



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

**GCSE (NEW)
ENGLISH LITERATURE**

SUMMER 2022

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCSE (NEW)

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UNIT 1

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. A small number of responses from those who had studied *Anita and Me* were also entered.

Although much more prevalent on Foundation Tier, 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. 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 question on texts not studied. In some cases, this problem led to some very brief, sketchy responses, and brevity on both tiers was a factor in limiting the achievement of candidates. Another issue that badly affected some candidates' achievement was a misreading of the extract question which asked for a commentary on the relationship between George and Slim. Some misread this or assumed that the focus of the question was George and Lennie, inevitably affecting their achievement here.

The question on Crooks also revealed some confusion, mostly on Foundation Tier but not exclusively, about the character. Some answered about Candy, either misreading the question or confusing the novel's characters, and a few muddled the novel's details, writing that Crooks was black and was missing a hand, for example. Some included details derived from the film of the novel which are not in the novel itself. While such misunderstandings are not penalised specifically, they do not suggest a thorough grasp of the novel.

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 detailed and focused understanding was demonstrated of how social factors at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. Most candidates on both tiers used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there remained 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* included comments about context which could not be credited.

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. 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 a sensitive, probing readings of the poems.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Extract questions

The *Of Mice and Men* extract question focused on the budding friendship between George and Slim. The extract gave candidates plenty of opportunities to comment on the rather tentative conversation between these two men who had only known each other for a short time.

Successful responses paid attention to both assessment objectives here, the subtleties of the relationship itself and the language used by Steinbeck to present them. Slim's patience and humility in attempting to draw George out in the conversation was noticed, for example, as was George's defensiveness over Lennie. Many well-rewarded responses commented on how Slim found common ground with George by complimenting Lennie before venturing into the more problematic topic of the relationship between George and Lennie. Some candidates carefully analysed Slim's demeanour and body language as well as what he said, and tracked the ebb and flow of the conversation through its moments of shared humour, awkward tension and comfortable silence.

Less effective responses tended to be more general and missed the nuances of language and behaviour in the extract. Some simply assumed the men were 'good friends' from the start while others thought Slim's intentions were malign or his behaviour aggressive.

The *To Kill a Mockingbird* extract also offered candidates some subtlety in the presentation of Alexandra. There were many insightful responses which explored the ways in which Lee exposes her snobbery and obsession with social status here. Some commented on her hypocrisy as shown by her insistence that the children should show a fake, surface politeness to everyone while excluding most from their privileged, inner circle. Her crude, unfair judgement of Walter based on her perceptions about his family rather than his character was also noted and there was some perceptive commentary on Lee's use of the innocent point of view of young children to ridicule and expose Alexandra's narrow-minded attitudes.

Less successful responses, as is often the case, did not use the detail in the extract to support their comments or they focused on Alexandra's bossiness towards the children and her attempt to interfere in their choice of friends rather than the attitudes which underpin such behaviour.

Anita and Me was studied by a small number of mostly Higher Tier candidates, many of whom responded insightfully to the extract describing Uncle Alan. The character's genial nature and the ways in which Syal presents his 'good egg' qualities were the focus of these successful responses. The varying reactions of the children and female adults to Alan were often included and better responses looked at Syal's affectionate humour in her portrayal of the character's mannerisms and behaviour. Some missed this more subtle aspect of characterisation and tended to see Alan as fake or over-emphasised his status as a 'sex symbol' to suggest that he exploited such perceptions.

Text Essay Questions

The majority of candidates who had studied *Of Mice and Men* selected the first question on whether Steinbeck's use of Crooks shows us the worst aspects of American society in the 1930s. Some candidates made good use of the implied evaluation in the question and wrote about Crooks' suffering in a deeply racist society alongside other potential 'worst aspects', such as the ill-treatment of Curley's wife by society's misogyny and sexism or the brutal life led by older workers represented by Candy. This approach offered some opportunities for thoughtful consideration of Crooks' miserable life, with many candidates concluding that while others' lives were limited and poor, Crooks' suffering was entrenched by the Jim Crow laws and the legacy of slavery.

Other successful responses focused on a detailed, well-supported and perceptive analysis of Steinbeck's portrayal of Crooks. The meaning of his loneliness and isolation, rooted in generational fear of white people who could threaten his life with impunity on a whim, was often better understood in the most successful responses than has been the case in past examinations. Whereas responses given middle-range marks cited the segregation of black people by law and custom as causing Crooks' loneliness, there were some highly rewarded responses where the few scenes in which Crooks appears were analysed perceptively and his misery and depression explored in depth. Most candidates on both tiers were able to refer to Curley's wife's threat to have Crooks lynched but in some responses the description of Crooks' behaviour after the threat became a more thoughtful focus for comment. Similarly, his cruelty towards Lennie was often used but in better responses the causes of that cruelty were explored in more detail and the effects of isolation on Crooks' mental health considered with apt support.

The alternative question asked candidates to write about the theme of injustice and, on Foundation Tier, to identify and write about characters who were treated unjustly, bearing in mind the contextual factors which played a part in their lives. There are, of course, several characters whose lives reveal the various injustices of the time and most included Crooks, Curley's wife and sometimes Candy in their commentaries. Some successful responses provided an overview of the theme of injustice and how Steinbeck uses it to expose and critique American society in the 1930s, showing how characterisation as well as events build a picture of a harsh, judgemental and competitive world. Most candidates across both tiers were able to show their understanding of characters who suffered the injustice of racism, sexism or other forms of discrimination and were able to link this injustice to the prevailing social attitudes of the time. The extent to which they could support their ideas with detailed textual references often determined from which band examiners could give their marks.

For those who studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the first essay question on the character of Calpurnia was most often selected. Again, her status as the black maid in the household of a white, middle-class family gave candidates a good starting-point from which to explore how Lee presents Calpurnia as both representative of the black community in the American South of the 1930s and as a light to shine on the discrimination and prejudice of wider society. For some candidates, Lee's presentation of her helped to shed light on Atticus' progressive attitudes in contrast to his community's deep-seated prejudice. Details such as Alexandra's behaviour towards Calpurnia, the visit to First Purchase church with the children and Calpurnia's reaction to the Tom Robinson trial were used to show the character's courage and resilience as well as the prejudice she suffers as a black woman.

The alternative question also elicited some thoughtful responses on Higher Tier. The idea of innocence was interpreted in a number of ways. Some successful responses focused on Lee's use of the children's point of view to shed a light on the stupidity and hypocrisy of the social mores of the time.

Scout's uncalculated intervention outside the courthouse or the children's encounters with Boo Radley and Dolphus Raymond were also used to show how Lee exposed the cruelties inflicted on those who did not conform to the social norms of the day and many paid close attention to the incredulous, anguished reactions of the children to the outcome of the Tom Robinson trial.

Other approaches were also used successfully. Some responses selected and commented on characters who they considered 'innocent' such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Where these included detailed, wide-ranging and aptly-selected textual references to support ideas about the theme of innocence, examiners could award high marks.

The small number of candidates who studied *Anita and Me* wrote with engagement and understanding on the relationship between Sam Lowbridge and Meena or the theme of belonging in the novel. Many of these responses showed a detailed knowledge of the text and tracked the relationship between Meena and Sam from the beginning of the novel to the final meeting between the two, showing how Meena's attitude to Sam changes over time. Some related the trajectory of the relationship with Meena's path towards a better understanding of both the UK's attitudes to Asian immigrants and her own dual heritage, as well as exposing the hypocrisy of racist attitudes at the time. Similarly, the idea of belonging was often explored using Meena's journey from wanting to identify herself with Anita's white girl gang to her awakening to her Indian heritage through Nanima's influence and some of the events in the novel which alienated her from white working-class culture.

Poetry

Higher Tier responses to the poems about birds varied widely 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 the poems themselves showed much promise.

Barry Hines' 'Starlings' was generally quite well understood, and most responses made apt selections to show how Hines' irrational hatred of starlings is depicted. The language used to describe the starlings was often quoted but not always commented on, although more use was made of the use of lurid colours in the poem. The contrast between the language used to show the virulent repulsion of the poet towards starlings and the rather more gentle words and images to describe other kinds of birds was often noted, as was the abrupt assertiveness of 'Except starlings' in the second stanza. Candidates in the middle range tended to express puzzlement at the reason why starlings attracted such hatred from the poet, while more confident readers of poetry suggested that the irrationality of such feelings was, perhaps, the main idea expressed and then questioned by the poet in the final stanza. In some thoughtful responses, candidates explored the idea of irrational prejudice as the topic of the poem, showing how the poet rather humorously mocks such beliefs and invites the reader in the last stanza to interrogate them. The religious and philosophical undertones of some of the language used, such as 'all life is sacred' led to some sensitive commentary about whether the poem might be drawing attention to ideas about tolerance and different perceptions of ugliness and beauty. While this idea was sometimes partially grasped, there were some rather imposed interpretations of the poem as specifically about racial discrimination, an idea which was difficult to sustain from a close reading.

R S Thomas' 'A Blackbird Singing' was generally understood to be a more positive, appreciative expression of admiration for the blackbird, giving most candidates a clear point of contrast with the Hines. Many saw also some link with the idea of prejudice in that Thomas says the blackbird's song is unexpectedly beautiful because its appearance has 'a suggestion of dark/Places about it.'

There were many responses in which the main linking idea between the poems was that of 'not judging a book by its cover', a sensible, valid comment. More perceptive responses explored Thomas' blending of images of beauty, both visual and aural, with an underlying melancholy associated with the blackbird, a sense of mystery and unknowable experience. At the top of the mark range, Hines' anthropomorphic descriptions of birds suggested to some sensitive readers a very different attitude to nature from that seen in Thomas' poem where the essential mysteriousness of the blackbird is suggested.

Again, less successful responses tended to impose on the poem the idea of racial discrimination or there was some searching for a literal explanation for the mention of grief or love. This lack of tolerance for ambiguity in figurative language and imagery tended to limit candidates' achievement and led to some unconvincing interpretations and a lack of focus on the rich images used in both poems, especially the Thomas poem.

On Foundation Tier, the content of the poems was generally well understood, if not always the details. The first poem, 'Bruises Heal', gave candidates a reasonable opportunity to work out what was happening to the girl narrating and the kinds of thoughts and feelings she experienced as a victim of bullying. 'My Son Waits at the Door' proved a little more challenging, partly because the bullying is less overt in it and partly because the poet expresses the impact the bullying has on the boy through imagery or implicit meanings. As always on Foundation Tier poetry, candidates tended to fare better if they read the poems closely for surface meaning first. There was sometimes confusion about who was speaking and whose thoughts were being expressed in the first poem and a sizeable minority of candidates missed the implication that the girl is not physically hurt but rather is damaged by cruel words which leave no bruises, thereby making it difficult to find help or show evidence of her suffering. Some more successful responses, however, were able to see the medical terminology used as an extended metaphor throughout the poem and to make some useful comments about how this contributed to meaning and the sense of deliberate and extreme pain inflicted by the bully. In the second poem, many candidates understood the sorrow and hurt caused by the abandonment of the boy by his erstwhile friends and better responses addressed the image of the howling hyena with some thoughtful comments about this as a representation of his loneliness. In their comparisons, some thoughtful responses included the different voices and points of view of the narrators, many sympathising with the parent in the second poem who had to watch the boy being hurt.

Weaker responses tended to rely on some basic misreadings and a surprising number thought that both characters were victims of self-harming behaviour. This sometimes led them to some less-convincing interpretations, comparisons and contrasts. For example, the boy in the second poem does not take off his coat after school in anticipation that his friends may call but some candidates thought this was to conceal the evidence of self-harm from his family. Some were not really able to see the impact of his friends' behaviour on the boy and assumed that the girl in the first poem was being physically beaten but the boy in the second was or that he couldn't play outside because he lived on a terrible, violent estate.

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 the subtext in what is said and how it is said.
- Think about what the writer or poet is trying to express about characters, ideas and, where relevant, wider society.
- Only answer questions on texts you have studied.

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UNIT 2

General Comments

Both tiers on both variants (2A and 2B) generally performed well and there was plenty of evidence of candidates achieving well at all levels.

For 2A, on both tiers, the dominant texts remained *An Inspector Calls* and *Heroes*. It was interesting to note, however, that there were a good number of responses to other texts, notably *A Taste of Honey*, *Paddy Clarke HA HA HA* and *Never Let Me Go*. It could be that the majority of the schools that ordinarily teach these texts decided to remain with Unit 2 this summer. For 2A Foundation *A Taste of Honey*, in particular, is proving increasingly popular.

For 2B Foundation Tier, *Blood Brothers* and *A Christmas Carol* continued to dominate, with *Lord of the Flies* still taking a good share on Higher Tier. Again, some of the other texts, such as *The History Boys* and *A View from the Bridge* were also represented in reasonable numbers on both tiers.

Predominantly on Foundation Tier for both 2A and 2B, a substantial number of candidates on addressed questions on plays and 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, and sometimes some or all of the essays were attempted too. This rubric infringement remains a serious problem for candidates whose teachers will have guided them through the study of two chosen texts. Several candidates on each tier expressed dismay in various ways about this, for example, saying that they were not present when all these texts were taught or that they had been misinformed by their teacher about the content of the exam. It seemed that there was a higher proportion of infringements for this season. Perhaps the two years of no exams have not helped this issue.

Responses were generally well organised and there was much evidence of effective exam technique in terms of timing and also attention to the appropriate AOs. Context was generally dealt with when applicable and not when it was not needed. There were exceptions to this (and for timing too) but good practice was the norm. The level of engagement with the texts studied was impressive, as was the amount of detailed knowledge shown by many candidates.

Comments on individual questions/sections

2A Higher and Foundation

For *An Inspector Calls* candidates explored the different ways the characters spoke and behaved in the given extract, considering what this revealed about them to an audience. The range of characters here offered plenty of scope for discussion and led to many careful and thorough responses. Some of the most interesting answers considered the ways characters react to and respond to each other, sometimes drawing sensitive comparisons between them. The extract offered plenty of scope to consider characters' behaviour through Priestley's frequent use of stage directions. This worked well in assisting discussion of Eric, for example, and his boisterous, probably inebriated behaviour in the extract.

The question suggesting that Mrs Birling might be the most unlikeable character in the play proved popular and encouraged insightful and detailed responses. Appropriate evidence was used to support the idea of Mrs Birling being the least likeable character. Most candidates concentrated on Mrs Birling's treatment of Eva at the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation meeting and there was plenty of scope here for supporting argument. However, it was evident which candidates knew the play really well through their examination of Mrs Birling's character beyond the charity meeting.

The question invited candidates to consider other characters as the least likeable if they wished. Convincing arguments were put forward for Mr Birling, Gerald and Eric, or, indeed, a combination of these and the part they played in the chain of events that led to Eva's death.

About one in ten candidates misread this question, substituting Mr Birling for Mrs Birling. This did not prove to be an issue as the quality of the responses was just as high and many then considered other unlikeable characters in comparison. Candidates were rewarded fully for what they produced and not penalised in any way for this misreading. The only candidates who may have disadvantaged themselves in this were those few who realised their misreading and crossed out work on Mr Birling before then writing an essay about Mrs Birling, therefore reducing the time available for their other responses. One possible way forward to avoid such mis-readings in future would be to refer to 'Mrs. Birling (Sybil)' in the question. This is not an ideal solution but will be considered.

The question about working life was approached in a variety of ways. A systematic consideration of Eva's various jobs and the Birlings and Gerald's influence over these proved popular. The question could also be read as a discussion of the class system in early twentieth century Britain and how this is exemplified through the play. Some interesting points were raised about the difference between the life of Eva, and the lives of Mrs Birling and Sheila who did not need to work and whose lives were facilitated by men's work. Some candidates developed this, seeing that Mrs Birling can only conceive of Eva being saved by a man – the father of her unborn child. It was noted that, as a single, working-class woman in early twentieth century Britain, Eva is facing a double oppression – that of her gender and of her class position. Some candidates did concentrate on contextual issues without relating them to the play and some included film references. These approaches were not as helpful and are to be avoided.

For *Heroes* the extract was particularly accessible and the question was effectively answered by many. Candidates considered the presentation of Larry LaSalle with insight. Points were made about his wide-reaching presence in being 'everywhere in the centre', his practical talents, mentorship of the children and status as a role model. This was balanced against a consideration of his limits, shown in Joey's recognition that Butch Bartoneau 'still beats up kids in the schoolyard' which could suggest that Larry's influence only goes so far. The darker side of Larry was examined with understanding, with points raised on his mysterious past and the children's dismissal of Larry's darker elements due to their prevailing positive impression of him.

Attention was paid to Cormier's language choices that help to create this impression, such as the 'faded' newspaper clipping suggesting that the days of Larry's glory are long gone, that 'rumours' are rarely positive, the fact no-one 'dared' to question him, creating the idea of an intimidating side to this man, and the sense of ownership suggested by 'our' champion.

The question asking which was the most interesting relationship proved a popular choice. Francis and Larry, Nicole and Larry, and Francis and Nicole were selected by different candidates, and sometimes a number of these relationships were considered in order to weigh up which could be the most interesting.

Candidates explored how their chosen relationship changed through the novel, with sensitive insights shown in the dynamics of the chosen relationship and how it develops across the text. Some candidates had an issue with the chronology of this text, suggesting, for example, that Nicole took pity on Francis because of his facial injuries – in other words treating the story as linear. This remains a particular challenge with this text.

The question about revenge elicited many detailed and informed responses. A range of characters and situations were considered in order to explore the theme, such as Francis' desire for revenge against Larry and Nicole's escape from Frenchtown rather than seeking revenge. Some interesting ideas were considered within these approaches, such as whether Francis could be seen to be avenging himself by considering suicide, and how the soldiers seek revenge for the bombing of Pearl Harbour, shown by the 'rage over the sneak attack in the Pacific' and Larry's comment that they can't let the enemy 'get away with this'. Candidates explored how the novel's montage structure means that the reader does not initially know why Francis wants revenge, especially when Larry is first presented so positively, and how our understanding of Francis' desire for revenge grows as we progress through the book. There were interesting discussions as to whether Francis could be said to achieve his 'mission' of revenge or not.

The question invited candidates to consider how far they agreed with the statement that '*Heroes* is a story about revenge' and many chose to weigh up the theme against other ideas, such as forgiveness, love, or appearance and reality.

There were strong responses to various other questions on the other texts across both tiers. On Foundation Tier, in particular, there was some excellent work on *A Taste of Honey*. The most interesting relationship question provoked some detailed responses about Helen and Jo, Jo and Geof, Jo and the Boy etc. These often included effective references to context, including genre. On Higher Tier, there were some excellent responses to both essay questions on *Paddy Clarke HA HA HA*. These showed very detailed knowledge across the text and a strong level of engagement, as well as the ability to analyse style.

2B Higher and Foundation

For *Blood Brothers* the extract question was effectively handled by many. Stage directions helped some to analyse Mrs Johnstone's gradual realisation about the nature of Mrs Lyons' visit and most were quite confident about where this happens in the play and its significance. The question about the relationship between the twins allowed candidates to range across the play as a whole, although many chose to focus on key scenes such as their first meeting, the cancellation of the planned Christmas party and the final scene. On both tiers the best responses made something of the middle section of the play and their teenage years, showing that the relationship did reach a peak there in one happy summer rather than at the beginning over a bag of sweets.

The thematic question about superstition was predictably the less popular choice but was well handled by most who chose it. Shoes on the table featured, as well as twins who should not meet, but many effective responses added to these points by successfully discussing the role of the narrator and through this approach accessing ideas about the cyclical structure of the play.

For *A Christmas Carol* the extract response was accessed in two, sometimes distinct ways. Some focused on the description whilst others on the characters. For those who could combine the two there were some excellent points to be made about language use and the contrast between the warmth of Fred and the cold nature of Scrooge and London in winter. Most candidates seemed clear about where in the text this took place and were able to make sensible comments at various levels.

The question about Tiny Tim was popular and many different approaches were taken to it. Some candidates made good use of factual context to support discussion of his importance, whilst others discussed his key importance to the redemption of Scrooge as more of a priority.

The question about spirits affecting Scrooge was predictably popular and each of the spirits was well represented. This included Marley, which was good to see. There was also increasing attention to paid to contextually linked devices such as the children Ignorance and Want and their appearance at the end of the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present. This ability to link context and elements of narrative detail remains very effective.

For *Lord of the Flies* the extract again provoked two main approaches, either looking at the descriptive elements or the dynamics between the characters. The best responses mixed both to good effect. There were some excellent responses to the question about Piggy that analysed the idea of him never having a chance by applying relevant context in detail. The question about violence was also popular and well attempted by many. One key to success with thematic questions such as this is to stick to the word in the title of the question rather than replacing it gradually with terms such as savagery, which are not necessarily synonyms.

Amongst the other texts attempted there were some lively and engaging answers on *The History Boys* and *A View from the Bridge* in particular. As ever, it is a joy to see the enthusiasm that has been shown in the classroom transferred into engaged responses on whichever text has been chosen and studied.

Summary of key points

- Only answer questions on texts you have studied.
- Include accurate details, do not make up quotations.
- Read questions carefully and answer each part of them, paying attention to relevant AOs whilst doing so.
- Engaged responses are successful; supported opinions are good to express.
- Avoid film references.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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UNIT 3

General Comments

Administration

Taking into account the difficulties centres have encountered over the last two years of Covid-19 and the aftermath in terms of staff and learner absence, it was greatly to the credit of teachers and students that NEA samples were generally submitted on time and in good order. The only recurring issue was the difficulty in ensuring that coversheets were signed by teachers and candidates as continuing absences interrupted the normal centre routine.

Generally, when it was necessary to alter the content of the required sample centres were careful to include a note with the folders indicating the reasons for the changes. It is important that this happens as such information can save time and effort at a later date.

A number of moderators commented on the use of polypockets since they hold up the moderation process. Similarly the use of staples is to be discouraged as they often need removing before the work can be fully accessed. Treasury tags are the best way to attach work together. Some centres feel it is necessary to use cardboard folders for each candidate's work. This is not required and on a practical level, increases the cost of postage. Having made these points, it must also be stated that the majority of centres presented the folders in a user-friendly fashion and moderators are always grateful when this is the case.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Contents/tasks and annotation.

It was noticeable that this year the majority of centres used common tasks across the whole cohort in both Sections. This is unsurprising when delivery methods were probably uncertain.

Section A

The Shakespeare themes for 2022 were 'Appearance and Reality' and 'The presentation of family'. Both were embraced with enthusiasm, the former being applied most frequently to *Macbeth* and the latter to *Romeo and Juliet*. *Macbeth* was the most popular choice and very often the essays were attempted on the sample task based on the quotation 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't'. This topic gave the candidates plenty to discuss, the more able spotting that The Witches set up this morally ambiguous world with their 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'. The task had the advantage that it invited the candidate to follow the theme through to the end of the play. However, it was still apparent that text coverage was an issue with some candidates and, as been the case in the past, some answers stopped after the death of Banquo and, in some severe cases, after the death of Duncan. Centres are reminded that full text coverage is a requirement of the specification and reduced responses are likely to result in limited mark ranges.

Some approaches centred on Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, the latter resulting in some interesting investigations of the rejection of femininity and the Lady's inability to sustain her assumed evil persona.

The same task was also applicable to Juliet's appearance of being 'obedient and respectful' and there were some closely focused essays which investigated her increasingly hidden life. Again, the title had the advantage of encouraging a full survey of the drama, the better ones concentrating on Juliet's increasing isolation as the play concludes. It was interesting to note that those candidates who closely analysed Juliet's deceptions as the play develops tended to be much less sympathetic to her towards the end of the drama.

The second theme, 'Family', attracted work on the Capulets as parents. Again, the task had the advantage of encouraging coverage of the whole text. The general opinion was that Lord and Lady Capulet were not spectacularly good parents though there was the acknowledgement that they were behaving within the cultural confines of their age. Responses on this task also noted that Juliet does not make life any easier for them through her own dishonesty. The principal scenes (Act I sc ii, Act I sc iii, Act III sc iv, Act III sc v, Act IV sc ii, Act IV sc v and Act V sc iii) all received suitable treatment in the best responses, thus ensuring full and thoughtful investigation of the limitations of the Capulets' parenting skills.

Other Shakespearean texts were rare but still figured in this year's entry. *Othello*, *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice* all received attention with some interesting and mature work on Desdemona and Lear in particular but otherwise it was uncommon to encounter texts outside the two well-established plays.

Despite all the interruptions to schooling over the last two years, it was clear that the learners had engaged with the Shakespeare texts and had enjoyed investigating the relationships, always fresh to each new cohort.

Section B

The poetry theme this year was 'Marriage' and the fifteen poems selected all received an outing in the resultant responses. By far the most popular combination was 'My Box' and 'A Marriage', unsurprising choices given the accessibility of the poems. While candidates managed to investigate Clarke's poem fairly thoroughly, RS Thomas's more subtle and illusive verse proved to be more problematic though most gathered that it celebrated in an understated way the gentle union of two people. Occasionally, Clarke's poem was linked to 'In September', which perhaps gave the candidates more to work on in terms of comparison.

Other interesting combinations included 'Antonia's Story' and 'Blue Carnations' which provided a good comparison of dysfunctional and successful relationships, and 'Jugged Hare' and 'The Sealwife' where candidates could discuss the way the poets investigate relationships where the wife was less than happy. Some candidates chose to look at 'Portrait of the Artist Hans Leo Richtor' in combination with 'Antonia's Story' or 'Caroline: A County Life' as examples of marriages where the relationship was interrupted.

The poetry selections are carefully chosen to ensure a good mix of relatively straightforward material and more testing verse, though an apparently simple piece is sometimes rather more complex than it may appear. This is certainly the case with 'A Marriage' and 'The Bride Chest'. 'Blue Carnations' with its offhand conversational style has inherent challenges as well. Candidates could generally see that it suggested a fulfilled relationship but struggled with how this was achieved.

Assessment

It is greatly to the credit of most centres that they provided accurate rank orders with fair marking given the various difficulties encountered with hybrid learning and unreliable attendance patterns. It was also pleasing to see the efforts that had been made to attempt internal cross moderation. However, when such moderation was evident, it was not always the case that the changes had been put into effect.

Where marks differed, it was invariably because of generosity. In Section A, one of the reasons for differing marks between the centre and the moderator has already been mentioned above. It is important that the whole text should at least be referenced to show appropriate coverage. For example, ending the survey of Macbeth's perfidy after the death of Duncan does not show the way in which the appearance/reality theme is played out later in the play.

Another reason for generosity in the assessment is the over-abundance of assertion. Candidates frequently understood the nature of the character of the principals but failed to justify their views through the considered selection of textual evidence. The AO1 marks are earned, in part, through the justification of the points made and to be fully successful such points need to be pinned back to the text.

The assessment of AO2 in both Sections also caused problems. The criteria test understanding of 'language, structure and form'. Frequently, coverage of this aspect was limited to noting the number of lines a poem has or the rhyme scheme, often coupled with comments on the layout. Such comments may be of value but principally the criteria are concerned with the way language is shaped by the writer. Also, very often 'AO2' was marked in the margin of work to indicate that the criterion had been met when in fact all the candidate had done was to make a textual selection, which is an AO1 ability.

In Section B, the presumption is that the AO3 aspect should be based firmly on a full understanding of the two poems. Frequently, it seemed that candidates picked aspects of both poems to make comparative points without evidence of any real understanding of the poems as a whole. Some were reduced to noting that 'both poems use metaphors' but made no attempt to examine how they use them in similar or different ways. Much was made of enjambment especially in Thomas's 'A Marriage' and correctly so, but that is not the only technique he uses in the poem.

As suggested above, generosity was apparent when there was an incorrect application of the bands. This was particularly the case in the band 3/band 4 range. The AO1 band 3 encompasses the ability to 'display some understanding of the main features' and writing about the text in a general way. Band 4, however, requires 'more detailed reference to text' and the ability to 'understand and demonstrate how writers use ideas, themes and settings to affect the reader'. Distinguishing between these two levels of achievement requires a close analysis of the relative attainment.

The points made above are designed to be helpful and to improve candidates' performance and I am fully aware that many learners are fully aware of the need to investigate the language and content of their texts. Many centres encourage them to do so greatly to their and their teachers' credit.

Summary of key points

Characteristics of good NEA folders:

- appreciation of and reference to the whole Shakespeare play
- engagement with the texts
- careful choice of poetry pairs to elicit meaningful comparisons
- justification of views through carefully selected textual references
- moving from the general to the specific when making points.

Characteristics of less successful NEA folders:

- concentrating on a narrow aspect of the text/s
- feature spotting without linking form to meaning
- a lack of understanding of what the poems are about and the messages within them
- making surface comparisons such as word or rhyme counting without exploration of meaning.



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