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# **GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS**

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## **ENGLISH LITERATURE GCSE**

**AUTUMN 2021**

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# ENGLISH LITERATURE

## GCSE

Autumn 2021

### COMPONENT 1 (SHAKESPEARE/POST-1914 PROSE/DRAMA)

#### SECTION A – SHAKESPEARE

##### General Comments

The paper did its job well, with no questions misleading or confusing candidates: the extracts seemed familiar to candidates and the essay questions appeared accessible. There were, however, a number of rubric infringements, with a few candidates missing out questions and a couple attempting to answer all of the Shakespeare extracts. These didn't seem to be a result of any issues with the questions, though, and, as with last year's November paper, were more likely to be a consequence of disruption to learning and the length of time that had elapsed between candidates studying the plays and sitting the exam.

Responses ranged across all 5 bands, although a large majority tended to fall within bands 2 and 3, probably as a consequence of the unusual nature of this resit exam. Almost all candidates answered on "Macbeth" (the most popular of the Shakespeare texts) and "Romeo and Juliet", and were able to access the questions and show engagement with the plays to at least some degree.

##### Comments on individual questions/sections

For question 1.1 candidates were able to discuss this key moment in Romeo and Juliet's relationship, most commenting on how the characters' willingness to abandon their family names showed the conviction of their sudden love and willingness to disregard their families' feud. Some, however, didn't seem to realise that Juliet only becomes aware of Romeo's presence halfway through the extract, thus missing the dramatic irony of Juliet's words. Better responses were able to track through the whole extract, offering some analysis of language choice, such as their use of religious imagery, while weaker ones tended to offer a couple of textual selections and more generalised comments on the lovers.

There were plenty of Capulet family relations available for candidates responding to question 1.2 to select from, but most wanted to write about Lord Capulet, whether in relation to Juliet, Tybalt or his wife. Some stronger responses looked at Capulet's treatment of his daughter across several scenes in the play, selecting apt textual detail from each for analysis, thus ensuring good marks across both assessment objectives. There were also a few effective discussions of Juliet's close relationship with the Nurse, sometimes contrasted with the more distant and uneasy relationship with her mother. Weaker responses identified one or two key elements of relationships but were brief or limited in scope and textual support.

Most candidates seemed familiar with the extract in question 2.1 and many were able to place it accurately within the play's main events. Stronger responses looked at the widening gap between the Macbeths and explored the language suggestive of Macbeth's mental deterioration. Some saw Lady Macbeth's attempts to cheer her husband as evidence of their remaining love and interpreted it as a further example of her manipulation of him. On the whole, I felt that more could have been done to explore key images such as "We have scorched the snake" and "O full of Scorpions is my mind, dear wife!", and a lack of attention to AO2 often characterised less successful responses.

Question 2.2 gave a fairly broad range of characters and events to make use of, although most candidates focused mainly on the first act of the play, discussing the witches in Act 1 Scene 1 and Act 1 Scene 3 and Lady Macbeth's invocation of evil spirits in Act 1 scene 5 and perhaps the dagger in Act 1 Scene 7. Better responses were able to take in more of the play, whether looking at Banquo's ghost in Act 3, the witches and the apparitions in Act 4 or Lady Macbeth seeing blood on her hands in Act 5. The nature of the question perhaps prompted more contextual comments than usual in a question where there is no requirement for AO3; however, such comments were usually able to gain some reward under AO1 as long as they didn't leave the text behind.

### Summary of key points

- Rubric infringements are always costly: missing out a question on this component has a major impact on overall marks and, ultimately, grades. Attempting extract or essay questions on plays that have not been studied rarely achieves anything other than wasting valuable time that could have been used more productively on persisting with a single extract and essay response.
- For essay questions, AO2 needs to be addressed through selection and analysis of key textual references, or comments on the play's structure, for example looking at contrasts, cause and effect and how plot and character development relates to the play's overall shape.

## SECTION B - POST-1914 PROSE/DRAMA

### General Comments

A statistically small cohort of candidates responded to the paper set in this series. Centres and candidates should be commended for submitting a range of responses which reflected secure reading and understanding of texts in challenging circumstances. It was clear from the responses seen that some candidates did not have the necessary exam stamina required to produce detailed and sustained responses in comparison to previous cohorts. A significant majority of responses demonstrated secure Band 3 skills, with a smaller number of candidates demonstrating the skills required to secure Band 4 which may of course be due to a range of factors including the current Covid context.

The questions worked across all texts for all abilities. At the lower end, there was a tendency towards unfocused narrative but most candidates attempted to deal with the characters or themes reflected in the questions set and the majority of candidates produced focused and supported essays. There was clear engagement with the texts and the questions set.

All the extracts worked well as a starting point for candidates and they were, quite rightly, used in different ways. Some candidates included the extract at the start of their response; many used the extract as part of a chronological approach; and others used it throughout their response, cross referenced with the wider text. All approaches were valid and all were able to work satisfactorily for the individual candidates concerned. Very few didn't use the extract at all, though some treated it with a light touch, preferring to focus on the wider text. This too was acceptable, although potentially a wasted opportunity. A number of candidates made no, or very little reference to the wider text and relied solely on the extract. Overall, the questions across all the texts worked well for all abilities.

The majority of candidates answered the question set on *An Inspector Calls* with a smaller number answering the question set on *Blood Brothers*.

## Comments on individual questions/sections

### An Inspector Calls

The question's focus, on the character of Sheila Birling, worked well and led to many focused and engaged responses. The question enabled more able students to comment in detail on the breadth of the play while less able candidates demonstrated a straightforward knowledge of events and related these to Sheila's role in the investigation of Eva Smith's death.

Candidates often started with a focus on Sheila's attitudes in the extract before broadening out to reference how these change in the rest of the play. The extract was a convenient starting point to discuss the events involving Sheila and Eva Smith at Milwards, before broadening discussion out to Sheila's changing attitudes in recounting the events and how these are consolidated in the rest of the play. In terms of AO2, the extract gave students the opportunity to provide a close analysis of the language and there was much discussion of stage directions such as when the character "almost breaks down" and reacts "stormily" to Eric. Indeed, the final part of the extract was well used and provided a useful starting point for a discussion of Sheila's relationship with her family and Gerald Croft, with better candidates discussing how these change throughout the play.

Weaker candidates relied heavily or solely on the extract, often providing a focused analysis of details from the extract without addressing the wider text. Lower band answers also tended to bolt on discussion of Priestley's intentions in writing the play without linking to characters and events.

### Blood Brothers

Very few candidates attempted this text. Candidates took a range of varied, valid approaches to the question and reference to the extract provided. Overall responses were relatively short and lacked sustained development and detailed support from the text however candidates successfully focused and commented on the character of Edward. Some responses used a comparative approach to focus on Edward in contrast to Mickey which was valid and allowed candidates to demonstrate knowledge of the text and major plot points. Responses showed a clear understanding of Edward's relationship with both Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone and Mickey. A few responses also commented successfully on Edward's relationship with Linda. Very few responses commented on the ending of the play.

## Summary of key points

Points to remember:

- The first key question for the examiner is: 'Does the candidate know the text well?'
- The second key question for the examiner is: 'Has the candidate answered the question in a focused and sustained way?'

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- Clear and sustained focus on the question asked
- Use of the extract at a relevant point of the essay
- Selection of short references to support points made
- Coverage and reference to a range of relevant points across the wider text

- Critical probing of inferences, implicit meanings and subtext as well as more surface ideas
- Close analysis of how the language and writer's techniques in the extract and wider text help to present the focus of the question
- Suitable analytical style of writing.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Plan where coverage of the extract will be best placed in the essay
- More detailed coverage of the extract and wider text, including the beginning, middle and end
- More selection of detailed supporting references rather than general impressions
- Avoid unfocused narrative and retelling of the story
- More practice on subtext and interpretation
- Practise creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked
- Avoid reference to plays and films when discussing prose texts
- Practise and develop an analytical style of essay writing.

## ENGLISH LITERATURE

### GCSE

Autumn 2021

#### COMPONENT 2A (POETRY ANTHOLOGY)

##### General Comments

The small number of responses to questions 7.1 and 7.2 indicated that of all the options to drop as compensation for lost learning time, the poetry anthology was – understandably – the most popular choice. Comments here are therefore rather limited by the very small sample size.

##### Comments on individual questions/sections

For question 7.1, Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and the theme of power was an accessible choice, and most candidates were able to make good use of phrases such as “sneer of cold command”, although a couple of responses felt “unseen”, perhaps suggesting that not all poems had been covered. As always, though, the most serious impediment to candidates achieving their potential here was the lack of contextual knowledge shown by some candidates. Those that were able to integrate comments on, for example, Shelley as a Romantic poet, or the reign of Rameses II into their analysis did well.

The most popular selection for comparison in 7.2, was “Hawk Roosting” – an excellent choice; I also saw “London” used very successfully. A few chose the usually dependable “Manhunt” but struggled to develop the comparison very far. As with 7.1, a lack of context was the most limiting factor. A couple of candidates omitted 7.2 altogether, thereby passing up the chance of earning up to 25 marks.

##### Summary of key points

- For the anthology poetry questions, showing at least some knowledge of the poems’ contexts is crucial, whether this is historical, literary, social or biographical. A lack of attention to AO3 always restricts the overall mark.
- Rubric infringements are always costly: missing out a question on this component has a major impact on overall marks and, ultimately, grades.

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

## GCSE

Autumn 2021

### COMPONENT 2B (19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PROSE)

#### General Comments

The questions worked across all texts for all abilities. At the lower end, there was a tendency towards unfocused narrative but most attempted to deal with the characters or themes reflected in the questions set and the majority of candidates produced focused and supported essays. There was clear engagement with the texts and the questions set in this paper.

All the extracts worked well as a starting point for candidates and they were, quite rightly, used in different ways. Some candidates included the extract at the start of their response; many used the extract as part of a chronological approach; and others used it throughout their response, cross referenced with the wider text. All approaches were valid and all were able to work satisfactorily for the individual candidates concerned. A number of candidates made little reference to the extract at all, and some treated it with a light touch, preferring to focus on the wider text.

The majority of candidates answered the question set on *A Christmas Carol* with a smaller number answering the question set on *Jekyll and Hyde*.

#### Comments on individual questions/sections

##### A Christmas Carol

The question focused on turning points for Scrooge in the novel. The question called on candidates to select key events that cause a change in Scrooge's character and comment on how Dickens presents them in the story. The open nature of the question gave candidates of all abilities something to discuss and allowed candidates free rein to select the events they considered key in changing Scrooge's attitudes. Invariably, some weaker candidates merely retold the story, or focussed on the ghosts without much reference to turning points, though most had some focus on the question. Lots of candidates tracked confidently through the novel, selecting key moments such as the visitation of Marley's Ghost; his growing concern for Tiny Tim; and Scrooge witnessing his own death.

The extract was usually referenced, but rarely in detail and weaker candidates ignored it or misplaced it within the novel. Knowledge of the extract tended to be a discriminator. Some better candidates discussed the ways in which Scrooge's turning points reflected Dickens' intention in writing the book as a catalyst for change in society. Scrooge witnessing the Cratchit family's Christmas was well referenced and it was pleasing to see a number of references to Ignorance and Want and, at the top, engaged discussion of the symbolism of these characters. Selection such as this allowed many candidates to discuss AO3 purposely and explore the divide between the rich and the poor in Victorian Britain. The best responses integrated context with detailed knowledge of the text and were fully aware of Dickens' construction of the characters and events to reflect his views on social reform.



## Jekyll and Hyde

A few candidates attempted this text. Candidates took a range of varied, valid approaches to the question and the extract provided. Overall, responses were relatively straightforward with some candidates able to show sustained development of ideas and detailed support from the text. Some candidates successfully commented on the question by focusing almost exclusively on the characters of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde. More thoughtful responses showed a clear understanding of varied “journeys” and “discoveries” in the novel in a broader sense with a few responses commenting on this in relation to the investigation of crimes committed, the revelatory nature of different perspectives, narratives or letters. The majority of responses commented on context however the more successful responses integrated comments on context within focused discussion of the text.

### Summary of key points

### Summary of key points

Points to remember:

- The first key question for the examiner is: ‘Does the candidate know the text well?’
- The second key question for the examiner is: ‘Has the candidate answered the question in a focused and sustained way?’
- AO2 and AO3 are worth a third of the marks but are not expected to take up a third of the essay.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- Clear and sustained focus on the question asked
- Use of the extract at a relevant point of the essay
- Selection of short references to support points made
- Coverage and reference to a range of relevant points across the wider text
- Critical probing of inferences, implicit meanings and subtext as well as more surface ideas
- Close analysis of how the language, writer’s techniques in the extract and wider text help to present the focus of the question
- Clear appreciation of how contextual factors influence characters and themes
- Suitable analytical style of writing.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Plan where coverage of the extract will be best placed in the essay
- More detailed coverage of the extract and wider text, including the beginning, middle and end
- More selection of detailed supporting references rather than general impressions
- Avoid unfocused narrative and retelling of the story
- More practice on subtext and interpretation
- Practise creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked
- More focused and integrated discussion of how contextual factors influence writers’ characters, themes and ideas
- Avoid contextual ‘bolt-ons’.

## ENGLISH LITERATURE

### GCSE

Autumn 2021

### COMPONENT 2C (UNSEEN POETRY)

#### General Comments

Despite the reduced teaching time and relative lack of preparation that candidates may well have experienced, the pairing of the two linked poems on this untiered paper, *The Tree* and *Christmas Tree Lots*, was successful. The familiarity of the subject matter of the poems allowed all candidates to engage on some level and proved to be accessible for all, with plenty of opportunities to stretch all abilities when discussing AO1 and AO2.

Across both poems, candidates generally understood the basic premise of each poem. The central ideas in each poem were well probed. The best responses contained a clear and brief overview of the poem as well as thoroughly tracking through details, though there were fewer of these than might have been expected.

Generally, candidates dealt with the second poem in some detail, with nearly all offering some points of comparison or linking.

#### Comments on individual questions/sections

##### Question 3.1

*The Tree*, by Wendy Cope, elicited a wide variety of responses. Candidates clearly enjoyed the poem and there was widespread understanding and engagement with the very familiar subject matter of a Christmas tree. Whilst most candidates could engage with the idea of the Christmas tree representing warm feelings of celebration, the idea of the familiar object making a new abode feel like 'home' proved to be something of a discriminator.

Understandably, many candidates linked the poem to their own experiences of Christmas. There was a keen sense of the descriptions of decorating the tree through selection of "Hung with treasures" and the image of "annual glory". Better candidates explored the idea of memories being held in the decorations, and the line, "Every little trinket tells a story" was well discussed. Some candidates engaged well with the idea of the tree as a "straggly adolescent", though others got confused with this metaphor. Inevitably, there were a few candidates who equated the one stanza structure with the shape of a Christmas tree, and these interpretations were obviously limited. Very few candidates recognised the sonnet structure of the poem: this was presumably down to the lack of opportunities these candidates have had in studying the poetry anthology, due to reduced teaching time and the adapted syllabus.

Some candidates linked the family moving to war or refugees. This was fairly understandable, given the imagery of the second poem, and these interpretations were treated openly and rewarded, depending on the level of engagement and support provided.

Overall, *The Tree* worked well, with candidates finding the poem accessible and it gave them opportunities to show thoughtful insight and sensitivity.

### Question 3.2

The pairing of *The Tree* and *Christmas Tree Lots* gave the candidates plenty to discuss in terms of comparison and worked well across the entire ability range. The central idea of *Christmas Tree Lots* was well understood, with many candidates recognising the imagery of comparing Christmas trees to refugees, in terms of their treatment. However, some candidates took this in a very literal sense, writing that the poet felt sorry for the treatment of the Christmas trees, rather than the refugees.

Better responses were those who explored the idea of the treatment of refugees as objects and equated the sense of something alive becoming possessions. The very best candidates linked “surrounded by joy” to Christmas as a time of celebration when many are blind to the treatment of the less fortunate in our society. Verbs such as “cornered” and “dragged” were often linked and discussed well. The end of the poem was often discussed, with the best candidates using references to the “gaudy gold star” and “surrender their pride” to support comments on the humiliation experienced by both Christmas trees and refugees.

Most candidates made links and contrasts between the poems. This often centred around decorations and contrasted the more positive image in the first with the mostly negative ideas in the second. Many linked the idea of war and refugees and these were rewarded openly, depending on the candidate’s level of engagement and support provided.

### Summary of key points

#### Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- A thorough examination of the first poem in 3.1
- A thorough examination of the second poem in 3.2, either as a discrete element or as part of the comparison
- Clear comparison of ideas, mood and some reference to how the poets use language
- Detailed selection and coverage from each poem
- Comments exploring the meaning of these selections
- Spending about an hour on the poetry questions

#### Ways in which performance can be improved:

- Ensure that the first poem is adequately analysed in 3.1
- Ensure that the second poem is adequately analysed in depth in 3.2
- Practise commenting on a range of poems and poetic techniques, including imagery and figurative language
- Avoid spotting and labelling techniques and patterns with no reference to meaning
- Develop the use of supporting references to support understanding of subtext
- Avoid ‘over reading’ of hidden meanings in the poems
- Experience in reading poems where similar topics are handled differently by poets
- Rehearse timings across the exam to ensure sufficient time is given to the poetry.



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