

GCSE Examiners' Report

English Literature

GCSE

January 2025

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Introduction

Our Principal examiners' report provides valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. It has been written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and details how candidates have performed in each unit.

This report opens with a summary of candidates' performance, including the assessment objectives/skills/topics/themes being tested, and highlights the characteristics of successful performance and where performance could be improved. It then looks in detail at each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.¹

The information found in this report provides valuable insight for practitioners to support their teaching and learning activity. We would also encourage practitioners to share this document – in its entirety or in part – with their learners to help with exam preparation, to understand how to avoid pitfalls and to add to their revision toolbox.

Further support

Document	Description	Link
Professional Learning / CPD	WJEC offers an extensive programme of online and face-to-face Professional Learning events. Access interactive feedback, review example candidate responses, gain practical ideas for the classroom and put questions to our dedicated team by registering for one of our events here.	https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/
Past papers	Access the bank of past papers for this qualification, including the most recent assessments. Please note that we do not make past papers available on the public website until 12 months after the examination.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page
Grade boundary information	Grade boundaries are the minimum number of marks needed to achieve each grade. For unitised specifications grade boundaries are expressed on a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS). UMS grade boundaries remain the same every year as the range of UMS mark percentages allocated to a particular grade does not change. UMS grade boundaries are published at overall subject and unit level. For linear specifications, a single grade is awarded for the subject, rather than for each unit that contributes towards the overall grade. Grade boundaries are published on results day.	For unitised specifications click here: Results, Grade Boundaries and PRS (wjec.co.uk)

¹ Please note that where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

Exam Results Analysis	WJEC provides information to examination centres via the WJEC Portal. This is restricted to centre staff only. Access is granted to centre staff by the Examinations Officer at the centre.	Portal by WJEC
Classroom Resources	Access our extensive range of FREE classroom resources, including blended learning materials, exam walk-throughs and knowledge organisers to support teaching and learning.	https://resources.wjec.co.uk/
Bank of Professional Learning materials	Access our bank of Professional Learning materials from previous events from our secure website and additional pre-recorded materials available in the public domain.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page.
Become an examiner with WJEC.	We are always looking to recruit new examiners or moderators. These opportunities can provide you with valuable insight into the assessment process, enhance your skill set, increase your understanding of your subject and inform your teaching.	Become an Examiner WJEC

Contents

	Page
Executive summary	5
Unit 1: Prose and Poetry	6
Supporting you – useful contacts and links	12

Executive Summary

The questions posed few problems and candidates were well prepared.

Responses to the extract questions (where candidates had genuinely studied the texts) posed few specific problems for candidates. The questions gave opportunities for candidates to focus on how the writers framed the readers' reactions to characters and events, especially with AO2 in mind. Essay responses on these texts often showed real engagement from candidates with ideas, characters and contexts fully addressed in them.

Better responses showed a thorough, detailed knowledge of the text and candidates made apt selections. Less successful responses tended to refer to fewer incidents and events discussed the text in more general terms. Most candidates used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their responses, although there were some responses on both tiers where there was limited or no reference to context.

Similarly in the Poetry section, there were many responses which successfully addressed all three assessment objectives and offered thoughtful, engaged readings of the poems.

Areas for improvement	Classroom resources	Brief description of resource
Exploring both poems and making comparisons	Unit 1 Sec B: Making meaningful comparisons	Comparing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structure and form • theme, meaning, and content • tone/mood and atmosphere • language and imagery.
Supporting ideas by using references to pertinent events and details from the novel	Developing Critical Analysis	This blended learning resource contains interactive self-study content covering how to develop critical analysis, including making close textual references meaningful.
Exploration of what the writer or poet is trying to express about characters, ideas and, where relevant, wider society	A range of text-specific resources	Knowledge organisers, planning tools, blended learning modules and more.

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UNIT 1: PROSE AND POETRY

Overview of the Unit

As has always been the case on both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was the most popular text by a considerable margin. The number of candidates studying *Chanda's Secrets*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* remained steady. Responses on these texts often showed real engagement with the themes, characters and contexts addressed in them by candidates at all levels.

Like last summer, on Foundation Tier a significant number of candidates attempted questions on novels which they had not studied. This rubric infringement remains a serious problem for those candidates, limiting their chances of a result commensurate with their abilities particularly. A number of candidates on both tiers – but particularly Foundation Tier – did not respond to the poetry at.

Responses to the extract questions posed few problems for candidates who were able to write with some detail and understanding. The vast majority tracked through the extracts focusing on specific details and making sensible comments. Better answers increasingly focused on the writers' choices of language and imagery, and wrote with some insight and clear understanding of subtext. A minority of candidates discussed contextual factors which are not assessed in this question.

Essay questions were generally handled well and none of the questions caused specific problems. Most candidates seemed clear on the assessment objectives being tested. More successful essays combined the exploration of a range of specific incidents and events from the text with detailed, specific discussion of contexts relevant to the task set. Less successful responses were usually brief and, whilst showing some understanding of the relevant themes or characters, discussed them in a generalised way without close reference to detail and specific incidents or events. Comments on context in these essays were also usually more sweeping and general.

In the poetry comparison on Foundation Tier, there was a significant number of candidates who explored the poems without comparing them or who only wrote about one of the poems. This had a damaging effect on their overall achievement, particularly considering the weighting of the different assessment objectives for this task. There was also a significant minority – 15.7% – who did not attempt the poetry response at all. On Higher Tier, there were far fewer of these types of issues and the vast majority of candidates had a clear understanding of the Assessment Objectives.

Last year, examiners noted that there had been an increasing number of responses that were extremely difficult to read and, in some cases, illegible. Centres appear to have responded to this information positively and taken the action we had hoped; typed responses seemed to be increasing in number and using word processors proved to be very helpful for candidates with significant handwriting issues.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Extract questions

The *Of Mice and Men* extract question focused on how Steinbeck created mood and atmosphere in the lead up to the shooting of Candy's dog. Successful responses paid attention to both assessment objectives to address the question, tracking through the extract with close reference to specific detail. Candidates discussed the tension whilst exploring Carlson's motivations and Candy's increasingly emotional and distraught reactions. Higher scoring candidates noted Candy's moment of false hope when he temporarily believed Carlson didn't have a gun. A real differentiator was where candidates were able to explore the way even Carlson was affected by Candy's reactions and his mood and attitude seemed to shift from belligerence and stubborn determination at the start of the extract to almost 'guilt' at the end, where he spoke "apologetically". Some explored the imagery of the dog being led out into the darkness at the end of the extract. More sensitive responses understood that Steinbeck was presenting Candy in a sympathetic light, as a character in a moment of extreme sadness and powerlessness. Many also discussed the section where even Slim did not come to his aid and the ways that added to our understanding of Slim as a character.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the ways the atmosphere of fear and tension was created was well handled by candidates on both tiers. Again, better responses tracked through the extract making focused use of the detail and discussing language choices and their effects on the reader. Candidates wrote about how the atmosphere was created through the description of the night-time setting, such as the "dark windows" and moon shining "eerily". More successful responses then picked examples from the children's actions, speech and behaviour which explored the nervous excitement gradually being overtaken by outright fear. These successful responses included discussion of the writer's use of light and sound imagery in the second half of the extract such as the squeaking step and the shadow of the man which terrified them, culminating in the dramatic "roar of a shotgun" as the children were running away at the end of the extract.

The discussions of the atmosphere in the courtroom in the *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* extract were similarly interesting, and candidates had a range of well-supported views. Most showed their understanding that Maya as a child was feeling deeply insecure, uncomfortable and exposed having to discuss details of the sexual assault in front of a courtroom full of spectators in "gay and flippant array" almost as if they had dressed up for the spectacle. They also explored her reactions at having to confront her abuser as the defendant. They recognised the court as having a hostile, unfriendly atmosphere and much was made of the imagery of the seats being described as tombstones. Better responses also included some sensitive exploration of the security Maya found in her coat which she described as "a friend I hugged to me".

The *Chanda's Secrets* extract gave candidates plenty of opportunities to comment on the complexities in Mrs Tafa's character and in her relationship with Chanda as well as revealing Chanda's attitudes towards her at this point in the novel. Most tracked through the extract showing their understanding that Mrs Tafa was being presented as a character full of self-importance who loved playing status and power games. Some even pointed out that she was behaving like a Roman emperor laying back on her cushions in the heat whilst getting fanned. Successful responses discussed the unpleasant descriptive detail used to portray Mrs Tafa and her condescending response on finding out Mr Bateman was "doing the arrangements". These successful responses saw that there was kindness in Mrs Tafa at the end of the extract, but that Chanda had had to both flatter her and play Mrs Tafa's 'games' to get what she wanted.

Text Essay Questions

As stated in previous years, examiners must judge the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. In most essay responses, a range of relevant references to contextual factors were given to show an understanding of how they influenced characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. Most candidates used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response, although there were some responses on both tiers where there was limited or no reference to context.

The *Of Mice and Men* essay question on George encouraged candidates on both tiers to explore Steinbeck's characterisation with particular focus on how the character tells us about life in America in the 1930s. Most were able to refer to a range of incidents and events from across the text that showed his personality and relationships with others, as well as discussing what he showed about friendship, loneliness, the lifestyle of a migrant worker and the importance of dreams in that era. Obviously, there was much discussion of his relationship with Lennie and his emotional response to having to kill Lennie. More successful answers zoomed in on a range of incidents and had interesting things to say about his interactions with Candy, Slim and Curley as well as his attitude towards Curley's wife. On Higher Tier, higher scoring candidates discussed how Steinbeck used the character to illustrate key themes and as a vehicle to illustrate – and in some cases criticise – the social beliefs and values of the time.

The second essay question focused on loneliness proved the more popular on Higher Tier. In essay questions like this it is possible to argue for or against the statement in the question or provide a balanced response and all approaches are equally valid. Most candidates were in agreement with the statement here, and wrote about various combinations of Candy, Crooks and Curley's wife. Some also gave some interesting discussion of Curley being both friendless and involved in an unsuccessful relationship with his wife, and George being lonely despite his companionship with Lennie. Again, better responses discussed a range of incidents and examples to illustrate examples of characters' loneliness and how it affected them. The very best answers really got to grips with the detail of how loneliness affected characters' behaviours and illustrated their points with well-chosen details from the text. Again, more insightful responses explored what Steinbeck was trying to show and do. Less effective responses on both tiers tended to be more general than specific, and while context was usually addressed to some degree, the commentary was simple and general.

For those who studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both tasks elicited responses across the mark range on both tiers. The question on parenting was mainly handled very confidently and candidates commonly centred their discussion on Atticus and his 'teaching' parenting style, exploring his attempts to foster empathy, thoughtfulness and understanding in Jem and Scout. Much was made of the contrasts between Atticus, Arthur Radley and Bob Ewell but there was also some wide ranging and insightful discussion of other characters' roles as 'parental figures' like Aunt Alexandra, Calpurnia and Miss Maudie. The most successful responses showed understanding of the ways Lee used parental influences to critique or reinforce society's values. Better responses showed a thorough, detailed knowledge of the text and candidates made apt selections. Less successful responses tended to refer to fewer incidents and events and discuss parenting in more general terms.

The alternative Higher Tier question on Maycomb encouraged candidates to discuss how the town showed the characteristics of American Society in the 1930s and gave candidates plenty of choice and freedom of which characters and events to write about to illustrate their points. Most chose to answer the question by focusing on the prejudice, racism and sexism evident in the prevalent attitudes of the time but many saw Atticus and other characters like Miss Maudie and Calpurnia as examples of how Maycomb was potentially seeing the first signs of change.

Better responses saw how Lee was trying to use Maycomb's characteristics to highlight injustices and prejudices in 1930s America and was using the town to provide a critique of 1930s American society. At a lower-level candidates concentrated on illustrating life in Maycomb in the novel with straightforward commentary.

Most candidates who had studied *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* selected the question that invited them to discuss the presentation of Maya's mother. Candidates were able to identify many ways in which she was a positive, strong influence and role model with a good range of textual evidence to support their views. Incidents such as her 'midnight party' and her support of Maya when she was fighting to become the first black ticket conductorette on the San Francisco streetcars were used to good effect and many discussed her support for Maya after she became pregnant, showing their detailed knowledge of the whole text. Better responses showed a clear grasp of the racial prejudice and the displacement of Black families at the time, alongside discussion of how Maya's mother did not always conform to societal expectations of how women or mothers should behave.

Candidates tackling the second question on resistance were equally well prepared discussing interesting and memorable events such as Henry Reed singing 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' as an act of resistance, and Maya's growing understanding of racism and having to hide Uncle Willie from the Ku Klux Klan. As with the first essay many were again keen to discuss Maya's experiences fighting to become the first black ticket conductorette and on both tiers the events selected were well chosen, focused and pertinent, helping candidates make meaningful comments on contexts. Better responses explored a range of examples of the prejudice and racism prevalent at the time, offering thoughtful commentary on how these reflected society with perceptive interpretations of Angelou's intentions. As with the other texts, better responses incorporated a wide range of textual discussion with increasingly detailed commentary and analysis, along with focus on the writer's craft.

Most candidates on both tiers who had studied *Chanda's Secrets* chose to answer the question on the presentation of Esther and mainly showed a thorough knowledge of her whole story. Higher scoring candidates were able to explore about how her character developed throughout the novel and tracked through key moments to support their discussion. Candidates wrote about how she aspired to leave Bonang and not be "stuck having babies", the motivation of reuniting her family and how she is vulnerable to exploitation due to the desperate circumstances she finds herself in. Many discussed her courage and acceptance at the end of the novel. Almost all candidates saw her in a sympathetic light, discussing her as a victim of society which did not protect women or children or those with AIDS, and discussed the impact that the stigma of AIDS had on her character and relationships with others in the novel.

The other question focused on secrets and invited candidates to choose a range of characters, incidents and events to explore the theme in the novel. Most chose to write about a combination of Esther, how Mama tried to protect her family, the impact of Jonah's secrets, or how Chanda broke the stigma of secrets and lies as well as covering Mrs Tafa's secrets about her son. Higher scoring candidates were able to closely refer to the text and explore a range of ideas. Better responses discussed what secrets demonstrated about the society in which the characters lived, showing an understanding of the shame and stigma of AIDS, the impact of poverty and how women and children were treated. These responses were underpinned by an awareness of Stratton's critique of the society that demanded people keep these secrets.

Poetry

Higher Tier responses to the poems about the brief encounters varied in their interpretations but most candidates were aware of the requirement to address both poems and to compare them. There was, however, a substantial minority on Foundation Tier who could not be fully credited as they had not compared the poems, even when their commentaries on one or sometimes both poems showed good understanding. Since the comparison element is heavily weighted in the assessment, this inevitably had a detrimental impact on some candidates' achievement.

On Higher Tier, candidates understood the narrative of the couple having an emotional farewell at a railway station and that the poem seemed to have an atmosphere of regret, rightly picking up on the line about "missed opportunities". Higher scoring candidates explored the narrator's thoughts and feelings, discussing why this moment seemed to have remained important, and evoked a sense of some regret in the poet. At the top end, candidates wrote with insight about the transient and fleeting nature of relationships and the power of emotions. Most explored the symbolism of the weather imagery and the setting of the train station as well as picking up on the filmic imagery. In the second poem, candidates saw the contrasts and understood that this was essentially a poem about an individual falling for a woman's beauty at a racecourse. They understood that she hadn't even noticed him but that he didn't mind as the image of her perfection in his imagination was better than probable reality and he was going to love the "idea of her" forever. Many commented on the description of him as being "unhappily married" and some explored the significance of the "new century." A few candidates cleverly noted that the first line- '1. The Lady at Kiev Racecourse' sounded like she was the first in a list of Lieutenant Schmidt's Ideal Ladies. They wrote about his fantasy of her on a warm shore and explored the imagery in his descriptions of her appearance. There were many interpretations of him taking the train to Sevastopol; some thought he must have been taking the train to find the girl, but the best responses identified that he had simply moved on, content with the memory. Most comparisons centred on discussion of the different types of encounter on display, but many also focused on the settings, the significance of the trains, and the weather imagery. As ever, examiners rewarded a willingness to interpret ideas and images even where the overall interpretation was slightly unconvincing. In the best responses, candidates tracked through both poems closely exploring a wide range of detail with focused commentary on how writers had used language and imagery to create effects. They offered insightful and sensitive commentary on the themes and meanings of both poems and a confident range of comparisons were made.

On Foundation Tier, a significant number of candidates do not attempt the poetry response and many more either only write on one poem or forget to include a comparison. Some write about *Anita and Me* mistakenly thinking that the extract from that text is their poetry resource. For these reasons it is strongly recommended that learners are reminded how to navigate the whole exam paper as close to the exams as possible as a very significant number of candidates have fallen into this category in the last two exam series and these factors have a very detrimental effect on individual results.

The first poem, was, on the whole, fairly well understood by candidates. Many wrote about the ways the lizard was described, focusing on the colour imagery and the speed of movement. Others also wrote about nature and the setting of the poem, exploring the atmosphere created by the "heat hazed wall", the vine and the bright sunshine. Better responses tracked through the detail of the poem exploring the characteristics of the lizard. The second poem was seemingly more complex in theme and content, and it was good to see how many noted the contrasts between the poems as well as the similarities.

The majority saw that this poem was about the poet's admiration and love for frogs, and many tracked through the poem discussing the ways the frogs' personalities were created through similes, personification and other imagery. Candidates discussed the ways they jumped and swam and the things the poet liked about them. They also found plenty to interpret in the description of their deaths on roads. Many compared the appreciation of nature in the two poems and explored the similarities and differences in the presentations of the animals themselves. Answers achieving higher marks tracked through both poems commenting on a range of detail, beginning to explore some uses of language and imagery, and finding several points of comparison between the poems.

Supporting you

Useful contacts and links

Our friendly subject team is on hand to support you between 8.30am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 029 2240 4291

Email: gcseenglish@wjec.co.uk

Qualification webpage: [GCSE English Literature](#)

See other useful contacts here: [Useful Contacts | WJEC](#)

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