



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

JANUARY 2022

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2022

PROSE (DIFFERENT CULTURES) AND POETRY (CONTEMPORARY)

General comments

On both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was by far the most popular of the texts, as in previous years, with *To Kill a Mockingbird* also quite popular on Higher Tier with some entries for Foundation Tier. As the number of responses to other novels was so small, this report will focus in detail on *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the summaries of features of successful responses and ways in which performance could be improved apply equally to all texts.

Although much more prevalent on Foundation Tier, a substantial number of candidates on both tiers addressed questions on novels which they had not previously studied. In many of these cases, every extract on the question paper was read and answered as an ‘unseen’ text. This rubric infringement remains a serious problem for candidates whose teachers will have guided them through the study of one of the texts over a long period of time. For weaker Foundation Tier candidates whose reading ability may be limited, this enormous waste of time and effort is particularly damaging, but a significant number of Higher Tier candidates also hampered their chances of a grade commensurate with their abilities by addressing questions on texts not studied.

Examiners are instructed to take account of the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. In most essay responses, some detailed and focused understanding was shown of how their society at the time the novels were set affected characters’ lives, behaviour and aspirations. There were relatively few responses on Higher Tier where there was no explicit commentary on the context of the novel studied, although it was sometimes a perfunctory reference or a sweeping generalisation on Foundation. Most candidates on both tiers used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there remains some confusion about where on the paper context is assessed. Sometimes in the extract question, for example, responses to the question on the scene from *Of Mice and Men* sometimes strayed into, or were largely composed of, comments beyond the range of the extract or were concerned with Lennie’s status in American society at the time. The impact of the Great Depression on migrant workers’ lives was also discussed in some responses which did not use the detail of the extract itself.

The poetry comparison question was generally handled with an understanding of the need to cover both poems and the comparative element for AO3. However, there was a significant number of candidates on both tiers who explored the poems without comparing them or who only wrote about one of the poems. The effect of this on their overall achievement on this question was inevitably serious, particularly considering the weighting of the different Assessment Objectives for this task. Strong responses, as always, looked closely at the language and imagery used in the poems for AO2, and focused more on meaning and interpretation for AO1, rather than simple identification of devices. On both tiers, candidates sometimes did not work out enough of the surface meaning of the poems – what was happening in them – before offering interpretations of the subtext which were usually unconvincing as a result.

On both tiers, however, there were some responses which successfully addressed all three assessment objectives and offered sensitive, probing readings of the poems.

Extract questions: Characteristics of successful responses

Of Mice and Men

The Steinbeck extract question gave candidates on both tiers plenty of opportunities to comment on the effects created in this scene in which Lennie's confused and chaotic reactions to his killing of the puppy warranted careful examination. Successful responses focused on the details and the language used to convey the inner turmoil and the emotional twists and turns as Lennie tries to come to terms with the implications of his actions. While aspects of Lennie's character which are evident throughout the novel, such as his child-like behaviour, his obliviousness to his own strength and his dependence on George, played a part in most responses, high-scoring responses focused much more closely on his actions, words and behaviour in this specific scene. These successful responses also tended to track the contradictions and rapid changes in Lennie's reactions and to understand them as reflections of his chaotic mind in turmoil. Rather than seeing single motivations for his behaviour, such as guilt for killing the dog or a selfish regard only for his dream of tending rabbits, better responses showed an understanding that these contradictions, twists and turns were all in play at the same time, reflecting his extreme anguish and fear. Similarly, examiners often rewarded highly those responses that looked for specific words and phrases which illustrated Lennie's anguished state of mind here, rather than references which supported a more general reading of his character. The way he spoke 'softly' to the dead puppy, his actions in burying and unburying it, 'hurling' it from him but then continuing to stroke it were all commented on with detailed and specific references to the language Steinbeck uses in responses which were awarded marks in Band 4 for both AO1 and AO2.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Candidates on both tiers were generally able to comment in detail on the presentation of Miss Maudie in this extract. While most responses on Foundation Tier were from candidates who had not read the novel, those who had studied it were often able to identify some key aspects of her characters here, such as her bravery in the face of the loss of her house or her care and concern for others more than herself. Successful Higher Tier responses looked carefully at some of the ways in which Lee shows the tragedy's impact on Miss Maudie despite her protestations. Some, for example, commented on the poignancy of 'the shadow of her old grin' and her actions in 'gazing at her charred azaleas' and recognised that even though she loved her flowers there was more to grieve for than she admitted. These Band 4 responses also analysed how Miss Maudie's resilience is revealed as a reaction to what she sees as others' sympathy which she seems to find difficult. Her humour, in particular, was noted in successful responses as a deflection from her situation and a way to relieve the stress she saw in the children's reactions. Such traits of character seen in Miss Maudie before the fire were commented on and noted as still intact after it, including her rivalry with local inhabitants and her sense of responsibility towards those who had helped her.

Successful responses to the extract questions tended to show:

- clear and sustained focus on the specific extract, not the context of the novel or storylines
- apt selection of short, specific references to support points made
- clear grasp of subtext, what's 'really' going on in the extract.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- clear knowledge of the assessment objectives being assessed here
- more thorough coverage of the extract
- more selection of supporting references rather than general impressions
- don't answer questions on novels you have not read.

Essay Questions: Characteristics of successful responses

Of Mice and Men

The question on loneliness, how characters of the candidate's choice in *Of Mice and Men* are affected by it, and what it shows about life in 1930s America was a very popular choice on both tiers. On Higher Tier, successful candidates often approached the question from the standpoint of context and examined how Steinbeck used the theme of loneliness to offer a critique of his own society. On Foundation Tier, where candidates were asked to select and write about lonely characters of their choosing, the most successful chose only one or two characters and considered the contextual factors that made each specific character lonely and offered some evidence from the text which showed their loneliness.

The best responses showed a critical grasp of Steinbeck's intentions in portraying characters such as Crooks and Curley's wife not entirely sympathetically, whose own behaviour is sometimes tainted by the loneliness inflicted upon them by their society. For example, Crooks' cruelty towards Lennie or Curley's wife's vicious threat towards Crooks was considered carefully as evidence that enforced loneliness or restricted opportunities made people worse and caused them real harm. The effects of racist segregation on Crooks' mental health were often closely analysed in Band 4 responses. In the case of Curley's wife, some insightful responses looked at how her marriage to Curley was doomed from the start, not only because of Curley's jealous restriction of her but more because the society in which she lived condoned and expected men to behave in this way. The paucity of opportunity for young women with few means and limited education was clearly understood to have contributed towards her unrealistic Hollywood dreams. Her vile subjugation of Crooks was also seen as the inevitable backlash of a powerless woman whose new husband had already abandoned her for the brothel and whose life of loneliness and restriction stretched before her. These highly rewarded responses showed that the candidates could see beyond the confines of the ranch and the characters and relationships within it to the wider society beyond which governed their actions, attitudes and aspirations.

Better responses on Foundation Tier to this question tended to link contextual factors to characters in specific ways rather than relying on a more general knowledge of the Great Depression or simple assertions about the racism and sexism prevalent at the time. The need for Curley's wife to be validated by the men on the ranch, with some understanding shown that there was no other way for her to be recognised, often helped to nudge marks into Band 4 on this tier, and these comments were often linked to some clear observations on the depth of harm done to Crooks by segregation.

The alternative question on ideas about masculinity on Higher Tier elicited some of the best responses on the paper. Again, responses in which the centrality of contextual factors in how characters behaved tended to fare better than those in which male characters were considered as individuals driven by personal attributes alone. In many of the best responses here, the prevalence of violence or the ever-present threat of violence was examined in detail as an example of male behaviour, as well as a lack of empathy with others or a propensity to compete rather than cooperate. These traits were identified in a range of characters, in the recognised 'villains' such as Curley and Carlson, but also in more sympathetic portrayals such as George and Slim. George's misogynistic labelling of Curley's wife and even the drowning of Slim's puppies, for example, were examined as evidence of a

coarseness of male behaviour arising from the harsh times in which the characters lived. There was some closely observed detail about Carlson's deeply insensitive behaviour before and after the killing of Candy's dog too which showed a thoughtful approach to the question and the text. While some very successful responses selected specific characters and offered insightful commentaries on these portrayals of masculine behaviour, many adopted a more thematic approach, often showing perceptive insight into Steinbeck's own critique of masculinity in his society: both approaches were equally credit-worthy. The stark contrasts between the ways in which Curley and Slim were described were often successfully highlighted to show how Slim's attributes of calm, respectful masculine strength were held up as praiseworthy while Curley's status-obsessed, violent behaviour was revealed to be fragile and destructive. Band 4 responses here were often amongst the most thoughtful and developed answers on the paper.

On Foundation Tier, candidates who remembered to link the behaviour of their chosen characters to contextual factors which helped to explain their behaviour generally did quite well. Many candidates chose Curley as a male character who behaved in ways typical of men in positions of authority at the time, sometimes contrasting him with George or Slim, men who behaved in more sympathetic or sensitive ways. Where comments were supported by reference to specific incidents in the novel and apt, well-chosen references to the language used by Steinbeck to portray them, marks in Band 4 could be awarded.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Both questions on this novel elicited some effective, focused responses which explored the text in its context with some apt reference to events, characters and relationships. The first question on the character of Aunt Alexandra gave thoughtful candidates an opportunity to consider not only her specific character traits and the events in the novel which revealed them, but also to show their understanding of how Lee uses her portrayal as a vehicle to shed light on social values and attitudes in the American South of the 1930s. In some excellent responses, Lee's mocking of Alexandra's views on the rigid social structures underpinning almost all attitudes to others in the novel was highlighted, with some detailed references to how the character classifies families and individuals according to their status in society. Her use by Lee as a vehicle to expose the petty snobbery and sometimes cruel treatment of people who do not fit her strict model of respectability was often exemplified in successful responses by her attitudes to other white families as well as her more obvious prejudice against black people. Her treatment of Calpurnia and her attitude to Atticus taking on Tom Robinson's case were often explored in some detail to illustrate both the atrophied nature of Southern society and its capacity for change. Alexandra's small but significant progress from a bigoted, rigidly status-conscious individual to a woman who begins to see the toll such attitudes have on the innocent was discussed as an illustration of one of Lee's central ideas, that society is capable of making 'baby steps' towards enlightenment. Her upholding of social norms for how women and girls should dress and behave was also examined and while some saw her attitudes as deeply sexist, others explored how Scout becomes able to acknowledge that in some instances Alexandra was right and some compromise in society was necessary. This focus on the ways in which Lee uses the character of Alexandra to criticise and offer hope to society in America, rather than responses which described her main attributes, was generally characteristic of successful Band 4 responses.

The alternative question on how the novel reveals 'the cruelty beneath the respectable surface of American society in the 1930s' elicited some interesting and thoughtful responses, many of which were given marks in Band 4. Successful responses showed some careful interrogation of the question itself which helped them structure their answers effectively.

The nature of 'respectable' society and who among the characters were the main proponents of its values were often discussed productively. Alexandra's pursuit of respectability for her family and Atticus' children was seen to have some dark consequences for Calpurnia and perhaps for Scout, and Maycomb's treatment of Dolphus Raymond, Boo Radley and Tom Robinson were examined often at this level. Some candidates noticed Lee's detailed portrayal of Maycomb's strictly observed social norms and how the mockingbird motif was used to highlight characters who had innocently fallen foul of them, eliciting our sympathy as readers. Ways in which vulnerable characters were punished for their differences or because of the inherent hypocrisy involved in being respectable were topics for thoughtful consideration of Lee's portrayal of Maycomb life. The price paid by Tom Robinson for having crossed an unwritten but fiercely defended line dictating interaction between white and black people was widely explored at the highest level. There was some insightful observation that it was not only the racist judicial structures of the time that exacted this heavy price but the simple gesture of sympathy for a black man towards a white girl which shocked and affronted respectable society.

There were only a few responses on Foundation Tier from candidates who had studied *To Kill a Mockingbird* and almost all of them selected the question on Aunt Alexandra. Where candidates were able to show an understanding of her prejudiced views about women or black people, and could locate these attitudes in the wider society in America at the time, some fairly high marks could be awarded. Some detailed references to events, Alexandra's actions and what she says at different points in the novel were also needed for marks in Band 4.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- clear appreciation of how context shapes characters' attitudes and motivations
- selection of a range of apt events and quotations to develop and support ideas
- some analysis of how the writer's message is conveyed through characters, relationships and events.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- practice in how to structure and sustain a response
- practice in creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked
- more focused discussion of how contextual factors affect specific characters' personalities, choices, ambitions and stories
- practice in selecting detailed textual evidence for ideas.

Poetry Comparison

Most candidates on both tiers understood that both poems and the comparison between them must be addressed to give them the best chance. Examiners rewarded comparison wherever they found it although most candidates looked at each poem first before making comparisons. Some compared all the way through their responses while others discussed the first poem and then compared it with the second, making comments on meaning, imagery and mood about both poems as they did so. A significant minority on Higher Tier wrote only about one poem or offered no comparison between poems. This inevitably affected their access to the higher bands, even where their understanding of one or both poems was secure. There were also quite a significant number of thin, unsustainable responses on Higher Tier which made one or two points about each poem but did not really explore ideas or develop interpretations.

Higher Tier candidates were given the rubric that 'both poets write about returning to places they knew in the past'. Most candidates at all levels found 'Chellow Dean' reasonably accessible in terms of meaning and mood, and most could locate in the language of the

poem the nostalgia and sense of a carefree childhood that emerges in it. More successful responses, however, were characteristically more secure on 'Syringa' and could therefore offer some meaningful comparison. In these responses, there was often some understanding and discussion of the kind of idyllic childhood landscape depicted in 'Chellow Dean' and some candidates began to explore ideas about the nature and reliability of memory. This was often elicited from the use of typical images from childhood such as the 'witch's house' which the poet seeks but cannot find. Successful candidates were able to distinguish between what was in the present and what was in the past in the poem, and could, as a result, make more significant meaning from the sense of dislocation given by the 'figures tugging brilliant umbrellas' who are out of place in this rugged landscape or the contrasting descriptive words and phrases for past and present. The evocation of personal experiences remembered through the filter of time was seen as romanticised and resonant for the poet and there was some discussion of the poem's structure in terms of the idealised memory, the despoiled present and the unexpected twist of perspective at the end. Successful responses gave a tentative overview of ideas and interpretations, some suggesting that the poem turns its back of romantic views of the past and highlights the importance of relationships over places. While the place was ruined and spoiled, the relationship endured and adapted.

In 'Syringa', the best responses picked up quickly on the power of the flower's scent to evoke images and experiences from the poet's past and did not assume that the beautiful opening image of the flowering syringa presaged an entirely pleasant mood in the poem as a whole. While many assumed the image of the 'drunks and drop-outs' in the garden to be judgemental and unpleasant, more successful responses saw the image as more ambiguous and the poet's attitude as tolerant in sharing the lovely scent with others. This ambiguity was also noted in the best responses in the kinds of childhood memories shared. The childish humour in the nicknames given and the superficially frightening chase by 'a tall man' led to some productive exploration of the affection felt by the poet for these long-gone characters and acknowledges her own ambivalence in 'staring hurts in both directions'. At the top of the mark range, candidates looked carefully at the people who 'have moved on or been moved off' and discerned some sense of a community apparently 'cleaned up' but having had its character and sense of itself removed in the process. The description of the neighbourhood as 'a hesitation ...' and 'not really a place' was confidently interpreted only rarely but there were some excellent responses in which the changes to it were understood to be unwelcome and having ripped the heart out of what was her childhood community.

Meaningful comparisons in the best responses focused on the poets' attitudes to the places they knew in the past, how they were described and what these places meant to them. In some, the way memory becomes distorted over time, particularly in 'Chellow Dean' was discussed thoughtfully, sometimes with the suggestion that places become imbued with a romanticised overlay of nostalgia because of what happened there rather than the place itself. Some assured analysis focused on how in 'Chellow Dean' the poet is willing to turn her back on the place and take with her into the future the love she found there, whereas 'Syringa' seems to suggest a commitment on the part of the poet to return to those old memories as she walks to work each day. Most successful responses compared these overview interpretations about what makes a place significant, the nature of memory and nostalgia for a past, carefree childhood whereas weaker responses focused on details and sometimes accidental or superficial common elements such as the drunks in 'Syringa' and 'drunk with longing' in 'Chellow Dean'.

The Foundation Tier poems, 'The Toadstool Wood' and 'A Talk with a Wood', were mostly understood as having different moods and atmospheres, even where the content was not always clearly understood. The first poem was seen as calm and peaceful by some, more menacing and sinister by others and there was some credible evidence given in the best responses to support both interpretations. The fairy-tale images in the poem – the sense of it

being under a 'spell' and the frog/prince motif – were often referred to. The best responses were able to identify them and offer some ideas about why the poet chose them and how they helped to build a picture of a magical world away from humans. Words such as 'magical' and 'mysterious' were also used by candidates who sought to locate the poems' mood in the language.

'A Talk with a Wood' presented more of a challenge to most candidates but in successful responses some sense of being healed by nature or being in tune with nature emerged. The idea of the poet addressing the wood itself in the poem was sometimes grasped and helped candidates who spotted it to see how the description of the natural world seen through the branches of the trees became comforting or restorative to the poet. While there was sometimes unsupported and unconvincing interpretation in good responses, this sense of an appreciative, calmed narrator was often successfully located in the language of the poem, such as 'drifted free' and the reference to 'love'.

Comparison mostly focused on similarities or differences of mood and atmosphere, often with some comment about there being a sense of unreality or fantasy in 'The Toadstool Wood' where there was more focus on the poet and the effect of the wood on his emotions in the second poem. Similarities were found in the inclusion of creatures in both poems, or the idea of both woods being secluded and devoid of human presence.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- balanced, well-timed coverage of both poems as well as a clear comparison
- probing of subtext, tentative interpretation rooted in the poems
- strong focus on images, language and effects created
- clear grasp of what the poets are trying to say about the topic.

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- careful reading of poems to avoid misunderstanding – figure out what's happening first by reading the sentences not just the lines
- practise locating ideas, mood and meaning in the language used in the poems
- think about how you will address each of the assessment objectives in your answer
- the subtext of a poem – the ideas the poet wants to convey as well as what happens in the poem – isn't in the shape of the poem, the punctuation used, or the devices used
- compare what the poets say about the theme given to you on the paper, and how they say it.



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245 Western Avenue
Cardiff CF5 2YX
Tel No 029 2026 5000
Fax 029 2057 5994
E-mail: exams@wjec.co.uk
website: www.wjec.co.uk