



GCE A LEVEL EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE A LEVEL

AUTUMN 2020

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Unit	Page
A72OU10-1 Component 1	1
A72OU20-1 Component 2	4
A72OU30-1 Component 3	6

ENGLISH LITERATURE
GCE A LEVEL
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COMPONENT 1: POETRY

General Comments

Fewer than 20 candidates sat this paper so it was not possible to observe trends within individual questions in any significant detail. There were responses to each one of the texts in Section A and to three of the five text pairings in Section B. Few as they were, responses still demonstrated a spread of quality from Band 1 to band 5.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A

Chaucer

Responses to 1(i) showed a quite secure understanding of the features of Januarie's character designed to both amuse and repel the reader but there was no attempt to analyse other elements of the verse which might have influenced the reader's feelings.

In 1(ii), responses were sensibly selective but when restricted to Januarie and May did not show sufficient range of understanding and appreciation.

Donne

Responses to 2(i) tended to describe the persona's strategy in the poem and define his intentions. While the writing was accurate, there was little attempt to explore the complexities of tone which are such a strong feature of this poem.

In 2(ii), responses covered both the secular and divine poems with some clear understanding of the ways in which Donne makes use of unconventional imagery and startling language. There was a tendency to list examples though and little effort to address the clear intention to display wit at the possible expense of sincerity.

Milton

Responses to 3(i) were more character studies of Eve than analyses of Milton's techniques in guiding the reader's feelings.

Responses to 3(ii) also leaned towards descriptions of character rather than discussions of the ways in which the balance of conflict in Book IX is a structuring element.

Keats

These were the least successful responses in this very small sample. Writing in 4(i) showed insecure understanding and appreciation with attempts to fill out the answer with contextual/biographical reference.

In 4(ii) there was some understanding of the issues but a very pronounced tendency to assert biographical details rather than to analyse relevant poems.

Rossetti

Some pleasing attention to poetic technique was clearly evident in the responses to 5(i), along with some sensitivity to the ways Rossetti presents the gulf between romance and friendship.

In 5(ii) there was a tendency to agree and to concentrate (relevantly) upon the poems where female sexuality and vulnerability are presented. Biographical references were used sensibly to illustrate Rossetti's first-hand experience of "fallen women" in the C19th.

Section B

Hughes and Plath

There were responses to both of these tasks which demonstrated a reasonable level of knowledge and understanding with some sensible approaches to the issues. Connections were sometimes asserted rather than fully explored and there were lapses into loosely related biographical writing which served little purpose.

Larkin and Duffy

Once again, there were responses to both tasks. In Q12 the choices of poems tended to be a little restricted so that the idea of "ordinary lives" was not fully explored, but there was some sensible writing on "Afternoons" and "Self's The Man" for Larkin, which remained relevant and well-focused. There was less range with some choices of poems for Duffy that did not quite fit the purpose. More attention could have been given to purposeful connections.

Heaney and Sheers

Both tasks were quite well addressed with some detailed and well-informed writing on both poets. As with all other texts in this section, there was a tendency to inject passages of barely integrated biographical writing into responses. There was also clear evidence of engagement and enjoyment which was very encouraging.

Summary of key points

- In Section A Part (i) responses, it is important to focus upon poetic technique. Description is not a valid substitute for analysis and candidates should always ask themselves HOW a poet is making meaning and (in order to show engagement) to what effect.
- Points of view in Part (ii) questions must always be considered (AO5), not simply re-stated or rebutted without careful exploration. AO3 elements (contexts) must be used as part of a relevant analysis of the poet's work so that essays remain literary rather than historical or biographical.
- When selecting poems (or extracts from narrative poems) for consideration in Section A Part (ii) and Section B responses, choose on the basis of maximum relevance to the task rather than personal preference.
- Connections (AO4) in Section B must be seen as opportunities to hold **poems** up against one another – comparisons or contrasts between the lives of the poets is of very limited value.

- Candidates should remind themselves of the differences between descriptive/narrative approaches and analytical writing. Please see WJEC resources on the appreciation of prose of poetry where the differences are clearly exemplified and explained.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE A LEVEL

Autumn 2020

COMPONENT 2: DRAMA

General Comments

Despite the small number of candidates for this series, all the Shakespeare plays, apart from *King Henry IV Part 1*, were represented in candidate responses. In Section B, there was also a pleasing range as questions 5,6,7,8,11 and 12 were all attempted.

There appeared to be very few timing issues for this paper, and most candidates had managed to produce complete responses in the time allowed.

There were some concerns with poor expression and in some cases a general lack of appropriate vocabulary and academic register which negatively affected the quality of the response.

It is important to note that from summer 2021 each task in both sections which tests **AO3** features a format change, as a specific reminder to address context will be included in all these questions.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A

As in previous series, the Shakespeare extract question exposed a lack of textual knowledge. Their evident unfamiliarity with the extract caused some candidates to struggle to understand the import of the given speeches and seriously hampered their attempt to analyse successfully Shakespeare's use of language and imagery. The more successful responses selected pertinent imagery and other uses of language from the extract which directly related to the given question focus (**AO2**). Weaker responses floundered at understanding key lines in the speeches and also featured errors in concepts and terminology (**AO1**).

It is a matter of some concern that **AO3** seems to be neglected and marginalised in some candidate responses, despite its double weighting for the Shakespeare essay task. Too many broad-brush references are made to history and perceived social attitudes, with little relevance to the question or indeed the text. It is far better to focus on cultural concepts and ideas and literary traditions and background in trying to find rich contextual material. The strongest responses in this section were on *The Tempest*, a trend which was apparent in 2019 also.

For **AO5**, it is pleasing to note an improved effort to draw on and integrate relevant interpretations, including critical views into the candidate's argument.

Section B

In this section, there was evidence of good engagement with the plays and most candidates were able to quote or refer to both plays in their response. However, in some instances candidates did not fully engage with the question, and this affected their ability to make **relevant connections (AO4)** and to show how relevant different interpretations (**AO5**) had informed their reading.

In some candidate responses, there was a tendency to merely acknowledge the view expressed in the question and then proceed to write about the plays from a different angle altogether.

Question 8 on *The Duchess of Malfi* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* was the most popular question in Section B, and some candidates focused on connections with reasonable success. Others showed some difficulty in making connections beyond a few superficial similarities. There was insufficient thought given in general to 'ideas and constraints of her time', and **AO3** was addressed through token acknowledgements to the different eras, or simply through sweeping generalisations about history and politics. Question 12 on *Lady Windermere's Fan and Betrayal* produced a few really good responses, showing sound knowledge of both plays and a firm grasp on the presentation of 'secrecy and disguise'. Question 11 on *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Loot* was also well done, responses showing a genuine engagement with 'the attack on family values' and a clear enthusiasm for both plays.

Summary of key points

Where responses were successful, they generally featured:

- good knowledge and understanding of the text
- appropriate support from and references to the play
- a clear engagement with critical views, usually put to good purpose
- attempts to **integrate** contextual materials (AO3) and other interpretations (AO5) to develop and support the central arguments in responses
- generally accurate and coherent expression.

Where responses were less successful, they generally featured:

- **insecure** knowledge and understanding of the text, particularly in the extract question
- poorly constructed sentences and paragraphs: it was common to see sentences which stretched to over half a page in the booklet and pages with no paragraphs
- sweeping generalisations in discussing context/inaccurate historical referencing
- failing to engage with the **whole** essay question.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE A LEVEL

Autumn 2020

COMPONENT 3: UNSEEN TEXTS

General Comments

Section A: Prose

There was little difference between the number of candidates opting for Q1 (1880-1910) and those opting for Q2 (1919-1939). Responses to both questions represented a range of ability and the challenges of the two extracts were found to be different but equal in their accessibility. Many candidates made good use of the supporting materials but there were still some responses that relied too heavily on pre-learned contextual information.

Section B: Poetry

Both poems provided candidates with plenty of opportunity to gain the full range of marks for this section of the paper. Of the two, Boland's *Energies* proved to be the more popular choice perhaps suggesting candidates felt more confident with the more recently published poem. However, there were a number of responses on Browning's *Love in a Life*.

It was pleasing to see fewer template-style answers in this series. However, as with previous years, unsupported assertions were seen too frequently. There were some responses that were very short in length or were rushed towards the end with paragraphs becoming a rapid list of points; perhaps candidates need more experience of managing full papers to learn how to balance their time between Section A and Section B.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A: Unseen Prose

Question 1 – 1880-1910

The Silence of Dean Maitland by Maxwell Gray

Strong responses showed an immediate and confident understanding of the circumstances and were able to use the supporting extracts to help shape their argument. Those who carefully read the introduction were able to comment on the writer's use of a pen name, linking this to context, supporting extracts and the treatment of Alma Lee. Many responses were also able to analyse how setting was used to create atmosphere and tension at the start of the extract and the contrasts between Alma Lee's innocence and the threat of the carter.

Less successful responses were characterised by narrative comments that re-told the story without commenting on the writer's use of language. In order to be at least clearly engaged (AO1) with a text, candidates must be able to go beyond an accurate description of characters and events and be able, with clear support (AO2) to say something convincing about a writer's techniques and their effects.

There was some misreading of the relationships between characters (that the 'youthful figure' seen to come to Alma Lee's rescue was actually her father) which could have been

avoided. As with previous reports, it cannot be emphasised enough that candidates need to be advised to spend adequate time reading and re-reading materials rather than embarking immediately on their answer.

Some candidates relied too heavily on pre-learnt contexts and spent a significant proportion of their time commenting on the New Woman, the suffragist movement and the concept of the 'dandy', divorced from the text. While an understanding of the historical, social, cultural and literary context is important for candidates to be able to place an extract in its time, any contextual points must be linked to the text. It is worth looking at the language of the assessment criteria and recognising that 'connections between unseen texts and contexts' are rewarded. Having said that, there were candidates who were able to neatly weave pertinent contextual points through their essay, enhancing their analysis with concise and relevant reference to the supporting extracts or their awareness of the context of the time period.

When engaging with the critical statements, those who were able to discuss or challenge the ideas within them through the text had the more successful answers. There were a number of candidates who took the opportunity to challenge the Forster statement by suggesting the sermon-like ending to the extract does more than make 'the audience want to know what happens next'.

Q2 – 1918-1939

***Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene**

In this passage there were some challenges to candidates' understanding that needed close consideration and this is a good example of material which requires time to digest the introductory comment and careful re-reading of the extract. The majority of candidates who chose to answer on Greene had done this and were able to begin their answers with comprehensive overviews that demonstrated engagement and understanding.

There were a small number of responses who had not fully understood the introduction, extract or supporting extracts but had embarked on their answer. These tended to be more narrative, lacked clear engagement and made superficial comments on writer's language that did not develop into an argument. As previously mentioned, candidates need to be advised to spend adequate time reading, re-reading materials and planning so as to feel more confident in their response. Particularly with this question, there was a tendency for candidate responses to improve as the essay progressed, suggesting their analysis and engagement developed as they spent more time going back to the text.

Pleasingly, there were fewer responses to this question that relied on pre-learnt context. There were examples of candidates using the supporting extracts to develop their analysis and, as with Q1, those who challenged the Forster statement with some sound discussion.

Less successful responses with regards to AO3 and AO5 acknowledged the supporting extracts by including quotes at the end of paragraphs without discussion or development. Candidates should be encouraged to spend time during planning to consider how the supporting extracts can be used to challenge or further their argument and show connections between texts and contexts.

Successful candidates were able to discuss literary concepts such as: the ambiguity surrounding the boy; the contrast in presentation between the boy and Hale and the cadence of the final line.

Section B: Unseen Poetry

Q3 – *Love in a Life* by Robert Browning

Browning's poem was less popular with candidates than Boland's and for those who did choose *Love in a Life*, the challenges it presented were not always tackled successfully. Unsupported assertion and candidates imposing meaning onto the poem were seen in less successful responses. As with the blackbird in 'The Poplar Field' from the Summer 2019 paper, candidates saw one word in the poem and brought their own meaning to the rest of the text – the 'hunt' became a literal one that the speaker in the poem felt was not appropriate for his partner as it was a man's sport.

However, there were some sound discussions about the connotations of 'the quest' and many candidates were able to identify and comment on the effect of the repetition, the subtle changes in tone and the unresolved conclusion.

Q4 – *Energies* by Eavan Boland

The more popular choice, Boland's poem provided a series of challenges that were met with success by many candidates. There were some good overviews, demonstrating candidates' engagement from the start. Stronger responses were able to show sound grasp of meaning when discussing the reoccurring patterns of images such as the daisies and children, or the attitudes expressed through expressions such as 'my time' and 'chores'.

Less successful responses only had partial understanding and imposed their own meanings onto the poem. Careful reading and re-reading, as previously advised, would have given candidates more time for processing their ideas, putting them on trial and then selecting the ones that could be substantiated by the text. There was some misuse of terminology, whether incorrect identification of techniques or terms used with no qualifying discussion or support to analysis.

Summary of key points

- Give adequate time to reading and re-reading of the introduction, extract and supporting extracts or the poem;
- Spend time planning in order to offer a brief, supported overview in the introduction that confirms understanding and engagement with the extract or poem;
- In Section A, avoid over-reliance on pre-learnt contextual material that becomes divorced from the analysis of the text;
- Some candidate responses for Section B seemed to suffer from a lack of time;
- Make careful and accurate use of terminology, recognising the form of the text, poetry or prose, and using suitable concepts.
- Remember that the business of critical analysis is to draw-out meaning rather than to impose or assert it.

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WJEC
245 Western Avenue
Cardiff CF5 2YX
Tel No 029 2026 5000
Fax 029 2057 5994
E-mail: exams@wjec.co.uk
website: www.wjec.co.uk