to afford student responses that are much more in tune with how we assess this subject.

Students still struggle to write about structure successfully, especially when they seem to be under the impression that this is a requirement, which it isn't. We hardly ever see an effective treatment of rhyme schemes (ABAB etc). What is much more helpful is those who consider openings/endings, plot development, changes of pace / scene. For those who understand the disciplinary knowledge of the subject, in particular related to genre features of form (external) and structure (internal), this is managed with much more confidence.

### AO3: ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

It was great to see the wholesale reduction in extraneous biographical or historical detail this year. Increasingly, students were demonstrating their ability to extrapolate ideas and wider meanings from texts and write about them without ever losing sight of the text itself.

There was less evidence of AO3 being addressed solely as social and historical context, bolted onto the ends of paragraphs, and much more focus on the key words in the question. Students are developing the ability to consider context in a much wider sense: the context of ideas; the context of the whole text; the context of the genre. This approach enables an appreciation of the wider meanings of the text and how it might speak to different readers at different times and, in some instances, led to perceptive, convincing discussion. For example, in *An Inspector Calls*, some students linked women's suffrage and the vote to those characters whom Priestley presents as having no voice, those who find a voice and those whose voice is still ultimately controlled. Similarly, responses that discussed the responsibilities / abuse of power, fared much better in Section B than those who stayed within the particulars of the poems in 'My Last Duchess', 'Ozymandias' or 'London'.

It might be helpful to return to the wording of the 'Statement of Importance' in the mark scheme for this qualification that sets the rationale for our interpretation of its assessment:

GCSE English Literature is the study of how writers communicate their ideas about the world, and how readers might respond to these ideas. It aims to develop a critical understanding of the ways in which literary texts are a reflection of, and exploration of, the human condition, the study of which develops empathic understanding of human nature.

High-quality English literature is writing which displays recognisable literary qualities and, although shaped by particular contexts, transcends them and speaks about the universality of the human condition. GCSE English Literature aims to enable students to appreciate these qualities, developing and presenting informed, critical responses to the ideas in literary texts and the ways writers present these ideas. It aims to enable students to make links between a variety of written texts and between the text and the context within which it was shaped.

### **Advice for Students**

You own your own interpretation of the text. Every year, we notice that lots of you do better in your responses to the unseen poems than to the taught texts, which is very interesting as it shows that you can do this, you do have the skills, and you can answer a question about a literary text without any help because you have developed the skills to do this during your GCSE course. Perhaps take some confidence from this and concentrate on knowing the play / novel / poetry cluster really well so you can use it to answer the question you've chosen in the way that you want to, and say what you want to say about the text. If you know the text well, you will be able to do this.

Remember that 'references' does not have to mean 'direct quotations'. We understand that you will want to learn quotations because it makes you feel that you are prepared for the exam. We also

know that some revision sites focus a lot of time on giving you ‘the ten quotes you need to know about Text X to pass this exam’. Try to bear in mind that we are not the authors of these revision sites and have no input into their content. Sometimes the best way you can ‘refer’ to the text you are writing about is by using moments from it to illustrate the points you are making. Just answer the question and show us that you know the novel, or play, or poem that you are writing about by referring to moments from it or paraphrasing the things characters say if you are not sure and can’t remember exactly. We have written the mark scheme in the context of this exam being closed book and don’t expect you to memorise chunks of the text; that isn’t the point of studying GCSE English Literature. A well-selected word or phrase from the text is often much more effective than a long direct quotation.

Read the question carefully and have a think about what direction you might take in response to it. You can then use this to come up with a short answer to the question that summarises what you want to say overall, which then becomes your introduction to the essay. It’s a great way to start as it is helping you to organise your ideas in your head as well as providing a really good anchor for you to use as you develop the rest of your response. It’s what we describe as a ‘thesis statement’ and the students who take this approach seem to find it really useful.

You don’t need to label parts of speech in order to do well. If you want to talk about the effect of a particular word choice, just use the word ‘word’! You might want to tell us that it is an adjective / verb / noun and so on, but we’re not looking for this and often can’t give you any marks for it. We just want to know if you can talk about the effects of deliberate choices made by the writer in terms of communicating meanings and ideas. If you are determined to take a grammatical approach, be very sure that you have something useful and relevant to say about the effect.

If you want to talk about structure, perhaps consider beginnings and endings of the text rather than trying to talk about particular structural features such as enjambment / caesura / rhyme schemes if you have nothing useful to say about them. Sometimes the best way to consider structure is by thinking about how ideas develop through a literary text.

If you are struggling to develop an integrated comparative response to Section B, the best advice we can give you is not to try. You can get just as many marks by offering an introduction that shows your understanding of the connection between the named poem and the one you have chosen to use, then dealing with each poem separately, then perhaps drawing the two poems together at the end of your response.

We’ve said this before, but it might be worth another reminder that we think carefully about the wording of the unseen questions as we want them to be helpful for you. If you read the questions before you read the poems, you’ll see that we’ve already sort of told you what we think they are about. We’ve done this to try to offer you a bit of a steer as we know you’re short of time and in a pressurised exam situation.

You don’t have to reproduce lots of biographical information about the writer or the surrounding historical context of the text you are writing about. Remember that this isn’t GCSE History, it’s English Literature. There is a reason why people continue to read things that were written in a different time or context; it’s because they are about ideas, themes and perspectives that have relevance to human beings / societal structures at different times and in different places. The focus for AO3 will be in the question – just talk about that. Know the what, the how and the why.



### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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