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GCSE

English Literature

8702/1 Paper 1 Shakespeare and the 19th century novel

Report on the Examination

8702
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Introduction

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2024 exam for teachers, and will:

- give an overview of general reflections that arose from the experience of marking the exam papers this year
- discuss some of the key points of each section of the paper
- provide clarification of the assessment objectives and how these are assessed
- offer some suggestions that might be useful for students to consider.

This report is written by the Lead Examiner following detailed consultation with the examination team, providing a summative overview of the thoughts and reflections of the panel on what they have seen in student responses in 2024.

General Overview

Examiners have been impressed by the quality of answers which has manifested itself in many ways: a noted fluency and structure to answers overall, clear understanding of our approach to the Assessment Objectives, and effective management of time. The questions have proved accessible and enabling to the candidature. It is clear that considerable effort goes into the preparation for the exam, and that students have an extensive knowledge of the texts they have studied and a clear appreciation of timing and of what is expected by the questions.

Students are showing an increasingly confident understanding of how to construct a response which meets the needs of the specific question they are being asked. The most notable aspect of this is the structure of responses, with answers opening with a thesis that outlines a response to the task or the text, and then pursuing a particular idea or interpretation. This sets the tone for the answers and leads to an organised and coherent response to the task overall.

Students are well-versed in how they can use the extract provided with the question to help them to build their response, and we see this used in many different ways. The purpose of the extract is to support and help the development of the answer by offering some material from the text - in the context of a closed-book, un-tiered exam - that may be useful and relevant in addressing the focus of the question. The extracts have been selected to offer some details and information relevant to the focus of the question: some material that students can use to support their answers, giving them a short piece of text as a potential source for references regarding character, methods or themes and ideas.

The questions all make reference to the extract with the phrase *"Starting with…"* which is the invitation to start their *thinking* about their answer by considering how the extract may help to illustrate the concept or idea that is the key focus of the question. Every question also offers a contextual statement that places the extract in the context of the wider text, and it can be helpful to spend a moment considering: what is happening at this point? why is it significant? what happened prior to this moment? what happens after it? These can all be effective thinking points for establishing an interpretation of the relevance of the extract.

Elements of the extract can be used wherever and whenever it suits the student's response. There are no rigid expectations of how great a proportion of the answer should be devoted to the extract, and how much to the whole text. The examiner is looking for an acknowledgement of both the extract and rest of

the text in the answer, but there is nothing prescriptive in what is expected, and rubric infringements (where the answer does not consider both the extract and the wider text) are extremely rare. It is perfectly legitimate to begin an interpretation at a point of the student's choosing, and then move towards addressing the extract at a later point in the answer.

One trend that has been noted is the use of vocabulary which is not fully understood. Perhaps the most frequent example of this in 2024 was Lady Macbeth being described as a proto-feminist or as a femme fatale without demonstrating understanding of these concepts. The ubiquitous nature of some of these comments illustrates the increasing use of social media for revision. Students should exercise caution recycling ideas and interpretations which they are not fully confident of using for their own interpretations.

Section A: Shakespeare

As expected, *Macbeth* was by far the most popular choice of text, followed by *Romeo and Juliet*. The questions for all texts proved to be very accessible, allowing students at all levels to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the plays effectively.

The question on *Macbeth* invited a consideration of how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a strong female character. This drew a wide range of interpretations with some arguing that she was a strong female character, others that she wasn't a strong character and derived her strength solely from others, and others that she changes over the course of the play. All of these, and many other subtle variations, were legitimate responses to the question.

This extract is from early in the text and therefore many took a chronological approach to their response, considering the development of the character through the play. With the focus of the question being Lady Macbeth, other points in the play which were heavily drawn upon were Act 1, Scene 5 her first appearance, Act 2, Scene 2 following Duncan's murder, and her final scene in Act 5 Scene 1. There was ample material here to develop a convincing interpretation of Lady Macbeth.

One of the limitations of some responses was that students seemed determined to include contextual comments on specific moments from the extract which did not always support their argument effectively. For example, 'Look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't' was sometimes accompanied by extensive explanation of religious imagery and connections to the Gunpowder Plot and as a result lost focus on the key aspect of the question. In contrast to this, there were some apt, well-chosen uses of references to examine the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, and how this reflected Lady Macbeth's strength, with her ability to command the 'brave' and 'noble' Macbeth, 'valour's minion' or 'Bellona's bridegroom.' Here the references were selected effectively to support purposeful analysis in the context of the demands of the task.

It is clear that many are increasingly aware of the fact that language analysis is only one aspect of AO2 and are adept at examining different ways by which the writer communicates meaning. Some effective examples of this included examining the contrast in the presentation of Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, evaluating their different strengths and qualities as women. Similarly, some compared Lady Macbeth with the witches, considering their portrayal as women and the extent to which they had any real power in the play. There was some exceptional analysis of parallels and matched moments across the play; a number contrasted the commanding imperatives of Act 1 with the desperate, despairing imperatives of Act 5, to highlight the change in Lady Macbeth. Others looked at the changing epithets for Lady Macbeth through the play, from 'dearest partner of greatness,' through 'dearest chuck' to 'She should have died

hereafter' as a means of characterising Lady Macbeth and how her position and strength changes through the play. An effective approach can be to select a detail that connects with other themes or images of the text and there were some great examples of this with, for example, the use of 'dashed the brains out' as a recognisable image that they could discuss in relation to Lady Macbeth as a strong woman with a variety of fascinating interpretations of what the use of this moment may indicate about her character and motivations at that moment in the play.

The question on Juliet's difficulties also led to a wide range of responses, frequently with students clearly sympathising and engaging with Juliet's situation. The extract was used by many as an effective springboard to the wide range of difficulties Juliet faces in the play with some detailed discussions of Juliet's character, her impatience and frustration at her situation, and her powerlessness to do anything about it. This linked smoothly into the position of young women in that society and the extent of Juliet's relative independence. As ever, there is a range of subtlety of response; some identified Juliet as a victim of the patriarchy whereas others had a more nuanced view, recognising her father as kind and thoughtful in the particular context of the world of the play. For some, Juliet was trapped, for others her love for Romeo was a way of escaping the obligations and restrictions surrounding her. The range and depth of responses reveal the richness and depth of interpretations of Juliet as a character.

Many used the time imagery that runs throughout the soliloquy as the foundation of an interpretation, with Juliet's difficulties including the impetuousness of youth, the breakneck speed at which love strikes, and the naïve guidance of Friar Lawrence. Often these interpretations followed a thread of imagery through the play, considering fast and slow as a metaphor for youth and age, and differing perceptions and expectations for love. There was effective consideration of the line 'many feign as they were dead' linked to with the many images foreshadowing the inevitable end of Juliet and Romeo. Particular time references in Juliet's soliloquy were often used to connect to other references such as 'too like the lightning' or 'these violent delights have violent ends,' thereby following a thread of imagery to offer an insightful examination of Juliet's difficulties.

Students were confidently able to identify numerous difficulties that Juliet faces, including her youth, her gender, love, her position in her family, societal expectations, her isolation, her betrayal by the nurse, the problems caused by Romeo and Tybalt, Romeo's banishment and her situation at the end of the play. These were then used in different ways to consider the issues and pressures on young women, or to reflect on the emotional impact on her, which frequently led to thoughtful, sensitive responses.

Responses to *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrated engagement with the text and the character of Shylock. The extract offered many ways into exploring Shylock's position in society and how he is perceived and treated by others. This was a 'how far' question, but students' present-day interpretations tended to be far more uniform here than with other texts, considering Shylock to be the victim of the play. Responses to *Much Ado About Nothing* explored 'tricking and deceiving' in the play, which naturally led them to the duping of Benedick and Beatrice and the darker machinations of Don Juan and the destruction of Hero's reputation.

Section B: 19th century novel

The most frequently used text was *A Christmas Carol*, with *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the perennial second favourite. *Frankenstein* and *The Sign of Four* maintain a steady presence. Although less prevalent, we saw some extremely insightful and impressive responses to all of the potential texts on this section of the paper.

Again, the questions proved accessible to all levels of response. There was perhaps a slight tendency with *A Christmas Carol* for students to recount the narrative, rather than focusing more specifically on 'the lessons Scrooge learns' and making these explicit. This underlines the importance of reading the question carefully and responding directly to the key task focus. The more successful responses focused on what lessons Scrooge learned and selecting details relevant to that interpretation. Broadly, students identified either personal lessons of individual morality, kindness and generosity, or wider societal lessons of caring for everyone and the value of all human life, or, of course, a combination of these. Some started with the extract as a moment of epiphany for Scrooge, and then moved around it in the remainder of their answer, exploring what led to this point, and the consequences of this final revelation. As the extract came from later in the text, many discussed Scrooge prior to this moment and turned to the extract later in their response.

We saw the extract being used in various ways to support interpretation and analysis, which illustrates the invitation and flexibility it can offer to students. Some students picked out elements such as the use of repetition and the phrase 'unwatched, unwept, uncared for' which gave them a way in to discussing Scrooge's feelings and character at this point in the novella. There were some strong examples of key imagery selected and linked to other points in the text such as the use of 'dark' in the extract, not only examining this metaphorically, but also considering the link to other points in the novel, notably 'darkness is cheap' from the opening stave and the contrast with light and redemption in the final stave, demonstrating effective engagement with the structure of the novella by picking up a thread that runs through it. Another fruitful line of enquiry was to focus on a key image or word such as the 'flannel bag with money in it' or the word 'profit' and use this to connect to the lessons Scrooge has learned about selfishness and greed through the course of the novella.

Students made connections to parts of the text that best suited their interpretations of Scrooge: for example, the importance of family and love led to Fred and Belle, the importance of kindness and compassion led to the Cratchit family, Ignorance and Want and the charity collectors were frequently used to condemn a Malthusian view of society, Fezziwig embodied the spirit of benevolence and generosity. There was effective discussion of the symbolic significance of each of the ghosts in relation to what they taught Scrooge. Also very effective was identifying the contrasts between the opening and closing staves and relating these to the change in Scrooge's character. Here students are able to discuss structure, characterisation and imagery in relation to Dickens' themes and ideas.

Students were similarly adept at recognising and using a range of writer's methods to analyse how and why Stevenson creates an atmosphere of fear and danger in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Many picked up on the idea of the setting as a specific method and used this to powerful effect to develop their responses. What is always fascinating is the range of responses to the extract and the text, so in this instance, with the extract from Chapter 2, the setting could justifiably be: Utterson's bedroom and his 'great dark bed', the city, nighttime, Jekyll's bedroom haunted by Hyde or the inside of Utterson's mind. All of these lent themselves effectively to exploring ideas of fear and danger and could be developed into a consideration of Stevenson's themes and ideas.

As with all the extracts, there were other lines of enquiry pursued which enabled effective exploration of the themes and ideas. Students picked up on motifs such as 'the fogged city moon,' which gave them access to that rich seam of imagery which runs throughout the text and enabled them to link setting and symbolism with Stevenson's ideas. Others picked out specific words or details which related to their understanding of the text, for example the fact that Utterson is 'enslaved' by his imagination led to some fascinating discussions of autonomy and morality in relation to the themes of the novel. 'Labyrinths' offered similar scope for metaphorical interpretation.

In this case, the extract was frequently the appropriate jumping off point for students, and from it they could connect to Enfield's original tale in the opening chapter, the murder of Sir Danvers Carew, other depictions of setting, including Jekyll's house, and other portrayals of Hyde in particular throughout the novel. The most important thing for students to aim to do is to go beyond how Stevenson creates the atmosphere, to also consider why this atmosphere is appropriate to the themes and ideas of the novel.

Similar approaches were apparent in the responses to the other questions. With *The Sign of Four*, students readily grasped the differences between Holmes and Watson, and were able to evaluate these and recognise that Holmes and Watson ultimately complement each other. Again, the ability to contrast the two characters often brought depth and insight to the response. *Frankenstein* often lends itself to the consideration of big, moral ideas, and in this case, through exploring the effects of Frankenstein's scientific ambitions, students were able to discuss not only how they destroyed him but also why they destroyed him. With both *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the questions focused on central themes and ideas of the novel, and students were able to develop thoughtful and insightful responses.

Assessment Objectives

Each year we reflect on the Assessment Objectives that inform the mark scheme and the strengths and weaknesses of how students have addressed these. Regular readers of these reports will realise that the same issues are raised each year. The general sense of senior examiners in 2024 was that the fluency, confidence, style and structure of responses is markedly improving. While there continue to be instances of misunderstood subject terminology and unhelpful contextual comments / generalisations, these are increasingly the exception rather than the rule.

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

The more successful responses are marked by an opening thesis, and then a development of the student's argument and interpretation of the text leading to a coherent essay that addresses the question. There are different ways in which a thesis is used. The most effective way to establish a thesis is to respond directly to the question, offering an interpretation or argument in response to the focus of the task. This immediately focuses on the specifics of the question and creates a sense of purpose and direction for the answer that follows. Sometimes however, thesis statements offer a generic overview of the text, identifying particular themes and ideas that can seem 'pre-prepared,' with set phrases or vocabulary, eg *"In the eponymous play Macbeth…"* or *"In Shakespeare's didactic play Romeo and Juliet…"* which do not directly address the question. The more successful introductions engage with the specifics of the particular question and indicate the overall direction that will be taken in the rest of the answer. Generic terms such as 'eponymous' are only helpful if the student is then going to discuss this concept in their essay.

There are still examples of extremely tightly structured essays following an acronym model as PEE, or PEEL, or PRETZEL or similar. While these structures may give support and direction to some, for others they can be limiting and constricting, and responses that rely upon them quickly become repetitive and constrained.

Along with the growing strength of opening thesis statements, there is also a developing quality of conclusions, with students drawing the strands of their argument together to offer some over-arching comment on the themes and ideas they have been addressing. Often these are a summation of the development of the thesis. There have been instances of strongly personal and powerful conclusions,

where students have clearly empathised with, for example, Juliet's difficulties or Jane Eyre's desire to belong, and have recognised these as universal, eternal themes, not just something confined to the text they are studying. Because we decide on a level for AO1 TASK at the end of the response, students who use their introduction and conclusion as an overall shape for their essay tend to achieve more highly because they are illustrating a sustained focus on the task.

References are any details from the text that support and illustrate the student's response. They may be details of characters or events, they may be quotations, they may be from the extract, or they may be from the rest of the play or novel. What is important is to choose them carefully, so that they are supporting and developing the interpretation being given in the answer. This is generally the case, but there are instances of students arriving with specific details and quotations that they are determined to use which are not helpful or relevant to the specific question being answered.

The best approach is to be led by the question. Identify the focus of the task, and then think about the best examples and references that can be given to show the understanding of the text in relation to that question.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

Equipping students to consider the variety of ways in which meaning is conveyed by the writer can free them from a reliance on a more rigid, language-based focus. The examples given above include how writers use settings, characterisation, relationships between characters, symbolism, structure, contrasts and motifs, as well as what might be considered more traditional language 'devices.' It can be useful to be aware of the imagery and motifs that run through the texts that enable students to make connections between different points.

Alongside this, we are starting to see a more holistic approach to subject terminology being put into practice. Students are referring to 'the word' or 'the image' far more readily and frequently, which makes responses more fluent and more focused on explaining their understanding of the text and how it works. Subject terminology simply means 'the language of the subject' rather than obscure Latinate technical vocabulary or terms that many struggle to understand and use effectively. It is clear that this message is more widely understood and therefore we have seen very few examples of students attempting to include an obscure term that they don't understand and that therefore is not helpful to them. Where a concept has been internalised and understood because it is appropriate to the teaching of that text with a particular cohort, such as liminality in a study of the Gothic, it can be a very enabling shorthand to a deeper understanding of writer's craft, but we don't give specific marks for the mentioning of a term and the health-warning around the narrow definition of subject terminology is still important to stress. We are interested in seeing understanding of the what, the how and the why of the text, as that is the essence of our Statement of Importance as offered in the introduction to the mark scheme.

AO3: themes, ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

Lengthy biographical or historical digressions are much less prevalent than in previous years, demonstrating a growing understanding that these are 'explicit' contextual factors. Those who read the question carefully and address the contextual focus fare more successfully. The question includes a steer towards particular themes or ideas of the text. Once the focus of the question is clear, just like selecting appropriate references for that question, it is also necessary to select only appropriate and relevant contextual ideas to support an interpretation. For example, a brief allusion to the divine right of kings might be appropriate to a discussion of Lady Macbeth as a strong woman who is seeking ultimate power.

A lengthy discussion of the serpent and flower image appearing on a medal commemorating the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot may be an interesting piece of information, but it is hard to connect it to the portrayal of Lady Macbeth as a strong female character. Similarly, lengthy explanations of Malthusian principles are not necessary, when they can be encapsulated in a phrase such as 'Scrooge embodies Malthusian principles…'

Similarly, sweeping generalisations and simplifications do not help students to access AO3 effectively, for example assertions that all Elizabethan and Jacobean women did was cooking and cleaning in a patriarchal society. Answers were far more purposeful and effective when they carefully examined the specifics of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's relationship in the context of a patriarchal society and how this might have challenged entrenched, traditional attitudes, or considered Juliet as exemplification of a young, privileged female in a similarly patriarchal society. It's important to address the key thematic focus of the task and consider the wider ideas being explored in the text.

Advice for students

Make sure you read the question carefully and focus on answering that specific question. The best answers come when you give your own views on the text and the focus of the question – trust your own ideas, rather than forcing pre-prepared paragraphs into your answer.

See the extract as an invitation to help and support you with answering the specifics of the question.

Revision is important and helps you to prepare and feel confident as you approach the exam but revise sensibly. Online revision sources can sometimes offer a bit of additional support to enhance and develop your knowledge and understanding, don't just repeat things that you are told that you don't fully understand. Use these with a health warning.

Trust your own words and vocabulary. You need to express your ideas clearly, but this must be done with words which you use comfortably and naturally. By all means use complex vocabulary when you understand it and it encapsulates an idea effectively, but don't try to impress with complex vocabulary that you don't fully understand. Often it is the precision of the words you chose to explain what the writer is doing, or how a character is behaving, that illustrate the depth of understanding, not long strings of adjectives.

Aim to keep references as focused as you can. The purpose of these is to support and illustrate your interpretation and ideas – it is these that are really important. The references are evaluated on how relevant and effective they are, not how long they are. You don't need to memorise big, long quotations; this exam is not a memory test. We want to see that you know the text you are writing about and can point to moments from it to help you to answer the question. If you can't remember the actual moment word for word, that doesn't matter.

Choose your references to the text carefully. You should aim to ensure they are relevant to the question you are answering. Don't force a reference into your answer just because you can write a lot about it – you will spend a lot of time writing about something which is not helping you to answer the question.

Think carefully about how the extract connects to the rest of the text. Are there any details or images which link to other points in the text or are there any words or images which encapsulate the broader themes of the text. These can be rich and rewarding areas for analysis.

AO2 doesn't mean 'language analysis'. You can take this approach if you like, but this is only one thing that the writer is doing on purpose to make meaning. They are also using characters, and places, and the structure of the text, and imagery and symbolism. Write about what is interesting to you to in terms of the methods writers are using.

Try to remember that AO3 doesn't mean 'history'. This is a GCSE English Literature exam, and we are interested in wider, big ideas about people and society. The question will give you a focus to think about, and if you concentrate on that, you will be more successful than if you try to put lots of history and writer biography into your answer.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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