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# **GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS**

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**ENGLISH LITERATURE  
GCSE  
SUMMER 2023**

## Introduction

Our Principal Examiners' reports offer valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. They are written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and detail how candidates have performed.

This report offers an overall 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 goes on to look in detail at each question/section of each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.<sup>i</sup>

The information found in this report can provide invaluable 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 annual 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.	<a href="https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/">https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/</a>
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 6 months after the examination.	<a href="http://www.wjecservices.co.uk">www.wjecservices.co.uk</a> or on the WJEC subject page
Grade boundary information	<p>Grade boundaries are the minimum number of marks needed to achieve each grade.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>For linear specifications, a single grade is awarded for the overall subject, rather than for each unit that contributes towards the overall grade. Grade boundaries are published on results day.</p>	For unitised specifications click here: <a href="#">Results, Grade Boundaries and PRS (wjec.co.uk)</a>

Exam Results Analysis	WJEC provides information to examination centres via the WJEC secure website. This is restricted to centre staff only. Access is granted to centre staff by the Examinations Officer at the centre.	<a href="http://www.wjecservices.co.uk">www.wjecservices.co.uk</a>
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.	<a href="https://resources.wjec.co.uk/">https://resources.wjec.co.uk/</a>
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.	<a href="http://www.wjecservices.co.uk">www.wjecservices.co.uk</a> 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 invaluable insight into the assessment process, enhance your skill set, increase your understanding of your subject and inform your teaching.	<a href="#">Become an Examiner   WJEC</a>

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## Subject Officer's Executive Summary

The examined units followed the patterns of previous series' question papers, providing opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of the texts they had studied and apply their literary skills.

The internally assessed NEA was well-managed and it was noted that fewer adjustments to centre marks were required this summer.

Areas for improvement	Classroom resources	Brief description of resource
<b>Making effective comparisons</b>	<a href="#"><u>Making meaningful comparisons</u></a>	A blended learning resource to support learners understand the mark scheme for AO3, and drawing comparisons in structure, form, theme, meaning, tone, imagery and content.
<b>Meaningful use of contextual information</b>	<a href="#"><u>Making productive use of contextual understanding</u></a>	
<b>Developing responses</b>	<a href="#"><u>Developing critical analysis</u></a>	Blended learning resources focusing on exploring different points of view, thoughtful and thorough analysis of Shakespeare and Poetry, and expanding responses to the extract questions.

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

## GCSE

Summer 2023

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

#### Overview of the Unit

This Unit tests all assessment objectives through Different Cultures Prose works (extract: AO1 and AO2; essay: AO1 and AO4) and Contemporary Poetry (AOs 1, 2 and 3).

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

Once again, unfortunately, a substantial number of candidates on both tiers addressed questions on novels which they had not studied. In many of these cases, every extract on the question paper was read and answered as an 'unseen' text. This rubric infringement remains a serious problem for candidates whose teachers will have guided them through the study of one of the texts over a long period of time. For weaker Foundation Tier candidates whose reading ability may be limited, this enormous waste of time and effort is particularly damaging, but a significant number of Higher Tier candidates also limited their chances of a mark commensurate with their abilities by addressing questions on texts they had not studied. In some cases, this resulted in some very thin, sketchy responses and brevity on all questions, even those for which the text had been studied.

Responses to the extract questions, at least where candidates had genuinely studied the texts, posed few specific problems for candidates and examiners saw less of the misunderstanding and misattribution noticed in recent examinations. In the extract questions on both *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the different ways in which the authors create an atmosphere of mounting tension gave candidates plenty of opportunities to select and comment on language and effects for AO2.

The question on characters who evoke sympathy in the reader was occasionally misunderstood as if the question asked for a focus on characters who showed sympathy towards others. While such misunderstandings are not penalised specifically, these responses tended to be rather self-limiting. The alternative Higher Tier question on the competitiveness and brutality of 1930s American society was less often selected, although responses here were often very thoughtful and sometimes highly analytical. On Foundation Tier, candidates were often able to select examples of brutal or harsh treatment on the ranch and link them to the status of migrant workers in wider society.

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 of how social factors at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations was demonstrated. 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. Fairly frequently in the extract question, for example, Higher Tier responses to the question on the scene from *Of Mice and Men* included observations about how the misogynist attitudes of the men reflected the lower status of women in American society at the time. In many cases, there was plenty of more focused commentary on the extract to reward but occasionally this lack of awareness of where different AOs are assessed meant that quite long sections of the response 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, engaged with meaning and ideas and how the language choices made by each poet conveyed them. On Higher Tier, candidates sometimes tried to work out the back stories of the relationships – who had left and why – rather than exploring how the poets felt and reacted to the loss of a partner. On Foundation Tier, the use of the central metaphor in 'The Sea' was sometimes missed. On both tiers, however, there were many responses which successfully addressed all three assessment objectives and offered thoughtful, sensitive readings of the poems.

### **Comments on individual questions/sections**

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## **Comments on individual questions/sections**

### **Extract questions**

The *Of Mice and Men* extract question focused on how Steinbeck evokes the sense of mounting tension which results in the brutal fight between Curley and Lennie. This key scene in the novel required some careful reading from candidates on both Tiers to ensure high marks.



Successful responses paid attention to both assessment objectives here to address the question: the shifting mood and atmosphere on Higher Tier, and the different characters' reactions and interjections on Foundation Tier, as well as the language used by Steinbeck to present them. Many highly rewarded responses on Higher Tier, for example, commented on how Slim's uncharacteristic irritability signals danger early in the extract. Many also saw how Curley's rage is triggered by his public humiliation, particularly at the hands of the other workers who are emboldened by Slim's behaviour to mock and taunt Curley for the first time in the novel. There was some careful analysis of the twists and turns in Curley's speech and behaviour, from trying to appease Slim at the beginning, his violent threats against Carlson in the middle and his strange calmness once he has opted for actual physical violence against Lennie.

Less effective responses tended to rely on a more superficial reading of the extract based on more general attributes of the characters, such as Curley's propensity for violence or Slim's status as a leader, rather than a close reading of their behaviour and demeanour here. In Higher Tier responses, there was less focus on Carlson's or Candy's interjections and the sense of humiliation these engendered in Curley while on Foundation Tier, comments in weaker responses tended to focus on the fight with limited reference to what had caused it.

The *To Kill a Mockingbird* extract also offered candidates some subtlety in the description of the courtroom in the moments before and after the verdict on Tom Robinson is heard. On Higher Tier, most candidates commented productively on the sense of time being suspended both in the town and in the courtroom while the verdict is awaited, though many struggled to suggest why the hot day is compared to a 'cold February morning'. As the verdict is announced, Lee's use of Scout's shock and disbelief and the distortion in her perception of the scene as a result was understood by most though not always carefully referenced. The poignancy of Jem's reaction was better understood and articulated by candidates on both tiers and more careful readers commented on the dignity and restraint shown by Atticus as he left the courtroom. The most highly rewarded responses for AO2 tended to tackle directly the unusual imagery used by Lee to suggest the state of shocked suspended animation in the courtroom as experienced by Scout, while less successful responses missed these more subtle aspects and relied more on what was said at different points in the extract.

The presentation of Maya's father, Bailey, was the focus of the extract on *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and most candidates on both tiers commented on his irresponsibility and neglect of his daughter in the scene. Sympathy for Maya as the daughter of a man who behaved so badly sometimes clouded candidates' assessment of other facets of his character, however. Evidence of closer reading sometimes meant that examiners could award marks in the higher Bands where Bailey's intelligence, quick thinking and easy charm was commented on as well as his casual attitude to both parental responsibility and the law. Where such observations were closely supported by references to Angelou's language as well as Bailey's behaviour, high marks for both AOs could be awarded. In weaker responses, while there were sometimes insightful comments on these aspects of Bailey's character, these thoughtful ideas were not always well supported with references to the extract.

In the *Chanda's Secrets* extract question, Higher Tier candidates were usually able to identify Chanda's mounting fear as she follows Mr Kamwendo in the dark in search of her mother and there was usually some supporting evidence for their comments on the language used to convey that fear. In better responses, candidates were also able to comment on Chanda's guardedness and distrust of the man in her initial conversation with him, as well as the way in which the landscape itself is described as threatening and hostile. Less successful responses were often brief and focused only on the end of the extract and some candidates struggled to pinpoint the events of the scene which limited their grasp of the details in it.

## Text Essay Questions

The majority of candidates who had studied *Of Mice and Men* selected the first question on the character for whom they felt most sympathy. While many wrote about one or two specific characters in isolation, some made good use of the implied evaluation in the question and considered some of the different ways in which Steinbeck evokes sympathy for characters in the novel, such as the terrible effects of segregation on Crooks or the misogynistic ill-treatment of Curley's wife. In some well-rewarded responses, these themes of isolation and discrimination were used to explore how sympathy is evoked for characters. The harmful social and economic realities of 1930s America were skilfully woven into these responses to shed light on events in the novel and show how the lives of characters were restricted and limited in ways which created sympathy.

Other successful responses focused on a detailed, well-supported and perceptive analysis of Steinbeck's portrayal of specific characters. Candy's predicament as an old man living in a brutal, utilitarian society at the end of his working life was frequently cited as evoking sympathy, often with discussion of how these wider social values are illustrated by the killing of his dog. The meaning of Crooks' loneliness and isolation, governed not only by the Jim Crow laws but by his race's well-founded fear of white people's violence was considered with sensitivity in some responses, again making use of detailed reference to events and his own observations to show how Steinbeck evokes sympathy for him. Crooks was a very popular choice on both tiers as the character most deserving of sympathy and while most candidates wrote about his circumstances as a person of colour in 1930s America, better responses examined more closely the effect of racism on his attitudes, aspirations and behaviour. Less effective responses on both tiers tended to be more general than specific and while context was usually addressed to some degree, the commentary was spread too thinly across too many characters to consider how Steinbeck creates sympathy for them in the novel.

The alternative question asked candidates to consider to what extent the competitiveness and brutality of American society is reflected in the novel. On Foundation Tier, candidates were asked to identify and write about characters whose lives could be considered brutal and hard. Most candidates on both tiers were able to select events and characters in the novel who show that competitiveness and brutality played a part in the lives of people in 1930s America. For some Higher Tier candidates, some of whom were awarded very high marks, a strong argument based on detail and illustration of the underlying and insidious violence embedded in the social values of the time helped to produce thorough and thoughtful responses. Details such as the casual drowning of puppies by Slim, generally considered an honourable character held up for admiration and respect, were shown to reflect a society where cruelty was the norm, not an exception. Similarly, George's killing of Lennie to spare him an even worse death was explored as another example of where the 'least worst' option leaves a man dead at the hands of his best friend. These illustrations of brutal actions by 'good' characters, alongside some of the cruelty inflicted on others by characters such as Curley's wife and Crooks who themselves are victims of social limitations and discrimination, resulted in some strongly analytical and wide-ranging responses. On Foundation Tier and in some weaker Higher Tier responses, although the question was much less often selected, there was some sensible selection of characters and events in the novel which showed how racist and sexist attitudes at the time created the conditions for cruelty and harsh treatment. The killing of Candy's dog, Curley's wife's racist threat to Crooks, and Curley's bullying of Lennie were most often cited and where some contextual links underpinned the commentary, examiners could usually award marks in the middle range. Less successful responses tended not to address the question or, occasionally, the contextual factors affecting characters and events were not articulated adequately.

For those who studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both questions elicited responses across the mark range on both tiers. The first question was addressed with some evaluation at the top of the mark range on Higher Tier. The specific influence of Calpurnia on the children was sometimes compared with the kinds of lessons learned from Atticus. There was often some clear understanding that empathy as a concept was one of Atticus' most important teachings but Calpurnia's lived experience as a woman of colour and a maid in the household of a white, middle-class family in a racist town offered them perhaps a more authentic voice to show the struggles of people of colour in the American South at the time. Some effective responses explored how Lee presents Calpurnia as both representative of her community in the American South of the 1930s and as a light to shine on the discrimination and prejudice of wider society. Details such as Alexandra's racist 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 how the character helped Scout to see her own society through the eyes of a woman of colour, despite her background and class. In many responses, Calpurnia's chiding of Scout when the Cunningham boy is invited to lunch was used as an example of the kind of explicit influence Calpurnia had on the children, whereas more effective responses tended to explore how her influence was more subtly inculcated by the children accepting her authority and beginning to appreciate her courage and moral example.

The alternative question also elicited some thoughtful responses on Higher Tier. The theme of empathy was explored in a number of ways, usually focusing on Atticus' defence of Tom Robinson, alongside other examples such as his unusual sympathy for Mrs Dubose and Boo Radley, to show his championing of maligned characters who were ill-treated by Maycomb's narrow-minded social values. Scout's innocent intervention outside the courthouse or the children's encounters with Dolphus Raymond were also sometimes used to show how Lee exposed the cruelties inflicted on those who did not conform to the social norms of the day by using the natural empathy of children. Where these responses included detailed, wide-ranging and aptly selected textual references to support ideas about the theme of empathy, examiners could award high marks. Less successful responses, as ever, were more general in approach, reflecting on what Atticus said about empathy rather than giving examples from the novel of characters and events which showed how the theme is presented.

Most candidates who had studied *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* selected the question on Bailey Junior. The close relationship between Maya and her brother was often tracked with some thoroughness, from her adulation and dependence on him as a small child to his more troubled adolescence. High marks were awarded where these approaches were well supported by detailed references and where due regard was shown to the influence of contextual factors. Bailey Junior's complicated attitude to his parents, for example, was sometimes considered thoughtfully as reflecting the attitudes of different generations of people of colour and the ways in which the prevailing racism of the day played out in different ways in different parts of America. There were some interesting analyses, for example, of Bailey's abandonment by his parents and the effects on his developing personality when confronted with the brutality and injustice of racist violence. While most responses showed a sound knowledge of the novel, slightly less successful responses tended to focus on Maya's early relationship with Bailey rather than the development of his character and his experiences as the novel progressed. Occasionally, candidates made very little reference to context which limited the scope of the response considerably in that Bailey's experience as a boy in a racist society was an integral component in his character.

The alternative question elicited some thoughtful responses, often focused on examples of the lack of control over their lives experienced by people of colour in the South at the time. These illustrations were often carefully selected and explored, such as Maya's realisation at her graduation of the educational inequalities suffered by children or the horrendous attitude of the white dentist to a child in pain, despite the fact that Momma had lent him money in the past. The strength of the helplessness and fear commonly felt by people of colour, illustrated by the incident with the white girls outside Momma's shop or the threatened

lynching of Uncle Willie, were also often used to show how little freedom and power over their own lives people of colour had at the time. In some interesting approaches, candidates sometimes chose to highlight the ways in which people of colour began to exert some control, such as Maya's struggles in employment and how she overcame entrenched racism there.

Most candidates who had studied *Chanda's Secrets* chose the first question, suggesting a variety of characters who evoked sympathy. Chanda's mother was a common choice and there was often a thorough knowledge shown of her story, her relationships with her husbands and how these men had affected her life as a young mother in different ways. She was generally seen as a victim of a society which did not protect women and children, the poor or the sick and where the stigma of AIDS and the shame and superstition surrounding it greatly increased her suffering. Other contenders included Esther and Chanda herself, both of whose innocence and carefree childhood was quickly destroyed by the deprivations of poverty, disease and death.

The second question focused on the injustice experienced by many characters in the novel and while few candidates selected the question, responses generally featured examples of injustice, such as the way in which Chanda's mother and especially Esther were treated by their neighbours and family members in Bonang and Tiro because they had contracted AIDS. Some very thorough responses explored the different kinds of injustice faced by characters in the novel, including exploitation by greedy employers, patriarchal structures which shamed victims of sexual assault, as well as the silencing and shaming of victims of AIDS.

## Poetry

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

On Higher Tier, the tone of Brian Patten's 'Song for Last Year's Wife' was generally quite well understood and most responses could identify the narrator's sense of loss and abandonment. While some candidates maintained throughout that his wife had died, rather literally interpreting the 'ghost' reference later in the poem, this idea is somewhat reflected in the early sense of grief in the poem. However, as his depiction of life without Alice develops, with his thoughts of her elsewhere, uncaring and unaware of the significance of the date, ideas about time passing and of being stuck in the past emerge. Some candidates explored the sense of nothing having changed, shown through the bleak images of winter and empty gardens, and suggested an interpretation that his thoughts and feelings a year on are unchanged. Others thought that these details showed his sense of having been abandoned a year ago and while this is insignificant to the wider world which carries on regardless of his loss, it is a catastrophe for him. Similarly, some candidates developed an interpretation of the narrator as not really living his own life but ever conscious of Alice's, seen through the contrast between the bleak imagery of his own surroundings and the warmth and vitality of his wife as he imagines her. The reference to 'spies' sent out to see what Alice is doing was also variously understood as the behaviour of a stalker or as an expression of his concern for her well-being, though the latter is a little undermined by the use of 'spies'. Some were able to see this behaviour as obsessive, indicative of a man unable to recover from the loss of the relationship but unwilling to subject himself to the humiliation of meeting her in real life. Examiners could reward different ideas and interpretations where there was some supporting reference to the detail and language of the poem and especially if the imagery used was addressed.

'Fists' by Peter Finch was most often seen as a stark contrast with the Patten poem in terms of tone and the reaction of the narrator to a similar situation. Many noticed that, like Patten, the narrator's relationship had broken down a year ago but that the pain of the separation, perhaps symbolised by the residual 'sting' in his fist, was still keenly felt. The aggression and violence implied by the actions of the narrator in the first stanza were clearly understood as a contrast to the more melancholy reaction of the narrator in the first poem. The poignant imagery evoked by the boxes he won't look in was generally recognised as a symbol of a lost domestic existence, with some candidates pointing out that these objects are fragments – 'half a menu', only one of a pair of child's shoes – and represent a broken past which is too painful to think about. Another idea common to both poems was the sense of the passage of time, which Finch describes as 'hissing like a cistern' and is represented by the renewal of his body over time. While many thought these images showed how the writer is aware of his own stalled life a year on from the break-up, others saw the image of time as threatening, an image of his life passing without his conscious agency over it. The writer feels separate from his own life, pretending to inhabit the lives of strangers to ease the emptiness in his own. As in the first poem, the fear of not even being acknowledged or being forgotten is apparent in 'Fists' at the end where the narrator is portrayed as dealing with his resurgent rage alone in a very prosaic setting. In some sensitive responses the self-mockery and bathos of these lines was noted and there was some analysis of how the poet evokes sympathy for an otherwise angry and potentially violent narrator.

There were some less productive approaches to the poems, often involving some guesswork and piecing together of how the relationships had broken up, what the circumstances of the ex-partners was, where they lived, how long the couples had been together and whether they had children. In some cases, an assumption that the relationship in 'Fists' had broken down because of domestic violence led to an overly judgemental view of the narrator. Some, for example, suggested that he refuses to see his children or isn't allowed to or that the reason he won't look in the boxes is because he doesn't want contact with his former family. Similarly in the first poem, some candidates asserted that the narrator's stalker-like behaviour was the cause of the break-up rather than a reaction to it. Where these less nuanced interpretations of each poem were given, candidates sometimes struggled to deal with the more figurative language and imagery in them and comparisons were less secure.

On Foundation Tier, some candidates had not read or accounted for the explanation that 'both poets describe the sea' and struggled to find the basic connections between the poems. However, James Berry's 'Seashell' was quite commonly understood to be evoking a sense of the unknown, the mystery of the ocean, through the sounds heard in the shell and many candidates understood the metaphor of the 'hungry dog' as a device to describe the characteristics of the sea at different times. While many responses were quite brief, some did select and comment on the language used in the poems to create particular effects. The use of 'ahhh!' and the danger implied by 'ghost monsters' were quite often cited as evoking a sense of awe at the unknowability of the ocean's depths in the Berry poem. In better responses, the different sounds and movements of the 'giant sea-dog' were also selected with sometimes an understanding shown of how the metaphor works to evoke the sense of the sea in different conditions. More highly rewarded responses showed a little more confidence in selecting and commenting on a range of different references, with sometimes more comparison of how the poets create effects in different ways. For example, some compared the use of sound in the first poem to show what can't be seen while the main focus in the second poem was thought to be how the sea moves as well as the sounds it makes. In some responses, the first poem was thought of as an unknown, sinister presence while Reeves' use of the dog metaphor gave a more playful tone to the depiction of the sea. In weaker responses, brevity rather than misunderstanding was the reason for lower marks. While some responded in a very general impressionistic way, suggesting that the poems brought back memories of days spent on a beach, for example, direct reference to the poems was often thin and unspecific at this level and the central metaphor in the second poem was missed.

## **Summary of key points**

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

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

## GCSE

Summer 2023

### UNIT 2A: LITERARY HERITAGE DRAMA AND CONTEMPORARY PROSE OR UNIT 2B: CONTEMPORARY DRAMA AND LITERARY HERITAGE PROSE

#### Overview of the Unit

Unit 2A tests assessment objectives 1, 2 and 4 through Literary Heritage Drama (extract: AO1 and AO2; essay: AO1 and AO4) and Contemporary Prose (extract: AO1 and AO2; essay: AO1 and AO2).

Unit 2B tests assessment objectives 1, 2 and 4 through Contemporary Drama (extract: AO1 and AO2; essay: AO1 and AO2) and Literary Heritage Prose (extract: AO1 and AO2; essay: AO1 and AO4).

This is the second session in which this unit has been assessed since the break caused by the pandemic. As usual, all four papers were available. Unit 2A Higher and Foundation Tiers, as well as Unit 2B Higher and Foundation Tiers.

For 2A, on both tiers, the dominant texts remained *An Inspector Calls* and *Heroes*. There were a good number of responses to other texts on Higher Tier, notably *About a Boy*. The range of achievement was comparable on different texts showing that all have remained accessible.

For 2B, *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. At least one centre had used *Silas Marner* for Foundation Tier and this worked extremely well with some excellent engagement and knowledge of the text shown at various levels

Fewer candidates than last year addressed questions on plays and novels which they had not studied. This was good to see but does still remain a problem for some. It seemed that examination technique was generally stronger in 2023 than 2022 as perhaps might be expected after the two-year break.

Potentially illegible handwriting was more of a problem than usual this year. Typed responses are assessed to the same levels as those that are handwritten and there were cases when this would have been a better medium for the candidate.

Assessment objectives were generally handled well. AO4 Context was addressed where appropriate, and candidates seemed generally very well trained in the application of their knowledge to the appropriate essay question. On some occasions this did go too far, and it is important to remember that these are Literature questions and need reference to the events and characters from the texts as well as to the relevant social, cultural and historical backgrounds.

There were a greater number of candidates than in previous who created their own quotations from texts when they could not remember the original. Accredited paraphrase: "she says something like.." is fine but complete modernisations or inaccurate substitutions of own wording are less helpful and cannot gain marks as successfully for AO1 or AO2.

In general candidates on both tiers impressed with an organised and informed approach to the questions set and there was plenty of evidence of success at all levels

## Comments on individual questions/sections

### 2A Higher and Foundation

For *An Inspector Calls*, the extract covering Sheila's conversation with The Inspector worked effectively. On Higher Tier, candidates were asked to write about The Inspector as well as Sheila and those that covered both at some or equal length did particularly well. Good use was made of quotations including reference to stage directions such as the use of the adverb harshly to describe The Inspector's final comments in the extract. For Foundation Tier, candidates explored the different ways Sheila spoke and behaved in the extract, considering what this revealed about her to an audience. The extended piece of speech by Sheila offered plenty of scope for discussion and led to many careful and thorough responses. On both tiers, answers considered the way Sheila is remorseful and filled with regret for the way she behaved and some discussed how she seems to lack confidence at times, knowing that Eva suited the dress more than she did.

Both of the Higher essay questions proved to be popular choices. Responses to the task about Mr Birling were generally well informed and much was made of relevant contextual points about The Titanic and the two World Wars as well as capitalism and socialism. These are familiar points used in many responses over the years but are being more clearly and relevantly handled than previously. The best essays also included his actions during the play and his relevance to the death of Eva Smith. It is always important to try for a balance between demonstrating knowledge for AO1 as well as AO4 for these questions. The same can be said for Foundation Tier. Here there was some confusion of his role at times, with some suggesting that he owned Millwards and sacked her from the shop rather than from his factory.

The alternative essay question on Higher Tier about innocence provoked some engaged discussions about various characters. The better responses made a clear separation between ideas about blame and innocence. For instance, it was easier and more productive to argue that Eric is not innocent but is perhaps not as much to blame for the death of Eva as his mother than to suggest he was innocent. Some strong responses also included the concept of naivety and saw the lack of foresight shown by various characters that then helps us to judge their innocence. The word 'none' in the question provoked some candidates to cover every character in the play, not just those in the Birling family. There were some useful comments about The Inspector and his various possible deceptions suggesting that he is not innocent either.

On Foundation Tier, Eric seemed to be the more popular choice for the blame question with three main areas of his character discussed: his irresponsible behaviour, his dishonesty and theft and his inability to provide for Eva. As with the question on Mr Birling, some Foundation Tier candidates relied on film versions and as a result commented on events that do not happen in the play. Those who discussed Gerald focused heavily on his rejection and abandonment of Eva / Daisy and his lack of empathy for what happened to her.

The extract question for *Heroes* asked candidates to respond to an account from Francis about the Rec Centre and its dramatic and disturbing history. On Higher Tier, there was generally a successful focus on mood and atmosphere. There were many opportunities to address language use throughout the extract, starting with the use of words such as 'abandoned' and 'boarded up'. Most candidates embraced these opportunities and worked their way through the piece methodically. The many who worked across the whole extract made good use of the final reference to Nicole Renard and how this links to the dramatic mood and atmosphere in the extract and to concepts such as doom.



Some candidates on Foundation Tier struggled with the extract question and the placement of it within the novel. Despite this, there were a number of confident responses regarding their thoughts and feelings and how Rec Centre has changed from a once happy place to one associated with negative events. Candidates spoke well about the later part of the extract and the almost supernatural mood and sense of foreboding created by Cormier. On both tiers candidates achieved more by sticking to the extract and the language used in it rather than trying to untangle the complex narrative structure of the novel as a whole.

Both Higher Tier essays were popular choices. Discussions of the changing relationship between Francis and Nicole focused on relevant details and events from throughout the book. There is still an uncertainty and reluctance around the two occasions on which Francis meets Nicole after the day of the assault, with many jumping straight from her seeing him as she leaves the Rec Centre to their meeting at the end of the novel, which is a shame. Despite this, the detailed knowledge of their changing relationship that was demonstrated was generally impressive and responses were again methodical and effective.

The essay about people not always being who they appear to be worked well for many on both tiers. There was an understandable focus on Larry La Salle but candidates also wrote well about Francis and how he is physically and mentally not who he appears to be. The veterans were also used successfully as examples to support the statement. As with other evaluative questions, there was a tendency to mention every character and there was less certainty about Nicole and whether she is who she appears to be. It is always acceptable and often useful to agree with such 'statement' essays to an extent but not to worry if they are not applicable to all of the characters as there can then be a temptation to force less effective arguments into a response.

The extract for *About a Boy* was successfully attempted in good numbers. Many saw the humour of the piece but balanced this with the evidence of Marcus's internal anxieties and confusion. Both essay questions were also answered effectively. It was good to see a range of friendships addressed in the second of these, not just that between Will and Marcus. Responses for this text showed real engagement and understanding of the writer's skills and intentions at times.

Candidates responded to the extract for *A Taste of Honey* with insight and maturity. There was some really sensitive discussion of the reasons for Jo's outburst at the extract's end and what it revealed about her own fears. There were many sensitive responses to the essay questions too, with appropriate and informed use of relevant contextual information, be it the understanding that Geof's offer to be a father figure and his marriage proposal were both a way to support Jo and also an attempt to be accepted by homophobic 1950s society or the interesting perspective offered by the emergence of kitchen sink drama for the second question.

Higher Tier responses to *Never Let Me Go* were also well informed. The essay question asking the candidate to choose the most interesting relationship produced a wide range of well supported choices.

## **2B Higher and Foundation**

For *Blood Brothers*, the extract question was effectively handled by many on both tiers. Candidates tracked the extract well, considering how mood and atmosphere was created and various points. There was much outrage expressed about Mrs Lyons' behaviour and sympathy for Mrs Johnstone. At the top of the mark range there was some detailed analysis of the manipulative nature of the exchange between them and how it is presented.

The question about Mickey's importance allowed candidates to discuss the play as a whole. Popular selections for this question included the first meeting between Mickey and Edward, Mickey's unemployment and dependency on pills and the death of Mickey and Edward. The more successful responses considered Mickey as a vehicle in play and how Russell uses him to highlight how societal disparities can profoundly impact individuals' lives. For Foundation, good use was often made of the bullet points to aid in structuring and developing a detailed response.

The thematic question about who we have the greatest sympathy for was well handled by most who chose it. There was a wide range of responses with Mickey and Mrs Johnstone being the most popular characters discussed with sympathy being felt due to their financial situation. A small number of candidates chose less obvious characters such as Linda, Edward and Mrs Lyons. There were a number of really thoughtful and original responses considering how Mrs Lyons does deserve sympathy as she is unable to have her own child and how her actions within the play stem from a fear of losing Edward. On both tiers, there were some responses where the more narrative approach was taken and the idea of sympathy was sometimes lost. On occasion, this meant that responses based largely on Mickey might have worked better for the other question

For *A Christmas Carol*, the extract proved tricky for many who seemed unfamiliar with this section and where it appears in the novella. Most candidates were able to pick out key aspects of the extract and consider the contrasting positives and negatives and some were able to pick up on the feelings of the characters within the scene. There were some excellent points to be made about the sharp contrast between the dreary physical conditions of the town and the cheerful demeanour of the people. The extract was filled with rich imagery and deliberate use of language and techniques to build up mood and atmosphere and it was good to see many confidently discussing this. On Foundation Tier, there were some responses that showed real insight into the contrasting moods too.

The question about Scrooge was popular and many different approaches were taken to it. Candidates covered a wide range of the novella in their responses and most focused closely on the way he highlights aspects of Victorian society through his Malthusian attitude at the start of the play, his greed and lack of compassion at various points, and his redemption and moral awakening at the end. On the whole, candidates discussed context well, thinking carefully about Dickens' message throughout the novella. Foundation Tier responses were sometimes more narrative and lighter on AO4 but showed engagement and detailed knowledge for AO1.

The question about family led to many confident responses. The Cratchits and Scrooges were understandably popular here but at the top end, candidates also drew on the spirits (including Marley) as family, society as an extended family, and the impact of Scrooge seeing Belle's family. Many spoke confidently about Scrooge's reaction to the scene with Belle's family and why Dickens includes this at the end of Stave 3. Context was used well in the answers with candidates exploring the importance of family in the Victorian era. This worked effectively on both tiers.

For *Lord of the Flies*, the extract was analysed well with candidates closely analysing the mood and atmosphere created. Some spoke with confidence whilst analysing Golding's use of language especially when describing the pig's head.

There were some excellent responses to the question about Jack which considered how Jack represents the dark and primal instincts that exist within human nature and how he is used as a foil to Ralph. Some candidates were able to discuss Jack at various points of the novel and made sensible links between him and figures in history such as Hitler.

The question on savagery was also popular. Across the board, candidates agreed with the statement, drawing on key points such as the boys' descent into barbarism, their loss of innocence and the violent behaviour that grows throughout the novel. At the very top, some candidates considered the darkness of the human psyche and the text as an allegory for World War Two in their responses.

There were a number of responses for other texts on both tiers, notably *A View From the Bridge*. These were engaged as ever and the enthusiasm for the texts that drives the teacher to choose to teach them continues to shine through in candidate responses.

### **Summary of key points**

- Concentrate on the language used in the extract given rather than spending too long explaining the background. This will maximise marks for AO1 and AO2
- Include accurate details; do not make up quotations.
- Avoid only answering with historical knowledge when addressing essay questions that include marks for AO4. Link relevant contextual points to characters and events.
- Considered responses are successful; supported opinions are good to express. This includes evaluative questions based on statements. It can be productive to argue both sides rather than force an argument.
- Avoid film references.

## ENGLISH LITERATURE

### GCSE

Summer 2023

#### UNIT 3 NEA: SHAKESPEARE AND WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

##### Overview of the Unit

Unit 3 consists of two separate tasks. Section A is a response to a Shakespeare play where AO1 and AO2 are assessed. Section B is a thematic response to a pre-released set of 15 poems where AO1, AO2 and AO3 are assessed.

##### Tasks

##### Comments on tasks/questions relating to candidate performance/meeting assessment criteria

As last year, most centres chose to use common tasks across the year group. This is perfectly acceptable and perhaps aids in the arrival of a reliable rank order. Moderators did sometimes worry about differentiation when it was clear that a task was perceived as being too testing for the less able candidates or too simple for the more able. Moderators were also sometimes worried about a similarity of approach across the entry which suggested that the candidates were working to a preordained 'list' of points to be made or areas of a text to cover. Centres are reminded that candidates are not allowed any notes or pre-annotated texts in the NEA assessment.

##### Task Marking

##### Administration

The vast majority of the centres handled the administrative aspects with professionalism. Where changes had to be made to the sample, they were generally clearly explained in a letter from the Head of Department/Curriculum Leader, very often with supporting evidence including emails from and to the Board. Moderators find this a most helpful approach and it deserves praise given the busy lives of Subject leaders.

As in the past, the only recurring problem was the obtaining of key signatures from teachers and pupils for the coversheets. Although the effects of the pandemic are slowly retreating, it is the case that absenteeism is still an issue and centres often found it difficult to ensure that the paperwork was in order before the despatch of the folders to the moderators. Centres are reminded that signatures can be typed.

It is pleasing to see that the use of staples and polypockets is reducing. Both approaches delay the moderation process. Some centres still use cardboard folders to enclose the work of each candidate when treasury tags would suffice. Nevertheless, it must be said that the vast majority of centres present their candidates' work in helpful and user-friendly ways. For this, moderators are grateful.

##### Assessment

Many centres produced accurate rank orders with detailed supporting annotations to justify the marks awarded. Often this was reinforced with internal cross moderation though sometimes the sensible changes made as a result of this exercise were not put into effect.

Where the moderators were doubtful about the marks awarded, it was generally because they were too generous. In the past, this has mostly been because AO2 was overmarked. However, AO1 was also relatively frequently kindly treated. Comments on this have been made in the notes on Shakespeare and poetry. Close attention to the text and the ways it conveys content and emotions is essential to gain high marks where it is expected that the candidate makes 'increasingly assured selection and incorporation of relevant detail' and is 'able to evaluate characters/relationships and attitudes/motives' (Band 5 criteria). It was apparent that a number of centres were giving Band 5 marks to work that was more suited to the Band 3 criteria 'display some understanding of the main features' and 'begin to select relevant detail'.

In Section B AO2 coverage particularly, the candidates feel they need to write something about 'structure'. I have noted a comment on this aspect in the body of this report. Suffice to say, that line/stanza counting, rhyme spotting and other prosodic aspects are only helpful if they can make sensible comments on why the poet has made these choices. Simply noting them is not very helpful and is unlikely to add valuable credit to the overall AO2 mark. The same is true of device spotting. Some candidates feel obliged to point out when in both Sections, the writer has used similes, metaphors, alliteration and assonance. While this shows an ability to spot such techniques, unless added to this is some investigation of how and why the writer has used them, then there is no great value in such comments.

Work on AO3 has generally improved over the years of the Specification though as noted above there still problems in ensuring that valid links are made. Sometimes rather empty claims were made, for example that a link between the poems was about 'memories' where that information was given in the title of the task.

The weaknesses in some candidates' work must not detract from the qualities apparent elsewhere. The critical points above are made in the hope that they will help teachers to guide their students towards higher achievement and I would repeat the point made above that it was clear from much of the work that the candidates were actively engaged in their studies and had profited from them. This is to be celebrated, as is the teaching and learning that went into the preparation of these tasks.

## **Comments on individual questions/sections**

### **Section A**

The choice of Shakespeare play, which now includes 'Much ado About Nothing' and 'Othello', previously unavailable since they were examination texts, was rather limited. As in the past, 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Macbeth', were most popular with very few centres choosing anything else. There were rare incursions into 'Much Ado About Nothing', 'The Merchant of Venice', 'Othello', 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear' but other comedies and the history plays did not make much of an appearance. It is understandable that teachers wish to stay in familiar territory given the enormous pressures the teaching profession are inundated with and financial considerations very often precluding the purchasing of new and different texts. Besides these points, the two most frequently chosen texts fitted the themes-based tasks very closely and suitable tasks based upon them were fairly obvious.

In passing, it is worth offering a note of caution. The NEA briefs (GCSE English Literature Non-Examination Tasks) which are released yearly and are housed on the secure website make it clear that whichever task is chosen, it must allow the candidate to 'show appreciation of the whole play'. This requirement is also found on page 10 of the [specification](#). Some tasks (for example, a consideration of the character of Tybalt) did not allow this with any ease and moderators were often worried about high marks awarded to work which only covered half the play.

The 'GCSE English Literature Non-Examination Tasks 2023' document provided centres with the themes which were 'The presentation of male characters' and 'Courage'. Both of these tasks proved to provide sufficient flexibility for centres to focus in on areas of study. Macbeth's battle between his ambition and conscience was frequently attempted and this proved to be a rich source for candidates to investigate. Similarly, Romeo's 'impulsive' behaviour produced some interesting and detailed responses with candidates almost universally considering him to be a young man unable to control his behaviour. There were also interesting responses to the 'courage' of Juliet in going against the perceived appropriate behaviour of female teenagers. This task allowed an investigation of the particularly rich imagery the young lady employs in her quest for freedom from the patriarchal society she lives in. Lord Capulet came in for a good deal of criticism for his two-faced treatment of Juliet although some of the more thoughtful responses acknowledged the cultural and societal influences on his behaviour.

Macbeth's battle between ambition and conscience was also a popular choice which allowed candidates full coverage of the play. The best responses realised that his behaviour was nuanced and not simply good or bad. Not many responses covered his relationship with Lady Macbeth and how he moves between loyalty to his king and loyalty to his wife. The best essays pointed out that while in battle he can kill without any emotional input but when it comes to killing a man he respects and has an emotional relationship with he falls apart.

## **Section B**

The selection of poems chosen for 2023 was well covered in the responses though certain combinations were especially popular. 'Toast' coupled with 'Return to Cardiff' provided ample opportunity for links to be made as did 'Toast' and 'Not Adlestrop' with its different considerations of lust and attraction. In these three poems, meaning, content and themes are fairly unambiguous while on other occasions, particularly work on 'From Father to Son' and 'His Father, Singing', such aspects are more carefully hidden and candidates tended to struggle with the opacity of these more difficult poems. 'Evans' and 'Dying in Pallau' produced some pleasing responses often centred on the relative positions of the men within their society and 'Walnut Tree Forge' and 'To My Father' offered good opportunities to compare father/son relationships, particularly in terms of the different environments though the latter poem did not often get the investigation of detail it deserves.

Success in this Section relies heavily on the close examination of the poems, including the style and imagery. Lower scoring responses tended to slip over the details of a poem concentrating instead on the overall content without the close observation upon which to base such claims. The approach taken to shaping the essays sometimes almost invited this lack of detail. While perhaps the safest route is to consider each poem separately before making the all-important links and comparisons, pragmatic observation of the outcomes would seem to suggest that the route to success is to base connections between the poems on clearly established understanding of the theme, content, viewpoint, mood and imagery of each verse. While it is perfectly permissible to attempt a fully integrated approach to the comparison, such attempts tend to be weak on the AO1 aspect, especially when the concentration is simply on similarities and differences. However, some very successful essays took this approach though it is not one to be undertaken lightly. Other candidates chose to examine the links after a close examination of one poem. Again, this is a perfectly legitimate approach though it does carry the risk that the second poem is not investigated with the same thoroughness as the first but instead seen simply as something to hang the differences/similarities on. Again, the AO1 mark will suffer if this is the case.

On a number of occasions, moderators will see 'AO2' in the margin of the work. Markers are reminded that AO2 credit can only be gained if language is investigated. Frequently it is awarded simply because the candidate has quoted the text. That skill is an AO1 achievement.

AO3 is given half the marks for the essay and it is the most difficult part of the task. Here care must be taken to avoid aspects which do not constitute a difference/similarity. For example, if a candidate writing about 'Walnut Tree Forge' and 'To My Father' states that one poem is set in the country and the other in church bell towers without any development of these points explaining how they affect the attitudes of the sons, the work cannot receive credit for AO3. Similarly, if a marker claims AO3 credit if a candidate states that 'Not Adlestrop' is set in a station and 'Toast' is set in Cardiff without any further comment, then the moderator will not regard the point as well made and relevant.

The main stress in AO2 should be on language but many candidates seem to think it is essential to note the prosody of a poem, again without any comment on the effect it has. So, moderators were often informed that 'Toast' had 15 stanzas without any rhyme. Very few candidates were prepared to go beyond this and try and explain why Sheenagh Pugh lays out the poem in this way.

As with the Shakespeare work, there was good evidence that the candidates had been engaged with their studies and that literature still has the ability to interest them.

### **Summary of key points**

- Ensure that the task set for Section A allows candidates the opportunity to cover the whole text.
- Avoid feature and device spotting without close links to relevant meanings.
- Links made for AO3 should be meaningful and go beyond surface observations.
- AO2 marks can only be awarded where there has been evidence of language investigation and should not be awarded for quotation without exploration.

In Section B, AO2 coverage particularly, the candidates feel they need to write something about 'structure'. I have noted above a comment on this aspect. Suffice it say, that line/stanza counting, rhyme spotting and other prosodic aspects are only helpful if they can make sensible comments on why the poet has made these choices. Simply noting them is not very helpful and is unlikely to add valuable credit to the overall AO2 mark. The same is true of device spotting. Some candidates feel obliged to point out when in both Sections, the writer has used similes, metaphors, alliteration and assonance. While this shows an ability to spot such techniques, unless added to this is some investigation of how and why the writer has used them, then there is no great value in such comments.

Work on AO3 has generally improved over the years of the Specification though as noted above there still problems in ensuring that valid links are made. Sometimes rather empty claims were made, for example that a link between the poems was about 'memories' which seems a bit obvious since that information was in the title of the task.

The weaknesses in some candidates' work must not detract from the qualities apparent elsewhere. The critical points above are made in the hope that they will help teachers to guide their students towards higher achievement and I would repeat the point made above that it was clear from much of the work that the candidates were actively engaged in their studies and had profited from them. This is to be celebrated in an environment which underplays the study of the arts.

## Supporting you

### Useful contacts and links

Our friendly subject team are on hand to support you between 8.30am and 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 029 2240 4291

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<sup>i</sup> *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.*