



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

JANUARY 2024

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2024

UNIT 1: PROSE (DIFFERENT CULTURES) AND POETRY (CONTEMPORARY)

Executive Summary

Most popular text choices (approximate percentages):

Foundation Tier:

1. *Of Mice and Men* (97%)
2. *Anita and Me* (7.5%)
3. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (5.5%)
4. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (3.4%)
5. *Chandra's Secrets* (2.3%)

Higher Tier:

1. *Of Mice and Men* (95.7%)
2. *Anita and Me* (1.4%)
3. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (3.1%)
4. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (0.8%)
5. *Chandra's Secrets* (2.2%)

Responses to the extract questions (where candidates had genuinely studied the texts) posed few specific problems for candidates. The questions gave opportunities for candidates to focus on how the writers framed the readers' reactions to characters, especially with AO2 in mind. Essay responses on these texts often showed real engagement from candidates with ideas, characters and contexts fully addressed in them. Similarly in the Poetry section, there were many responses which successfully addressed all three assessment objectives and offered thoughtful, engaged readings of the poems.

Candidates must:

- Read the questions very carefully and remember which assessment objectives are being assessed in each
- In the text essays, refer to events and details from the novel to support their ideas
- In poetry questions, establish what is happening in each poem first and then look for evidence in the poems to support each point made
- Ensure that both poems are addressed, and comparisons are made
- Think about what the writer or poet is trying to express about characters, ideas and, where relevant, wider society
- Write clearly. An increased number of illegible scripts were seen this year
- Ensure they are writing about the correct character for the question set
- Not answer questions on texts they have not studied, thereby ensuring they have adequate time to answer the poetry question.

Useful resources available for candidates:

- [Making productive use of contextual understanding](#) – Blended learning
- [Making meaningful comparisons](#) – Blended learning
- [Unseen poetry](#) - Blended learning
- [Developing critical analysis](#) – Blended learning
- [Exploring literary presentations](#) – Blended learning
- [Examination Walk Through Unit 1](#)

General Comments

On both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was still the most popular of the texts, as in previous years. However, there has been a significant shift in the last two years towards a wider variety of texts studied for this examination, particularly on Higher Tier. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as in previous years, remains a popular text and on Foundation Tier almost all candidates who had studied a novel other than *Of Mice and Men* wrote responses to this text. The picture on Higher Tier was different, however, where examiners assessed significant numbers of responses on *Chanda's Secrets* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as well as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Responses on these texts often showed real engagement on the part of candidates with the ideas, characters and contexts addressed in them.

Once again, unfortunately, a substantial number of candidates on both tiers addressed questions on novels which they had not studied. In many of these cases, every extract on the question paper was read and answered as an 'unseen' text, though many also attempted to answer questions on the whole 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 limited their chances of a grade commensurate with their abilities by addressing questions on texts they had not studied. In some cases, this resulted in some very thin, sketchy responses and brevity on all questions, even those for which the text had been studied. A number of these candidates on both tiers did not respond at all to the poetry, amplifying the impact of time wasted on texts not studied. There were also responses which showed serious confusion between characters in *Of Mice and Men*, on both tiers, where commentaries on Candy were actually about Curley or Crooks. In some cases, the question may have been misread, whereas in others there was some confusion about which characters were which. In both cases, however, these errors damaged candidates' chances of achieving good marks. Examiners also noted a rise in the number of illegible scripts where the handwriting made it difficult to decipher enough of the responses to safely award a mark.

Responses to the extract questions, at least where candidates had genuinely studied the texts, posed few specific problems for candidates. In the extract questions on both *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there were opportunities for candidates to focus on how the writers framed the readers' reactions to characters, especially with AO2 in mind. Candidates who had studied *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were sometimes able to tease out the complexities of Dolores' characterisation in the extract, though there were some responses which showed a limited understanding of who Dolores is and the part she plays in the novel, even where essay responses showed a clear knowledge of other aspects of the text.

The *Of Mice and Men* question on sympathy for Candy encouraged candidates on both tiers to look at both sides of Steinbeck's characterisation, with many able to outline Candy's pitiful victimisation as well as his own racist and misogynist behaviour in the novel. The alternative question on how characters' dreams and ambitions are used by Steinbeck to expose some elements of 1930s American society was a popular choice. On both tiers, candidates were generally able to discuss the dreams and ambitions of specific characters and link them to the prevailing social mores of the time. Some candidates also focused interestingly on characters who seemed devoid of ambition and drew some thoughtful conclusions about groups who were excluded from hopes and dreams in American society in the 1930s.

Examiners needed to take account of the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. In most essay responses, some references to contextual factors were given to show an understanding of how they influenced characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. Most candidates used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there were some responses on both tiers where there was limited reference to context. There also remained some confusion about where on the paper context is assessed. Fairly frequently in the extract question, for example, Higher Tier responses to the question on Curley's wife ranged well beyond the extract itself, often including comments on how women were perceived in 1930s America. Occasionally, this lack of awareness of where different AOs are assessed meant that quite long sections of the response could not be credited. This weakness was less prevalent in responses to the other texts, although there were some essay responses on Jem Finch which made little explicit reference to the wider social context of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Text essay responses to *Chanda's Secrets* tended to rely on facts and figures about the prevalence of AIDS or domestic violence in sub-Saharan Africa which sometimes led to sweeping generalisations that seemed disconnected from the characters in the text.

The poetry comparison question was generally handled with 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. This had a damaging effect on their overall achievement, particularly considering the weighting of the different assessment objectives for this task. Strong responses, as always, engaged with meaning and ideas and how the language choices made by each poet conveyed them. On Higher Tier, better responses compared how the writers invited, or did not invite, the sympathy of the reader for the poor people described, whereas weaker responses sometimes misread the content of the poems in different ways. On Foundation Tier, candidates who engaged with the immigrant backgrounds of the characters' families in both poems tended to offer more thoughtful interpretations, with weaker responses struggling to see the connections between them. On both tiers, however, there were many responses which successfully addressed all three assessment objectives and offered thoughtful, engaged readings of the poems.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Extract questions

The *Of Mice and Men* extract question focused on how Steinbeck introduces the character of Curley's wife to the reader. This familiar scene in the novel required some careful reading from candidates on both tiers to ensure high marks.

Successful responses paid attention to both assessment objectives here to address the question on Steinbeck's characterisation of Curley's wife and the language choices which revealed her insecurities and preoccupations. Many highly rewarded responses on Higher

Tier, for example, used the reactions of George, Lennie and Slim to show how her treatment by others on the ranch affected her and sometimes exacerbated her outrageous flirtation. Other candidates saw her in a different light: her naivety and innocence as a mere 'girl' playing the part of a femme fatale in an exaggerated and foolish attempt to make friends on the ranch were emphasised, with plenty of detail to support this view.

In many cases, candidates kept in mind that this is the reader's first encounter with Curley's wife, a character who has already been maligned by other characters. The meaning of her flirtatious behaviour here, and its potential consequences, are only hinted at by Steinbeck in his use of light imagery and the rather exaggerated, almost comical, details of her appearance. Some of her underlying insecurities about her marriage and her relationships with others on the ranch were successfully teased out in better responses, although some relied on contextual factors, which could not be credited, to show their understanding of these aspects. There were also some extreme and unbalanced interpretations of the character as a malicious, immoral, promiscuous woman who wants to destroy the hopes of innocent men on the ranch. This interpretation, which can be supported to some degree, often missed the more subtle features of her characterisation here and candidates did not always make use of their wider knowledge of her story in the novel to inform their commentary.

The portrayal of Mrs Dubose, as seen through Scout's terrified eyes, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was generally well handled by candidates on both tiers. The ability of the character to evoke terror in the children despite her pathetic physical condition was studied carefully in better responses, where the specific viewpoint of the child narrator was kept in mind. Evidence of Mrs Dubose's reputation for meanness and spite, alongside some of the grotesque imagery of old age and disease used in the extract, often took candidates a long way in showing how Lee convinces us of the children's genuine fear of her. Weaker responses on both tiers addressed some of the detail in the description of the old, sick woman, but did not track through the extract or really understand how Scout's perspective was used by the writer to highlight her impact on the children while hinting at some sense of the old woman's suffering. A narrow range of observations was the main reason for responses being kept below Band 3 in the mark range.

There were similar issues about the narrator's viewpoint and the way this is used by Angelou in the depiction of Dolores in the *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* extract. The way the reader's reactions to Dolores are filtered through Maya's worries about how she herself is perceived was sometimes understood by candidates, but, as mentioned above, some struggled to understand Dolores' role in the novel as a character who exposes Bailey's neglect and mistreatment.

These more subtle aspects of her characterisation here were often missed. Better responses tended to focus more productively on Dolores' appearance, her attempts to present herself as 'proper and serious', yet still with the body of a child, her endeavours to keep house for Bailey 'with the orderliness of a coffin' and the overall impression created of her as an exploited young woman trying to win over a prospective step-daughter.

The *Chanda's Secrets* extract gave candidates plenty of opportunities to comment on the grotesque language used to convey a mood and atmosphere of intensity and fear. Many candidates were able to track through the detail in the extract to show how Mama's initial scepticism becomes overwhelmed by Mrs Gulubane's deliberate dramatisation and vivid language and imagery. Some candidates, mostly on Higher Tier, who were aware of Mrs Gulubane's cynical manipulation of the other characters, became a little absorbed in explaining this rather than focusing on mood and atmosphere, somewhat missing the vivid images and language used by her to create this mood. Where candidates could use the consciously hyperbolic, rather ridiculous gothic language of Mrs Gulubane to make the same

point, examiners were able to award high marks. Marks below Band 3 were usually given where candidates were not quite able to show a grasp of the changing atmosphere in the room and made a few valid points about tension or fear.

Text Essay Questions

The majority of candidates who had studied *Of Mice and Men* selected the second question on how characters' dreams and ambitions help to reveal aspects of American society in the 1930s. While many wrote about the dreams of specific characters, such as George and Lennie, Candy and Curley's wife, some explored the meaning of dreams and aspirations as a source of hope and escape in difficult times, as well as Steinbeck's use of dashed and unrealistic dreams to undermine the idea of the American Dream and its hold on oppressed people in 1930s America. In some well-rewarded responses, these themes of crushed aspirations were thoughtfully expounded. Unrealistic, delusional hopes, such as Curley's wife's Hollywood dreams, were set against the more modest, almost-achieved scale of George and Lennie's 'little farm' to show that there was no escape from the grind and exploitation of the lives of women and of migrant labourers. The hopelessness and initial cynicism of Crooks towards common aspirations of migrant workers were also explored, sometimes with reference to how quickly his nascent dreams of joining George and Lennie are crushed by Curley's wife's reminder of the fragility of black people's lives in America at the time.

There was also some productive use of other characters who seemed not to be affected by such hopeless dreams and aspirations. The protection given to Curley by his status and money, as well as Slim's grounded focus on self-respect and an earned reputation rather than dreams of escape, often featured in successful responses. The harmful social and economic realities of 1930s America were skilfully woven into these responses to shed light on events in the novel and show how the lives of characters were limited and their hopes and dreams crushed.

Other successful responses focused on a detailed, well-supported analysis of the meaning of specific dreams for different characters. Candy's predicament as an old man living in a brutal, utilitarian society at the end of his working life was frequently explored as the main driver for his aspirations, although in some cases a less convincing argument was based on him having always harboured hopes of the American Dream.

Crooks' yearning for an escape from loneliness and isolation, governed not only by the Jim Crow laws but by his own long experience of racist violence, was considered with sensitivity in some responses. Less effective responses on both tiers tended to be more general than specific and while context was usually addressed to some degree, the commentary was spread too thinly across too many characters and was less focused on how contextual factors drove their dreams in different ways.

The alternative question asked candidates to consider how far Steinbeck creates sympathy for Candy and, on Foundation Tier, asked them to consider whether Candy could be described as weak and undeserving of the reader's sympathy. Most candidates on both tiers were able to select events and relationships in the novel to show that Candy has little status on the ranch and his future as an old man with limited support in a society which did not value age and experience is insecure. For some Higher Tier candidates, some of whom were awarded very high marks, a strong argument based on detail and illustration of the underlying and insidious ageism embedded in the social values of the time helped to produce thorough and thoughtful responses. Key scenes were explored in detail, particularly the killing of Candy's dog and his outburst at the end of the novel against Curley's wife, to expose how his predicament is deeply rooted in societal values.

Many at this level, but also on Foundation Tier at the highest level, also discussed some of the ways in which he can be considered a weak and unsympathetic character who embodies the exploitative and racist attitudes of his society, even though his life is destroyed by them. His casual racism and unexamined misogyny were often cited as a misguided way of combatting the prejudice shown against himself, especially on Higher Tier. On Foundation Tier, such aspects of his character were used to show how he is weak in simply accepting the values of his time or that Steinbeck sheds a less favourable light on his character at different points in the novel.

For those who studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both questions elicited responses across the mark range on both tiers. The first question was addressed with some evaluation at the top of the mark range on Higher Tier though most candidates tracked through Jem's progress from a young boy inventing games with his friend and his sister to his exposure to the consequences of accepted social norms in the trial of Tom Robinson. Better responses here, as is always the case, showed a thorough, detailed knowledge of the text from which apt and illustrative selections could be made to show the influences on Jem as he grew up, the relationships and events which shaped him and how Lee uses the character to suggest a different path for American young people in the 1930s. The games played around the Radley house featured commonly to show how the children gradually learn to develop empathy towards Boo, culminating in the final scene where Boo emerges to save their lives. The impact of the Tom Robinson trial on Jem was also a salient idea used in many successful responses. His naïve disbelief and painful realisation at the outcome of the trial were used to show that Jem had matured but could not accept the prevailing racism of the time and looked to become a lawyer like his father to fight against it. In some responses, while there was some use of other events, such as his interactions with Mrs Dubose or some of the teachings of his father, the trial of Tom Robinson was not mentioned or only briefly. Although such omissions are not penalised by examiners, it seemed a shame that one of the catalysts for Jem's growing understanding of the world around him was under-used.

The alternative question on the theme of prejudice gave candidates on both tiers some choice and freedom to show their understanding of characters and events in the novel and how Lee uses them to highlight injustices in 1930s America. Most candidates chose Boo Radley as an example of prejudice, with some able to argue convincingly that the stifling conformism and punitive, judgemental attitudes of the southern states had destroyed a man's life. Others selected Atticus as a lone figure standing against the entrenched racism of the time and suffering abuse and prejudice from his neighbours as a result.

Other characters also featured, such as Dolphus Raymond and Calpurnia. In better responses, there was some specific evidence offered to show how Raymond's behaviour had been skewed by other people's prejudice against his breaking of societal norms in his personal relationships, as well as some of the ways Calpurnia is reminded of her racial inferiority by Alexandra and others. Where there was detailed support and a clearly expressed understanding of the prevailing culture of the time, examiners could award high marks. In general, weaker responses tended to spread their comments too thinly, briefly outlining the ways in which a range of characters suffered prejudice without the close study needed for higher marks. On both tiers, there was sometimes a lack of explicit focus on how the prejudice suffered by characters was a reflection of wider society's values.

Most candidates who had studied *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* selected the question on Momma, Maya's grandmother, and how Angelou uses the character to show some of the attributes and attitudes of black people and their white counterparts at the time Maya was growing up. On Foundation Tier, many candidates made good use of the bullet points to help them select and comment on events and relationships which addressed the question. This approach always helps candidates to avoid general and unspecified commentaries which do not show their knowledge of the text for the higher marks. On Higher Tier, some

focused selection helped better candidates to show the role of Momma in protecting and helping Maya and her brother to navigate through the deeply racist times of their childhood and adolescence. Events selected were often focused and pertinent, such as Momma's dignified response to the mockery of the poor white girls on her property, her ill-treatment at the hands of the white dentist and her strict but loving care of her grandchildren at different points in the novel. A few candidates addressed Momma's significance to the novel as a whole, showing that her submissive avoidance of white racism reflected her generation's isolation in segregated black communities which would give way in later generations to a different approach and more interaction between the races.

The alternative question sometimes elicited responses which relied on listing of characters who could be considered victims, with some brief examples to show why this was the case. Fewer candidates addressed the idea of heroism or characters who could be considered heroes, or explored why such role models were absent in the novel.

Most candidates, on both tiers, who had studied *Chanda's Secrets* chose the first question, suggesting a variety of characters who evoked sympathy. Chanda's mother was a common choice and there was often a thorough knowledge shown of her story and the many injustices she encountered in her life. She was generally seen as a victim of a society which did not protect women and children, the poor or the sick and where the stigma of AIDS and the shame and superstition surrounding it greatly increased her suffering. Other contenders included Esther and Chanda herself. Esther's fall from grace, from a relatively privileged early childhood (shown by the flushing toilet) to prostitution and disease by the time she was 16, was also commonly used to show how Stratton evokes sympathy in the reader. Chanda's broken dreams and ambitions, as well as Esther's desire to travel, were often cited as sources of the reader's sympathy. A surprising number of candidates wrote about Jonah as a character who evokes sympathy in the reader. His desolation at the death of his daughter and unacknowledged guilt at having spread AIDS in his family were seen as the main cause of his degradation into alcoholism and an ignominious end. Most Higher Tier responses to both questions on the novel included a range of statistics about the prevalence of AIDS, prostitution or violence against women and girls to show an understanding of contextual factors. These sometimes seemed disconnected with the way Stratton uses characterisation and the presentation of events and communities in the novel. On Foundation Tier, however, a significant number of responses here were limited by a lack of reference to context, even though in some cases there was some clear understanding of characters and events shown.

The second question focused on the sense of crippling shame experienced by many characters in the novel and while few candidates selected the question, responses generally featured examples of shame, such as the way in which Chanda's mother and Esther were treated by their neighbours and family members in Bonang and Tiro because they had contracted AIDS. Some more thorough responses explored the different ways in which characters respond to this sense of shame, such as Mrs Tafa's reliance on superstition and rituals and Chanda's mother's willingness to sacrifice herself to spare her children the terrible shame of AIDS.

Poetry

Higher Tier responses to the poems about people living in extreme poverty varied widely in their interpretations and particularly in their understanding of figurative language and ideas. As mentioned above, most candidates were aware of the requirement to address both poems and to compare them, but there was a substantial minority who lost marks by not comparing the poems, even when their commentaries on one or sometimes both poems

showed much promise. Since the comparison element is heavily weighted in the assessment, this inevitably had a deleterious effect on some candidates' achievement. On Higher Tier, most candidates could identify the details and images of extreme suffering and poverty in both poems, including the unkempt condition of the beggar in Tong's 'African Beggar' and the evident starvation of women and children in Achebe's 'Refugee Woman and Child'.

In the Tong poem, many candidates were aware of a sense of menace in the portrayal of the beggar and the lack of sympathy from the narrator for the beggar. Some were able to locate those elements in the language and imagery of the poem. For some candidates, the imagery was a source of unease, that maybe the beggar was evil and 'cunning', exploiting passers-by in a cynical, cruel way. While most detected a more sympathetic tone in the last stanza, there were some who saw the 'grotesque mask of death' as more imagery suggesting the man was fake, perhaps not even a beggar at all. Examiners could reward a willingness to interpret ideas and images, even where the overall interpretation was unconvincing, although in the best responses, candidates were aware of the poet's manipulation of the reader's impression of the beggar in the first two stanzas and could see how the observer in the poem dehumanised and rendered alien a man whose extreme poverty had reduced him to something unrecognisable as a fellow human being. Some saw an inherent criticism of all of us who could not imagine living with so little and thought of pity as an inconvenient 'curse'.

Some details were quite often misunderstood and sometimes led candidates down less productive interpretations. The beggar being a 'target for small children, dogs and flies' was fairly commonly mistaken as the beggar himself targeting children, leading to some clearly inappropriate ideas about kidnapping and abuse of children by the beggar. The animal imagery of 'cunning, reptile eyes' was seen to support this interpretation while the dehumanising of people in extreme poverty was missed. Some candidates believed the beggar not to be human at all and wrote about a 'creature' who had been abandoned or neglected. Most responses, however, showed a clear view of the beggar as a man in a pitiful state who was neglected, feared and ignored by people around him, who found it easier to characterise him as a creature devoid of humanity than to proffer him support and sympathy. 'Refugee Mother and Child' was often discussed as describing people who could be more readily sympathised with, showing some appreciation of the less ambiguous tone of poem. Another common link between the poems was the sense that the isolation of the beggar in the first poem was more acute because of the strong bond of 'tenderness' between mother and child in the second. The opening lines of the poem were often thought to be different in tone from the images and details of horrific deprivation in the second stanza. The sense of vulnerability which emerges only in the last stanza of the Tong poem was seen throughout the Achebe poem. There were differing interpretations about the fate of the child in the Achebe poem, many of which were sustained by detailed reference to the language of the text.

The repetition of 'ghost' in 'ghost smile' and 'ghost of a mother's pride' suggested for some that the child is dead and only the imprint of normal motherly reactions are discernible in the mother. Some also interpreted the idea of the child's 'skull' as a reference to his death and the mother's loving gesture of combing his hair was seen as her devotion to her child, even after death. The haunting images of a normal domestic scene of breakfast and school also engaged many candidates: some saw this simple reference as the life the mother and child used to have or should have had, contrasting poignantly with the conditions of their lives now.

These were hard-hitting poems with some intense and unpleasant ideas in them and I was struck repeatedly by the sympathy and reflectiveness shown by many candidates at all levels of achievement in their responses to them.

On Foundation Tier, the first poem, 'Hijab Scene 7' was, on the whole, fairly well understood by candidates. Many wrote about easy stereotypes that the character wearing a hijab is judged by and they were able to pick out the intrusive questions and assumptions which had become common in the life of the narrator.

The tone of the poem was also fairly readily identified in that the narrator's anger was seen to be mounting. The final image of 'explosives/They're called words' was mostly explained in simple but sensible ways, often with the narrator using a common stereotype of Muslims as being violent as a weapon against people who make such assumptions. A few candidates could see that the 'words' referred to had become the poem itself which was written to challenge and mock those prejudices.

The second poem, 'How to cut a pomegranate' was less well understood though there was much simple paraphrase which was rewarded. Many candidates were aware that the pomegranate was symbolic or emblematic in some way and began to see some connection with the first poem as both having something to say about 'respect' or about the different attitudes that the poets have towards their heritage. Some referred to a sense of 'nostalgia' in the second poem, for example, while the irritation of the speaker in 'Hijab Scene 7' was a different kind of response to the ethnic background of their family. Even where the figurative language of the Dharker poem was less well understood, candidates sometimes pointed to the vivid, beautiful descriptions in the poem to show that the poems were starkly different in tone and atmosphere. Though interpretations were not always secure, a willingness to reach beyond the literal in the second poem tended to distinguish better responses. Most responses in the middle range of marks were more likely to offer simple paraphrases of the poems and struggled to see links between them. Perhaps some candidates had missed the steer on the paper that 'both poets' families came from different countries in the past' and could have found more productive approaches if this had been taken into account.

Summary of key points:

- Read the questions very carefully and remember which assessment objectives are being assessed in each.
- In text essays, refer to events and details to support your ideas.
- In poetry questions, figure out what is happening in each poem first and look for evidence in the poems to support each point you make.
- Think about what the writer or poet is trying to express about characters, ideas and, where relevant, wider society.
- Do not answer questions on texts you have not studied.



WJEC
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