GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE (WALES) – INTERIM REPORT

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GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE (WALES)

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2018

UNIT 1

General comments

On both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was clearly the most popular of the texts, as in previous years, with *To Kill a Mockingbird* also quite popular on both. There were responses written to questions on all the other novels, including some by students who had studied *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and *Anita and Me* but apart from these small numbers, most were rubric infringements. This was much more marked on Foundation Tier but on both tiers a significant number of candidates wasted a lot of their time reading extracts and answering questions on novels they had never read or studied. This remains a serious problem which will only be addressed by familiarity with the question paper's layout and what candidates are expected to do.

Examiners needed to take account of the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. They noted some detailed and focused understanding of how social factors at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives. Most candidates on both tiers used this knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there remains some confusion and misunderstanding about where on the paper context is assessed. Sometimes, candidates focused more on aspects of the novel outside the scope of the extract itself. Answers to the question on the presentation of Curley in the *Of Mice and Men* extract sometimes led candidates to speculate on the nature of migrant workers' lives, for example, or there was too much background explanation of how Curley came to break his arm.

The poetry comparison question was generally handled with a clearer understanding of the need to cover both poems and the comparative element. Relatively few candidates wrote about the poems but did not compare them or mistimed their responses so that only some elements of the task were covered. Strong responses looked closely at the language and imagery used in the poems and focused on meaning and interpretation rather than simple identification of devices. In weaker Higher Tier responses, a significant number of responses discussed punctuation, enjambement, alliteration, or sometimes devices which did not appear in the poems, without really addressing what the poets had to say about the characters described in their poems.

Of Mice and Men

The Steinbeck extract question asked candidates to focus on Curley's behaviour and speech in this scene and most managed to track the most important features here. Successful responses focused on the details and the language used to describe the character's reaction to his wife's death. The way Steinbeck shows Curley as galvanised into action with a renewed sense of purpose by an event which should have shocked and saddened a husband was noted by more successful candidates, although the best were careful to support these ideas by reference to the detail in the text. These responses were also able to track the subtleties of Curley's response through the extract. Some felt that 'he worked himself into a fury' showed his anger was stoked up by Curley to justify his actions in exacting revenge on Lennie. The reference to 'Curley's face reddened' was also examined closely with some thoughtful comments on how Slim exposes the character's underlying shame in leaving his wife's body to pursue Lennie.

Weaker candidates tended to rely on different ways to say that Curley was angry and vengeful rather than exploring the nuances of his reactions. Some were able to explain that the character showed a lack of care and affection for his wife and a vengeful anger against Lennie which was rooted in his previous humiliation by Lennie rather than the death of his wife. In weaker responses, however, this clear understanding was not supported by specific reference to the detail in the extract.

A wider understanding of Curley's characterisation across the novel helped better candidates to focus on the meaning of his behaviour in the extract but, as mentioned above, some candidates were deflected into commentary on contextual factors or over-explanation of what had happened up to this point. This often meant that there was little selection and comment on language and images, required for AO2, or supporting references for ideas for AO1.

Characteristics of good extract responses:

- **Clear and sustained focus on the specific extract, not the context of the novel or storylines**
- **Selection of short, apt references to support points made**
- **Discussion of subtle changes in behaviour at different points in the extract**

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- **Clear grasp of what is being assessed here and what is not**
- **More detailed coverage of the extract**
- **More selection of supporting references rather than general impressions**
- **More practice on probing subtext and interpreting what is really going on in the extract, not relying on surface meanings**

Of Mice and Men

The question on Curley's wife and the extent to which she brought her troubles on herself was a popular choice on both tiers and examiners awarded the whole range of marks to these responses. Better candidates showed a sound understanding of the character's underlying attitudes and motivations at different points in the novel and had clear and well considered views about the impact of contextual factors on her behaviour. Such interpretations were often insightful and perceptive, suggesting that Steinbeck wanted to draw attention to the limitations and lack of opportunity of women's lives in America in the 1930s by creating a rather naïve, pitiful character who was misjudged and vilified at every turn. Others saw in the character's portrayal an indictment of the misogyny of a society that saw women as both dangerous and irrelevant. Some focused their responses on the mismatch between the way she is viewed by men on the ranch and the 'ache for attention' revealed as a basic human need in her characterisation. The best candidates used the question to make subtle judgements about both character and context.

Key events were selected by better candidates to show the development of the reader's understanding of the character. Her cruel treatment of Crooks was explored with confidence in strong responses and often seen as the clumsy expression of a desperate need for status and respect. Steinbeck's early description of her dress and sexualised behaviour was also thoughtfully compared by better candidates with her portrayal in death as an innocent girl. Her behaviour was viewed through the prism of context in better responses, whereas weaker candidates often referred to the limitations of women's lives at the time but were less able to interpret how this was reflected in Curley's wife.

At the lower end on Higher Tier and more commonly on Foundation, the character's appearances in the novel were sometimes narrated with limited comment on contextual factors or with simple judgements made about how her behaviour led to her demise. In other weak responses, candidates sometimes made rather sweeping assertions about women's lives at the time, suggesting that wives were expected to cook and clean and never leave the house. This in turn led to simplistic judgements such as 'she wouldn't have died if she'd obeyed what Curley said' or 'she shouldn't have even been in the barn with Lennie.' This rather literal interpretation of the question was characteristic of weaker Higher Tier responses and many on Foundation Tier.

The alternative question was generally better handled in terms of context and most candidates on both tiers showed some understanding of what made particular characters weak or vulnerable in the context of 1930s America. Better candidates tended to see these characters as Steinbeck's vehicle to comment on his society and to offer a critique on its uncaring, exploitative attitude to minorities. Some at this level commented on the significance of characters' dreams as reflections of their hopeless aspirations in a harsh world or on the way characters who had been dealt a harsh hand in life were driven to cruelty towards others. There were some thoughtful distinctions made between characters and the ways in which their weakness and vulnerability are presented. In better responses, for example, the devastating effects of segregation and isolation on Crooks' mental health was explored. Characters were generally well selected as representatives of weak members of wider society but in the best responses there was a more coherent thesis offered about how Steinbeck's criticism of his own society informs his characterisation.

Weaker candidates tended to list reasons why particular characters were weak or vulnerable and match them with references to how minorities were treated at the time the novel was set. While such approaches often showed a general understanding of both character and context, there was less reference to specific events. Where events were mentioned – often the killing of Candy's dog or the racial threats meted out by Curley's wife to Crooks – there was less comment on what these show about Steinbeck's attitude to society.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- **Clear appreciation of how context shapes characters**
- **Selection of a range of apt events and quotations to develop and support thoughtful ideas**
- **Some analysis of how the writer's message is conveyed through characters and events**
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Ways in which performance could be improved:

- **Practice in how to use the wording of a question to show knowledge and insight**
- **Practice in creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked**
- **More focused discussion of how contextual factors affect characters' personalities, choices, ambitions and stories**
- **Practice in selecting detailed textual evidence for ideas**

<u>Poetry Comparison</u>

Examiners looked for and rewarded comparison of the poems in whichever way candidates chose to address the task but in most cases there was some cross-referencing of details as well as some comparison of mood and imagery. On Higher Tier, sophisticated and detailed comparison of ideas, language and effects characterised the best responses and examiners awarded the whole range of marks, including the very highest, for such work. Very few candidates on both tiers failed to include some comparison of poems although the quality of such comparison varied widely.

On Higher Tier, candidates were usually able to see the different moods in the poems and most were able to locate some of the details which helped to create these moods. There was room for varying interpretations of both poems and examiners looked to reward the ability and willingness to probe meaning and subtext even where interpretations were less convincing. Better candidates focused on the detail and imagery in 'Bamp' to develop a thoughtful, perceptive reading of the poem. The deep affection for and pride in the grandfather here shone through in the use of images of magic and 'buried treasure' and some very sensitive responses explored how the stereotypical behaviour and limitations of old age are inverted here to reveal a character who enjoys life and is loved and respected. The closing stanza of the poem with the image of 'knitting the air' was better understood by candidates who appreciated the appreciative, celebratory tone of the poem as a whole.

'My Grandparents' gave rise to some equally thoughtful responses at the top of the mark range. The monotony of the old people's lives here, suggested by 'day after day', was usually noted but in more perceptive responses the imagery of 'dried flowers' and the lack of real human interaction was explored with sensitivity. The willow pattern lovers attracted some thoughtful ideas: some suggested that this was an image of the old people's younger selves, long gone and 'unnoticed', perhaps substituted for a more materialistic life in which they take pride in possessions. Some saw alienation between the partners and perhaps from others in the ambiguity of 'I'd have introduced them' and in the unsettling mood of the poem as a whole.

Weaker responses to the poems relied on speculation about the characters described rather than close reading of details and images. Some at this level noted the absence of a partner in 'Bamp' and assumed that the character was sad and lonely as a result, with the consequent assumption that 'My Grandparents' portrayed a loving couple because they had each other. It was inevitably difficult to select detailed references to support these ideas which made for rather general commentaries. In middle range responses, there was a tendency to feel sympathy for the characters in both poems for the signs of old age and frailty portrayed. While this showed engagement and some understanding, it sometimes led to a limited approach which missed the joyful tone of 'Bamp' and the more subtle ideas in 'My Grandparents'.

Feature-spotting was also characteristic of weaker responses. Enjambement and punctuation was mentioned by many candidates but very few could shed any real light on why the poets had chosen this technique and what effects were achieved. In a few responses, the entire response dealt with devices and features and offered very little on ideas, meaning and the content of the poems. This approach often led to the identification of what is not in the poems rather than what is, such as rhymes, and in rather empty comments on language and effects detached from meaning.

The comparison element of the task was handled in different ways by candidates at all levels. Most wrote about each poem then drew their comparisons together after, although examiners rewarded comparison wherever they found it in responses. Where there was a sound understanding of both poems, better candidates were able to compare the imagery used to explore ideas as well as the different relationships between grandparents and grandchildren implied in each. In weaker responses, where the understanding of ideas was less secure, candidates sometimes came unstuck in the comparison and repeated misreadings or relied on superficial identification of devices across both poems.

On Foundation Tier, there was usually some clear understanding of the content of the poems in general terms and some attempt made to select words and phrases and offer simple explanations of them. 'October' usually elicited simple comments about Halloween and some appreciation of the excitement and anticipation in the mood of the poem. In better responses to this poem, some of the ways in which this atmosphere was created were selected for comment. The 'orange sherbet sunset' was included by some as an example of childlike or nostalgic detail although few candidates really examined the image itself. Many candidates wrote engagingly about how the poem evoked memories of childhood Halloweens, showing an awareness of the tone of the poem. 'Seaside September' was recognised by better candidates as having a rather more thoughtful, contemplative mood and some were able to track how the poet describes the transition from summer to autumn. In some higher scoring responses, the use of the boat and the harbour to reflect the changing weather of the seasons was commented on. Comparisons were usually brief and focused on the different months mentioned in the poems or the weather references in them. As is characteristic of most Foundation Tier responses, there was some reluctance to select and comment on the details in the poems.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- **Coverage of both poems and a developed comparison of ideas, techniques and effects**
- **Probing of subtext, tentative interpretation rooted in the poems**
- **Strong focus on images, language and effects**

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- **More exposure to ways in which poets use language in different ways**
- **More focus on how ideas are conveyed through imagery**
- **Careful reading of poems to avoid misunderstanding**
- **Practice in supporting ideas about mood and meaning with detailed reference to the poems**