



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/2: Modern texts and poetry
Report on the Examination

8702
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Lead Examiner's Report 2019: GCSE English Literature 8702/2

This report should be read in conjunction with the report for 8702/1.

This qualification is now in its third year and is becoming increasingly robust in terms of how students are responding to its demands. The examining team reported a universal improvement in the ways that the assessment strategy is understood and the development of understanding of the assessment objectives and the ways in which these are interpreted.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2019 exam for teachers. It has been compiled from the views of the entire examination team and will:

- Provide a general overview of the examination with some overall messages
- Exemplify some strengths and key points for each specific section of the component
- Provide clarification of the assessment objectives and how they are assessed
- Suggest some possible approaches that might have a positive impact upon student performance.
- This year we have also included some comments from teacher examiners on how the experience of examining has shaped their view of this subject.

Examiners are very mindful of the fact that this is an un-tiered examination and therefore the following comments will give feedback and suggestions that could inform progress at different levels of attainment.

General Overview

Once again, almost all students coped extremely well with the demands of the paper. Overall there is a real sense that students are confident in tackling the whole paper, there were very few students who did not manage to answer every question. Most students are managing their time well and spending the appropriate amount of time on each question. Many wrote coherently, clearly and at length, in an appropriate style and utilised a wide range of appropriate references to support their discussion, thereby demonstrating detailed knowledge of their texts. Those at the upper reaches of performance provided convincing, eloquently-expressed and insightful ideas, and those towards the lower end showed their engagement with the text and focused on the key words in the question, demonstrating their ability to respond to the task.

There was a strong improvement in terms of task focus in particular this year, with very clear engagement with the question being asked. This was a marked improvement on previous years. The structure of responses was much more dynamic and purposeful with many examples of introductions being used to frame the overall purpose and give clarity to the response as a whole. There was also much more evidence of higher-ability students knowing the value of setting out a thesis or concept to drive and shape their answer. At the other end, there was much less evidence of formulaic, acronym-driven structures which liberated these students and enabled them to focus on the key ideas in the question. The improvement in the use of discourse markers seems to be having a very positive effect on responses to task. Those who were familiar with, and accustomed to, the use of 'thought language' presented very confident and well-shaped answers. A move away from an overreliance on the reproduction of memorised direct quotations has also freed students up. It is clear that more teachers are increasingly familiar with the idea that references can be in a variety of forms and are merely a way for students to demonstrate their knowledge of the text. There was also a welcome move away from paragraphs centred around a single quotation and

towards the central idea in the task, leading to far more in-depth analysis. However, it was noted that there are still some students following a very tight structure to their answer, and that sometimes this doesn't benefit the student. Whilst a general essay structure can be useful for some, many were disadvantaged by overly-structured paragraphs that repeat throughout the response, as they are not able to build on their response and develop their ideas.

Where AO2 was most effective, students had simply answered the question. In Section A in particular, focusing on character as construct, plot moments / development, settings, genre, and authorial purpose all proved to be extremely enabling and, rather than AO2 being attached to redundant identification of parts of speech, students were instead focusing more holistically on the writer as maker of the text.

Students demonstrated more confidence with their handling of thematic concepts and focused their attention on the key words in the task, enabling clear integration of AO3. As a result of this, there was a welcome decline in generalised comments related to historical time frames, or biographical details about the writer.

Section A: Modern Prose and Drama

The vast majority of students selected *An Inspector Calls* and many demonstrated a strong knowledge of the text and its characters, themes and context. What was pleasing to see this year were the many and varied ways of referencing to the text with less emphasis on the insertion of 'by rote', decontextualized quotations and instead, use of the main ideas within the text to support their response. Both the questions on selfishness and on Sheila produced strong responses. Students' choice of reference was often judicious and relevant and there were fewer examples of the pre-learned direct reference being used as the primary driver of the point being made. The idea of character as conscious construct was much more in evidence. Many focused on how Sheila was presented early in the play and how she matured and developed as the play progressed. Some examiners noted that Q1 tended to be the question where students took a more comprehensive approach to the task, going through each character and their actions as examples of selfishness. Whilst there is no particular issue with this approach, those who selected Q2 often appeared to be more judicious in their selection of material to include in their answer: for example, the taking and then return of the ring was explored skilfully as illustrative of a device by Priestley to exemplify the change in character. Here is where students who focused on the meaning and ideas behind a direct quotation were able to fly: one examiner noted that 'it is interesting to see what the range of students do with the same quotation, for example when Sheila accepts the ring from Gerald - 'is this the one you wanted me to have?' – there is so much opportunity for comment – Sheila's almost childlike reaction, focus on 'you', her lack of choice, contextual comments [Gerald's dominance, Sheila's subservience], comparison with her later returning the ring and what that implies about her.' There were some wonderful responses to the ideas in the play: 'As the number of culpable characters increases, the audience itself is subtly implicated in the crime of Eva's death' is one example of the level of higher-order thinking being employed.

Blood Brothers, *Animal Farm* and *Lord of the Flies* are also popular text choices and students engaged thoroughly with the questions, in particular the importance of money in *Blood Brothers*, the failure of the rebellion in *Animal Farm* and the breakdown of society in *Lord of the Flies*. *Animal Farm* seems to still pose a challenge for some in terms of making AO3 ideas an integral part of the line of argument and there are still tendencies to provide disconnected biographical details about Golding in responses to *Lord of the Flies*. In the vast majority of cases however, this was easily outweighed by powerful treatment of ideas about society / human nature. The best responses focused on the universality of these texts' thematic concerns and their relevance to a modern

audience in conjunction with an appreciation of the author's original intentions. Other texts are less widely-used but examiners commented that less popular texts which elicited really successful responses this year were *DNA*, *A Taste of Honey* and *Pigeon English*. It was commented that 'it's a shame that more don't study *A Taste of Honey* as the responses to this play seem to be so enthusiastic and engaged'. One examiner noted about *DNA* that 'for such an apparently simple play, it generates some really informed and passionate debate. Many students have excellent textual knowledge and use it well.' Similarly, those who saw responses to *Pigeon English* were impressed by the high level of engagement and passionate empathy with the characters and the ideas. It seems that when students have connected with a text enthusiastically, their responses are extremely engaged and fluent.

Section B: Poetry Past and Present

For Q25, the extended metaphor of the swans was well understood by the majority and often explored in great depth. Some examples of effective selections of second poem were 'Neutral Tones' (death of a relationship), 'Sonnet 29' and 'Love's Philosophy' (strong romantic relationship), and 'Singh Song!' or 'The Farmer's Bride' (passion). Where responses had focused on the key idea of 'romantic love' and what that might mean, answers were shaped and built around this idea and the poems used as illustration / exploration of the central theme. This then lent itself very effectively to a selection of second poem that could either link with or provide a different view of this same theme.

Q26 remains more popular than Q25. Of the poetry tasks in general, students who led their analysis through ideas in the poem, rather than methods, tended to do much better. Often, the best responses adopted a less integrated approach to comparison, developing an idea in one poem before making a link with the second poem. The most popular comparison with 'War Photographer' was 'Remains' followed by 'Exposure', 'Bayonet Charge' with some providing a really insightful link to 'Poppies', drawing thoughtful parallels between the guilt of the photographer and that of the mother, both as bystanders. However, it was also here where the selection of second poem often either made or hindered the response overall, with a number of students attempting a more challenging comparison with 'Ozymandias' and trying to link this to the effects of war which proved to be very difficult for them.

Overall there was a clear sense that the idea of AO3 being attached to the key word in the question for the taught poetry is much more embedded, and students who focus on this give themselves a strong foundation for their response. Where responses to the anthology poetry were less successful, this was often where they were driven by the methods which then got in the way of an engagement with the ideas and focus of the question. There were lots of examples of subject terminology based purely on technical terms that littered the whole response but were not linked to meaning. An example from 'War Photographer' was 'spools of suffering' which was identified as sibilance in many responses but with no link to the actual meaning of either 'spools' or 'suffering'. There were lots of examples of students struggling to say anything meaningful about such terms such as sibilance, alliteration, enjambment and so on. Where students were much more successful, they were focused on meaning and ideas, and used methods as a means of illustrating meaning rather than the methods driving the focus of the response and, in particular, the comparative links between the poems. It is worth reiterating here that there is no prescribed or favoured comparative methodology as comparison has no discrete AO, therefore it is really important that students are prepared for the best form of comparative approach that suits their level of ability and that making links between ideas / meanings provides the strongest foundation for a treatment of the two poems.

Restrictive essay styles seemed to appear more in Section B with students following a quite rigid ‘language / form / structure’ approach. This often led to some spurious comments about structure, including attempting to comment on a circular structure that isn’t in fact present in that particular poem, or making some rather forced and thin comments on the equally ubiquitous enjambment and caesura. These two techniques in particular appear to be the ones that students really struggle to say anything very robust and meaningful about, and are often therefore contradictory in terms of effect: slowing a poem down in one moment, then speeding it up the next, for example. It was a common reflection of the examiner reports that students still hold the view that there is inherent value in the mentioning of particular techniques at the expense of their relevance and efficacy. As one member of the senior team remarks: ‘I remain concerned about how students approach comments on structure in Sections B and C. The various structural techniques can, seemingly, be made to have any chosen effect, often without any coherent explanation as to why – and the same technique is often able to produce totally opposite / different effects. Students often address structure at the end of a response, as though they have been told they must do it; all too often, it adds absolutely nothing to what they have already achieved.’

Section C: Unseen Poetry

The first unseen poem proved to be extremely popular with students this year; they really engaged with ‘Harry’ and his concept of a simple life, with the result that responses were enthusiastic, fluent and heart-felt and methods were integrated into an overall analysis of ideas extremely effectively. It was a common observation that students often did their best work on this part of the paper, provided that they had planned their time accordingly and allowed enough time to fully engage with the task. Sometimes those who found the previous two sections more of a challenge because they were trying hard to remember revised material, flourished in this section by simply responding to the poems. Students demonstrated their skills in terms of analysing meaning and methods very effectively, sometimes more effectively than in the previous sections. Responses were confident, thoughtful and insightful, and one examiner commented: ‘Every student who did this question appeared to ‘get it’ regardless of their ability. The higher ability students wrote intelligently and had plenty of language to analyse and the lower ability were able to engage fully with the ideas behind the poems. It never ceases to amaze me what wonderful ideas students come up with then they’ve not been told what to think.’

The second unseen poem was handled most successfully when students had read the question carefully and therefore understood the main link between the two unseen poems and considered ‘Nobody’ in the context of the work they had already undertaken on ‘The Richest Poor Man in the Valley’. There was a marked improvement in terms of focusing on two or three methods to create meaning and students dealt with perspective / person, tone, use of analogy and imagery of the natural world very effectively. Less successful responses gave a narrative description of content in both poems which meant they could not move out of Level 1 because the task requires a focus on *how* the two poets communicate their ideas. Similarly, technique-spotting unlinked to meaning is unhelpful here. The best responses integrated their comments on methods as illustration of how both poets presented their ideas. For example: *‘Macrae uses Harry in order to present her view that there are much more important aspects to life than wealth, such as being outdoors and experiencing the beauty and joy of nature. Laskey also seems to share this idea, that nature is important in having a happy life. He uses the single-word sentence ‘Promise’ to convey how strongly and genuinely he feels about this, and the imperative ‘Don’t’ to emphasise how central it is, as if you shouldn’t even think about disobeying. This shows how strongly he believes that the natural world, and building a ‘snowman’, is closely intertwined with having a happy and fulfilled life, and you won’t get the best out of it if you don’t experience nature often.’*

It is this area of the paper where more effective time-management would be valuable. There were fewer examples of students not attempting this task than last year, but often the converse; two or more pages devoted to a description of the content of both poems which took time away that might have been used more effectively elsewhere. As this response is worth 8 marks, it's really important to present a focused, succinct answer. The most effective are still the ones who employ the 'both / both / however' formulation, and / or those who consider the key connection between the two poems as suggested by the question itself and then focus on two or three ways in which the writers present this shared idea.

Assessment Objectives

There is a growing sense that students clearly understand the remit of the tasks and that each task focuses on AO1, AO2 and AO3. These were more integrated this year and there were far more examples of students just answering the question rather than attempting to follow a formula. Some comments on particular elements of the AOs:

AO1 Response to text and task and References - Whilst the ability to 'zoom in' on a particular word can be valuable in some cases – depending on the quotation being used - some forced this approach and emphasised part of a quotation that did not offer the intended meaning that was suggested. Students who were following an ascribed structure for their response were more at risk of doing this, as they would 'zoom in' on a word from every quotation they used, which is not always appropriate. Furthermore, some seemed to be determined to include particular direct quotations that did not always fit with the points they are making. Some of the strongest responses avoided memorising chunks of the text and instead, referenced (pointed to) particular moments / instances as illustrative of the point of view they were developing.

AO2 Writers' Methods - The idea of AO2 being about methods / craft of the writer is much more embedded and it is clear that many are moving away from the narrow, and potentially reductive, focus on 'language form and structure', especially in Section A. There were many who rooted their response in all aspects of writer's craft, for example the use of character as construct, plot / narrative as driver of ideas, and symbolism. This approach enables the student to respond to the text as a construct, debating and teasing out ideas based on the nuances inherent within the text. Far fewer students were labouring their responses based on parts of speech or making disconnected selections of methods for the sake of identifying them. There were far fewer instances of students naming parts of the sentence this year. The naming of individual parts of speech and an attempt to endlessly unpick their use was a fruitless exercise for the vast majority who attempted it and, in almost all cases, replacing the naming of a grammatical function with 'word' would have been far more useful.

Subject terminology is still an area that would benefit from reiteration of previous messages. Although there were fewer instances of the grammatical naming of parts with no value / purpose, what seems to have taken its place is some kind of perceived notion that success in this qualification is linked to the inclusion of some extremely complex terminology. The examining team are unsure where this idea has developed from as the message from the outset of this qualification is that subject terminology is 'the language of the subject' and there is absolutely no inherent value in particular terms. 'Subject terminology' should be seen as language used to discuss what the writer is doing to create meaning, and where there is a term that can be effectively used as shorthand for whatever method is being used, that's great – but it doesn't have value in and of itself. Terminology needs to facilitate. Some aspects of genre terminology, in some very specific circumstances, can be a means of providing a useful shorthand to discussion of shape linked to meaning / genre, such as ideas about tragedy from Aristotle's Poetics. However some fairly

obscure literary terminology is seen by some students to have intrinsic prestige and is often used incorrectly. Although this is not inherently problematic as marks are not lost for misidentifying literary techniques, it can inhibit students from focusing on meaning and can get in the way of their argument. As one member of the senior team commented: 'There are rather obscure terminologies being used – chremamorphism being one. There still seem to be too many students encouraged to throw a range of 'high-end' terminology, hoping something will stick, but ending up simply feature spotting or attempting some rather strained analysis. The majority of the better responses used simpler terminology to focus and build their analysis/argument rather than show off a knowledge of literary and linguistic methods.'

A further thought about effective handling of AO2: focusing on the effect on the reader rather than on the creation of meaning seems to have a really limiting effect on the depth and quality of answers. Once a student embarks on an answer such as 'this makes me feel really sympathetic to...' there is no scope to intensify the examination of this line of response. However, focusing on how writers use methods to create meaning, which is the wording in the mark scheme, does enable them to focus on ideas and is a far more useful approach to take.

AO3 Relationships between texts and their contexts - Some students feel that they have to squeeze in unhelpful and unnecessary historical / biographical contextual details, for example long explanations of Margaret Thatcher's effect on Liverpool rather than dealing with the issues caused by poverty and unemployment in general, large chunks of Russian history, or decontextualized political paragraphs on the evils of capitalism. Students who engage with the texts, responding freely and naturally to the ideas, have a lot to say and are often reflective and insightful when freed from the constraints of a rehearsed structured response. The mark scheme wording for this assessment objective is 'ideas/perspectives/contextual factors' with 'ideas' foregrounded. The idea of 'universality' can be very useful in terms of considering what the text has to say about people / human nature / societal structures. In all cases, where students focused on the key idea in the task, they addressed AO3 effectively.

Examiner Reflections

Some examples of feedback comments from the examining team on how knowledge gleaned from marking has impacted on their own view of GCSE English Literature:

- Prepare and discuss timings for each section and make sure enough time is left to address Section C effectively.
- Students do not need to spend too much time writing their response to 27.2 – one page is more than enough and those who think first and spend a few minutes deciding what to say did much better than those who described what both poems were about.
- Try to avoid focusing on a rigid essay structure that follows a formula to each paragraph as that can stop students from answering the question as a whole.
- It's not the amount of illustrative points that the student makes, but the depth and quality of the points, that gets them the marks.
- Focusing on understanding what is meant by 'methods' and that it is much more than 'language / structure / form'.
- There is no requirement to write about any particular method.
- It is helpful to 'notice' things about the text rather than having a list of techniques that should be spotted.
- Focusing on how the method links to the meaning of the text in that particular instance, rather than just general definitions of different techniques.

- Handle biographical details about the writer with extreme caution and generally avoid, as students insert it into their answers and really struggle to link it to a response to the question.
- AO3 means ‘ideas’ and should come out of the text not the other way around. Consider ‘what further information might deepen understanding of this character / moment / idea’ rather than front-loading my teaching with a load of context.
- Think less in terms of PEE and more in terms of What / How / Why as an over-arching approach to all the texts.
- There are different ways of handling a comparative response to the taught poetry. Focusing on the most effective way of structuring a comparative response to the ability of the particular student is much more effective.
- A ‘how far’ question is not more challenging than a ‘how’ question; it appears if there is an assertion or idea in the task that could be refuted in order to open up the possibility of debate rather than close it down. If a question uses the ‘how far’ construction, there is no requirement for the student to provide a balanced argument and it is not a discriminator of performance. They can argue solely ‘how’ if they want, there aren’t more marks for bringing in the converse.

Advice for students

- In Section A, read both questions carefully in order to make an informed decision about which one you are going to choose.
- When you are looking at the question before you start to answer it, make sure you focus in on the key idea / theme and spend some time considering that in order to decide what you are going to say. Decide what you mean by ‘romantic love’ or ‘ideas about war’ or ‘selfishness’; what does this term mean, how would you define it, and how does the text explore ideas about that theme?
- One of the best ways of approaching an essay is to answer the question right at the start. If you’ve spent a bit of time considering the key idea in the task, you will be ready to tell us what you think in the first paragraph. The rest of the essay then becomes your ‘working out’ – your exploration of why you think what you think, and illustration of what you have said in your first paragraph.
- When you are answering your question on Section B, think really carefully about which poem you are going to choose to link to the named poem. Look at the question a few times with the list of poems in front of you and make sure you’ve chosen one that works well with the question.
- Remember that the people in the text are conscious constructs, and so are the places being described, and the objects mentioned. The more you learn to notice deliberate things the writer has done to communicate their ideas, the less you will be trying to find the techniques that you think should be in every literary text.
- The best way of approaching the study of a literary text is: **What** (is the writer writing about), **How** (has the writer presented their ideas, and **Why** (has the writer written this text; what ideas are they exploring). If you remember these three words you are addressing all of the assessment objectives for this qualification and learning to think about the text in a way that is going to benefit your ability to write about it. This isn’t a formula for a response, but a way of thinking about each of the texts you study.
- You can approach the paper in any order you choose, but generally it is more beneficial if you start with Section A and work your way through the paper that way, leaving Section C until the end. Writing about something you are familiar with often helps you to get started and, by the time you get to Section C, your brain will be working much more efficiently and you’ll be ready to tackle the unseen texts.

- When you get to 27.2, the question will tell you what the main link is between the two poems. Read it carefully first of all in order to start your thinking. Then spend a few minutes reading the second poem and holding it in your head against the first unseen one that you have already written a response on. Then maybe select one or two things that the writers are doing to present this shared idea to us.
- NB: for 27.2, there was some concern about fitting the three numbers into two boxes on the answer booklet. Please don't worry about this as the pages are not electronically 'read' so just make sure you write 27.2 clearly – it doesn't have to fit into the question boxes in the margin of the answer booklet.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.