



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2020

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

General comments

On both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was by far the most popular of the texts, as in previous years, with *To Kill a Mockingbird* also quite popular on both. There were responses written to questions on all the other novels except *Anita and Me*, including some by candidates on both tiers who had studied *Chanda's Secrets*.

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

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 shown of how their society at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. There were relatively few responses where there was no explicit commentary on the context of the novel studied, although it was sometimes a perfunctory mention or a sweeping generalisation. Most candidates on both tiers used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there remains some confusion about where on the paper context is assessed. Sometimes in the extract question, for example, responses to the question on the scene from *Of Mice and Men* sometimes strayed into the killing of Curley's wife or Candy's involvement in *George and Lennie's American Dream*. The impact of the Great Depression on migrant workers' lives was also discussed by some while the detail of the extract was less used.

Contextual factors such as the social status of women in 1930s America helped many candidates to shed a useful light on the behaviour of Curley and his wife, as well as her treatment by the other ranch workers. Similarly, in the alternative question on whether Steinbeck offers any hope for the future, candidates on both tiers focused with success on characters' dreams and aspirations and the ways in which American social values limited these.

There were a number of responses to the question on Curley and his wife which showed some over-reliance on the film version of the novel. Scenes which do not appear in the novel were quite frequently mentioned and while these did not result in marks being deducted, some more productive illustrations from the novel were missed. Candidates also sometimes speculated about why Curley's wife wore full make-up, suggesting that Curley was physically violent towards her.

Perhaps this approach precluded investigation which was more rooted in the text, such as what the full make-up might suggest about her naïve aspirations for a Hollywood lifestyle.

The poetry comparison question was generally handled with understanding of the need to cover both poems and the comparative element. However, there were more Higher Tier candidates than in previous January series 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 and focused more on meaning and interpretation, rather than simple identification of devices. There was still some tendency to 'spot' techniques or count lines/rhymes with limited commentary on effects. In weaker Higher Tier responses, candidates sometimes looked for a volta in the poems at the expense of looking for meaning. Better responses on both tiers included a range of sensible interpretations of ideas, with comparison, while those at the highest level on Higher Tier looked very closely at the way language and imagery were used in different ways to reveal what the poets thought and felt about the mining disasters, the miners and their families. Foundation Tier candidates could, on the whole, comment on the different moods in the two poems, with more successful responses focusing on selected words and phrases.

Extract questions

Of Mice and Men

The Steinbeck extract question gave candidates on both tiers plenty of opportunities to comment on the effects created in one of the most poignant scenes in the novel. Successful responses focused on the details and the language used to convey the inner turmoil endured by George as he resolves to kill Lennie before Curley finds him. While Lennie's oblivious joy and excitement was also commented on, better responses saw this as a deliberate attempt by George to ensure he died happy, without the shadow of Curley's wife causing him distress. George's extreme anguish and stunned disbelief at the end of the extract was also commented on in more successful responses on both tiers. As always, responses where there was apt, detailed support for these ideas could be awarded high marks, as could a thorough tracking of the twists and turns of Steinbeck's characterisation, particularly of George. On Higher Tier, the ways in which these create the fluctuations of mood and atmosphere was the focus in better responses. Some highly perceptive answers homed in on Steinbeck's embedded reference in the scene of the approaching sounds of Curley's posse. One candidate wrote: 'With every mention of Curley's gang George's window of opportunity to do the right thing gets narrower and that creates mounting tension.' Other thoughtful responses referred sensitively to George's hesitation and how this creates an agonising hope, or anxiety, that he might not go through with it. Some saw the ambiguity implied in Lennie's urging of George to 'Do it!' and commented with insight on his variation of the usual mantra about the farm to include new, poignant phrases such as 'Ever'body gonna be nice to you.' His broken speech patterns, shown by the use of ellipsis, were noticed by a number of candidates on both tiers, showing his struggle to steady and calm his own nerves as well as Lennie's. Coverage of the whole extract was lacking in some responses on both tiers, particularly where George's reaction to his killing of Lennie was missed or where the focus was on more general impressions such as how Lennie 'obeyed' George or how much he wanted the dream farm. Contextual information about the farm, migrant workers' lives or how the characters came to be in this predicament sometimes leaked into extract responses and, although examiners did not deduct marks where this occurred, candidates' time and effort was often wasted on comments which could not be credited.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Candidates on both tiers were generally able to comment in detail on the presentation of Boo Radley in this richly descriptive extract from the closing scenes of the novel. Responses very often identified the ways in which Lee conveys the character's deep-seated fear and nervousness of other people. Phrases such as 'Boo had drifted to the corner of the room' and the description of his voice as that of 'a child afraid of the dark' were used to explore how Lee creates an image of Boo as both afraid and innocent. Some candidates on both tiers noticed how Boo is described as having ghost-like qualities, an ability to melt unobserved into the background and to move soundlessly. The opening paragraph of the extract presented some challenge for thoughtful Higher Tier candidates. Apart from Boo's more obvious poor health shown here, some insightful comments were made about how his spatial awareness and confidence in his ability to navigate the physical environment had been horrifically damaged by confinement for decades in his own home. Boo's compassion and love for the children was also examined in better responses. The hesitation and timidity with which he approached the sleeping Jem showed, for some candidates, an ability to overcome for a moment his extreme anxiety to show his compassion for the boy. One candidate, for example, wrote 'The number of times Lee shows Boo trying to touch Jem shows how much of an effort it was and how much care he felt for him that he was prepared to do it.' While most responses to this question on Foundation Tier were by candidates who had not read the novel, those who had often showed some insight into the effects of Boo's incarceration on his health and social awareness. One candidate, for example, noticed how dependent he is on Scout: 'He doesn't do anything he hasn't been given permission to do by Scout and holds onto her like a little child.'

Chanda's Secrets

The depiction of Mrs Tafa in this significant extract elicited some detailed responses from candidates on both tiers. Many candidates focused on how different and unusual her behaviour is here, compared to the way she is presented up to this point. Most knew that the way she 'collapses in a chair' showed the effect on her of having confronted her neighbours with the truth about AIDS and were able to use Chanda's reaction to Mrs Tafa productively to comment on how different she is because of it. The description of her, from Chanda's point of view as 'scared and alone' was commonly used, as was her acknowledgement of her own past selfishness in her attitude to Mama's illness. Her extreme, out-of-character reaction of grief and shame was also referenced in some detail by many candidates on both tiers. Careful tracking of her turmoil through the extract, with close textual references to support the twists and changes in her behaviour and Chanda's reactions to it, often resulted in marks in Band 4 on both tiers.

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
- Clear grasp of subtext, what's 'really' going on in the extract

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Clear knowledge of the assessment objectives being assessed here
- More thorough coverage of the extract
- More selection of supporting references rather than general impressions
- Don't answer questions on novels you have not read!

Essay Questions

Of Mice and Men

The question on the relationship between Curley and his wife required some reflection on the nature of this flawed marriage and what Steinbeck's presentation of it shows us about the values and attitudes of the society in which they lived. Better candidates showed a sound understanding of the characters' underlying attitudes and motivations at different points in the novel – her flirtatiousness, his possessiveness - and had clear and well considered views about the impact of contextual factors on their actions and attitudes. Such interpretations were often insightful and perceptive, suggesting that Steinbeck wanted to draw attention to the crippling effects of gender stereotyping and restrictive attitudes towards women at the time. Many saw Curley as a representative of a patriarchal society that felt entitled to control the lives and aspirations of women. The double standards implied by her not being allowed to talk to the ranch workers while he can visit the 'cathouse' after only two weeks of marriage were commented on thoughtfully by a range of candidates. While most were sympathetic to Curley's wife and saw in her neediness an 'ache for attention' and validation, some perceptive candidates viewed her immature dependence on her beauty and sexual attractiveness as more troubling. As one candidate said, 'Curley's wife's dream to be a Hollywood actress shows just how badly equipped she is to cope in this masculine world where her flirting isn't enough to overcome her lack of opportunities.' In another thoughtful response on Higher Tier, Curley's wife was seen as 'a hopelessly naïve girl who thinks she can break out of her stereotypical role while actually replicating it every day.'

There were also responses which focused more widely on attributes which shed light on why their marriage was a sham. Both Curley and his wife were sometimes seen as having a propensity for violence, as evidenced by his belligerence and her cruel use of another social prejudice in threatening Crooks. On both tiers, though mostly expressed more simply on Foundation, many candidates examined the way Steinbeck frames the reader's response to Curley's wife by the other characters' denigration of her as a 'tart' or a 'tramp' before she is introduced. This was understood by some Higher Tier candidates as a vehicle to show, as one said, 'that we can all fall into the same trap of prejudice.'

While examiners noted that candidates often focused more on one character than another, in some instances responses were weakened by a limited focus on the relationship between them. Curley's warped reaction to the death of his wife was usefully explored by many candidates, though not always well understood in weaker responses. Occasionally, Curley's wife's behaviour was explored with limited reference to Curley himself. Others wrote about Curley with less examination of how his behaviour impacts his wife. Mostly in Foundation Tier responses, though not always, there was some reliance on scenes which only appeared in the film version of the novel. Candidates who found other, text-based evidence for Curley's controlling behaviour and her nervousness of him tended to fare better in both assessment objectives.

A lack of focus, some sweeping generalisations about context or thin use of the text resulted in less successful responses to this question. Responses tended to drift from Curley's wife's racist attack on Crooks to a discussion of Crooks' life and background, rather than maintaining a focus on the meaning of the attack for her. Curley's fight with Lennie similarly led occasionally to a loss of focus on the relationship between husband and wife. Weaker Foundation Tier responses relied on generalisations about Curley's controlling behaviour or his wife's flirtatiousness, alongside some simplistic or perfunctory comments about the status of women at the time. Reference to specific events in the novel was a common factor in less successful responses on both tiers.

The alternative question on how far Steinbeck offers little hope for the future of American society elicited fewer responses than the first question though there were some equally knowledgeable and insightful essays on both tiers in answer to it. Many candidates on both tiers and at all levels of achievement discussed the characters' dreams and aspirations and how these showed both the desperate need and the lack of opportunity to escape the grim reality of life in America in the Great Depression era. More successful responses drew some thoughtful conclusions about the meaning of these dreams for the characters themselves, as well as commenting about what the dashing of their hopes signified for American society. Other approaches considered the impact of contextual factors such as social prejudice, poverty and inequality on the characters' lives and explored why these powerful forces implied such little hope for the future.

A thorough, methodical examination of these issues was often enough to gain marks in Band 4 for candidates on both tiers. Candidates at this level looked carefully at how Curley's wife and Crooks, in particular, were affected by deep-seated social prejudice and some saw Curley's delusional Hollywood dreams and Crooks' fleeting attraction to the dream farm project as expressions of false hope, soon to be destroyed in different ways by forces beyond their control. Candy's plight as an old man on the brink of social isolation, Lennie's as a man with disabilities and even Curley's inability to feel secure in his high-status role on the ranch were examined closely in some perceptive, well-supported responses. The character of Slim was of interest at this level, with some candidates suggesting that he is held up by Steinbeck as one possible hope for the future for American society. One Higher Tier candidate referred to him as a 'prototype of a different kind of masculinity' and others wrote about his attributes of tolerance, kindness and intelligence as 'pointing the way to a better society based on fairness'.

Weaker responses to this question were sometimes over-reliant on context. Although there was often considerable knowledge shown of the social and political geography of 1930s America, these comments sometimes over-shadowed reference to the novel. In a few cases, examiners found no mention of the novel to reward. Some basic listing of characters' dreams on both tiers also tended to be a little limiting, especially if there was less focus on what Steinbeck was trying to say about society at the time in his use of these dreams.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Both questions on this novel elicited some effective, focused responses which explored the text in its context with some apt reference to events, characters and relationships. The father/son relationships selected for coverage in the first question generally focused on Atticus and Jem, Boo Radley and his father and, less commonly, Bob Ewell and Burris. Able candidates were able to weave their understanding of context into a close analysis of Atticus' influential parenting of Jem. Events such as Jem's 'punishment' for destroying Mrs Dubose's flowers proved useful in showing how Atticus teaches Jem to respect others, even those who seem to think in ways completely at odds with himself. The idea of real courage explored in this incident was widened in better responses and linked to Atticus' own defence of Tom Robinson and how Jem began to be aware of these links and influences as he grew older. Some detailed responses also noted the mirroring of Atticus' behaviour and body language by Jem in the incident outside the courthouse. Atticus' careful stewardship of both the children towards a more mature understanding of the prejudiced, deeply flawed society in which they lived was relevant here, though the interactions between Jem and his father featured more strongly in better responses.

For example, a number of thoughtful, probing essays considered how Atticus embodied a different kind of masculinity as a model for Jem, where tolerance rather than violence, argument rather than prejudice, should prevail. The devastating realisation Jem suffers at the end of the trial to show the limitations of such principles featured in many responses as Lee's way of showing how the younger generation, represented by Jem, would have to fight for social justice.

The alternative question asked candidates to comment on the importance of Scout as the narrator of the novel. Most responses focused on the naïve voice and outlook which helped to shine a light on the acquired prejudices of the time, highlighting such views as both hugely damaging and sometimes ridiculous. Her innocent intervention to defuse a potentially violent encounter at the courthouse was often cited as evidence of how Lee makes use of her specific point of view, reminding readers that the people capable of such violent, prejudiced acts are 'just folks'; ordinary people lacking reflection and perspective.

Other responses on both tiers explored how Scout is used to break the stereotype of girls and women as 'Southern belles', with all the restrictions to their freedom of movement and expression implied by such views. Her experience of the education system, as shown from a child's viewpoint, was also discussed with often detailed support from some of the scenes which showed how inadequate Miss Caroline's teaching methods (and by extension the system as a whole) were in meeting the needs of a new generation of young people. Her growing maturity and reflection were also seen as examples of the ways in which society would need to change, such as her eventual awareness of the need for tolerance rather than violence or the real damage done to black families by segregation.

In less focused responses, candidates often showed reasonable knowledge of Scout as a character – her ideas and experiences – but with less focus on her use by Lee as a narrator. While examiners could often award marks in Band 3 where responses were detailed and well-supported by references to the text, candidates who could evaluate Lee's authorial choices and intentions were often very highly rewarded indeed.

Chanda's Secrets

Essays on the relationship between Esther and Chanda and the ways in which it damaged or benefited each character were, for the most part, focused and thoughtful, covering a range of incidents and events from the text. All candidates had clearly covered contextual elements regarding AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa very carefully and were well informed, often shedding a sympathetic light on Esther and the ways in which she suffered from both the disease and the effects of the social stigma associated with it. Many were able to track the origins of their friendship from the humour and affection shown to each other as little girls to the support and practical help Chanda offers to Esther as they grew older and faced the challenges of AIDS, poverty, grief and loss in their lives. In some cases, candidates saw the sacrifices Chanda made to take care of Esther as significant, particularly the postponement of her ambitions and her education. Other candidates were able to widen their commentary on the relationship to show how Esther was instrumental in changing Chanda's view of her community and the need for compassion rather than shame for those suffering from AIDS and their families. On Foundation Tier, most candidates were able to select evidence to support their views about the two girls and often cited the rift caused by Esther's prostitution as a turning point in their friendship and some attempted to justify their views on who was damaged or benefited with some solid reasoning and evidence.

The alternative question on the theme of secrets gave candidates on both tiers a choice of characters and ideas to discuss. On Higher Tier, the best responses examined the ways in which shame and secrecy pervaded characters' lives in many ways, from Chanda's rape as a young girl to Mrs Tafa's denial of her son's fate and the way Esther was treated after her parents died. The pitiful fate of Chanda's mother, especially her secret return to Tiro, was also highlighted as an example of the horrendous effects of secrets on characters' lives. While Foundation Tier responses were generally more factual and listed examples of secrets in a less expansive way, there was often enough knowledge and understanding of the text for marks in Band 3.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

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

Ways in which performance could be improved:

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

Poetry Comparison

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

On both tiers, weaker responses were characterised by confusion over the surface meaning of the poems. In Foundation Tier work, this was often in comments on 'House Fear' where candidates did not first work out who was returning home, whether they were on the outside or inside the house and why the key was rattled in the door. On Higher Tier, though the poems were more complex, some basic errors of understanding were sometimes made. Some candidates thought the poems were about divorce, terrorist attacks or bombings when the rubric should have directed them to the content of the poems. In 'Surprise Surprise', candidates were sometimes confused about whether mining disasters were very common or not common at all, and in the Larkin poem the chronology of events was not always understood.

Although candidates tried to comment on structure, they sometimes missed the sequence of events and thought that the miners described at the beginning were returning from the explosion rather than going to work, oblivious of what was to happen 'at noon'. These misreadings in themselves were less significant than the misinterpretations they sometimes gave rise to.

Higher Tier candidates were given the rubric that 'both poets describe a disaster in a coal mine'. The best responses began to develop interpretations which included some perceptive ideas: the exploitation of working miners, the fragility of human beings doing dangerous jobs, the manifestation of a community's grief and loss. 'Surprise Surprise' was generally better understood than 'The Explosion' and many candidates detected the sense of bitter irony and anger beneath the sardonic title and what follows. The image of 'volcanoes erupting' to suggest the explosive destruction of the disaster was much cited at all levels, with some more probing at the top of the mark range and some linking of the image with that of 'snow at Whitsuntide' to explore how natural phenomenon are compared with a more man-made disaster in the mine. Some also saw the repetitive images seen after each disaster given in the second stanza as evidence that these disasters are cynically managed, with the 'stern faced' manager, pristine and undamaged in his white helmet, presiding over the communal grief, disguising, perhaps, own implied guilt. While these details were commonly quoted, those candidates who looked more closely at the word choices and the tone of this stanza tended to offer a more thoughtful interpretation. Where not all candidates could locate the sense of disdain and anger in the poem, many were aware of the sarcasm of the final stanza, suggesting that the poet was criticising those who allowed these predictable accidents to happen. Larkin's poem was seen by able candidates as very different in tone. The crafting of the nostalgic, pastoral scene portrayed in the first four stanzas was grasped securely by a minority of candidates although there was often some understanding shown of the camaraderie and carefree simplicity among the miners on their way to work. The much-cited line, 'Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter' gave closer readers a lot to work with. The sense of generations of men in families and the everyday, simple relationships between showed how, in one candidate's words, 'Larkin builds up a picture of a world about to be destroyed.' The images of nature were noticed too, with sometimes a more probing commentary on Larkin's use of them. References to sun and shadow, cows and larks' eggs were interpreted in different ways and sometimes linked and examiners often found thoughtful ideas to reward. The 'tall gates' to the pithead very often recalled for candidates the idea of the 'gates of heaven', an idea which was convincing even where other imagery was not well understood. The more mystical, visionary images in the last two stanzas of the poem were similarly rich in resonance and there was a range of interpretative ideas about the sense of preciousness and memory suggested by 'gold as on a coin' and the unbroken eggs.

Comparisons between the two poems often worked at the different attitudes to the miners and their families in the two poems and the different tones created as a result. The angry bitterness of the Hines poem was contrasted with the nostalgic, elegiac tone of the Larkin, for example, and some saw how both portrayed the miners as unwitting victims, although with different effects. In weaker responses, some spotting of less substantial links was common or the links were not explored, such as the religious references made in both or the fact that men died in both.

The Foundation Tier poems, 'Night Sounds' and 'House Fear', were mostly understood as having different moods and atmospheres, even where the content was not always well understood. The Doherty poem was seen as calm and peaceful by most, though some detected a note of menace in it at the end. The images in the poem were often referred to although many candidates struggled to develop comments on them beyond paraphrase and looked for more literal explanations such as someone turning on the lights or breathing in their sleep.

The idea of a child narrator enchanted by the silence of the night was credibly suggested by many candidates and examiners rewarded those who could support this idea with examples of the simplicity and repetitiveness of the language. Many candidates could also suggest how a child's imagination would run riot in the quietness of night. Words such as 'magical' and 'mysterious' were also used by candidates who sought to locate the poems' mood.

'House Fear' presented more of a challenge to most candidates, some of whom, as mentioned above, did not quite unpick what was happening in it. Many candidates thought the owners were in the house, listening to the sounds of an intruder and although they could detect the sense of threat and fear in the poem, could not quite see where and how it was generated. The idea that the house had been abandoned was also common though the evidence in the poem suggested otherwise. Where the surface meaning of the poem was securely understood, candidates could often develop more thoughtful ideas about 'the lonely house' approached 'from far away' at night and could select the detail suggesting a hostile, cold and unwelcoming atmosphere in it.

Comparisons rarely ranged further than comments on the different moods of the poems though sometimes candidates commented on the cosiness of the house and the narrator in the first compared to the coldness and hostility of the house in the second. A few explored how the sense of the unknown and potentially sinister came from outside the house in the Doherty but from inside in the Frost. Sometimes candidates saw the sense of mystery as a link between the poems.

On both tiers, there was some over-reliance on counting rhymes, stanza lengths and punctuation. In particular, Higher Tier candidates sometimes wrote about the structure of the poems as if this was a matter of line length or the number of lines in a stanza, while missing the chronology of the Larkin poem with its clear 'before and after' structure. The attribution of unlikely effects to such features as enjambement and the shape of each poem on the page also sometimes got in the way of a closer reading of the poems for meaning and ideas.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- Practice timing responses for coverage of both poems as well as a clear comparison
- Probing of subtext, tentative interpretation rooted in the poems
- Strong focus on images, language and effects

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



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