GCSE Examiners' Report

English Literature

GCSE

Summer 2026

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Introduction

Our Principal Examiners' report provides valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. It has been written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and details how candidates have performed in each component.

This report opens with a summary of candidates' performance, including the assessment objectives/skills/topics/themes being tested, and highlights the characteristics of successful performance and where performance could be improved. It then looks in detail at each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.[1]

The information found in this report provides valuable insight for practitioners to support their teaching and learning activity. We would also encourage practitioners to share this document – in its entirety or in part – with their learners to help with exam preparation, to understand how to avoid pitfalls and to add to their revision toolbox.

Further support

Document	Description	Link
Professional Learning / CPD	Eduqas offers an extensive programme of online and face-to-face Professional Learning events. Access interactive feedback, review example candidate responses, gain practical ideas for the classroom and put questions to our dedicated team by registering for one of our events here.	https://www.eduqas.co.uk/home/professional-learning/
Past papers	Access the bank of past papers for this qualification, including the most recent assessments. Please note that we do not make past papers available on the public website until 12 months after the examination.	Portal by WJEC or on the Eduqas subject page
Grade boundary information	Grade boundaries are the minimum number of marks needed to achieve each grade. For unitised specifications grade boundaries are expressed on a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS). UMS grade boundaries remain the same every year as the range of UMS mark percentages allocated to a particular grade does not change. UMS grade boundaries are published at overall subject and component level. For linear specifications, a single grade is awarded for the subject, rather than for each component that contributes towards the overall grade. Grade boundaries are published on results day.	For unitised specifications click here: Results and Grade Boundaries and PRS (eduqas.co.uk)

[1] ***Please note that where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.***

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Exam Results Analysis	Eduqas provides information to examination centres via the WJEC Portal. This is restricted to centre staff only. Access is granted to centre staff by the Examinations Officer at the centre.	Portal by WJEC
Classroom Resources	Access our extensive range of FREE classroom resources, including blended learning materials, exam walk-throughs and knowledge organisers to support teaching and learning.	https://resources.eduqas.co.uk/
Bank of Professional Learning materials	Access our bank of Professional Learning materials from previous events from our secure website and additional pre-recorded materials available in the public domain.	Portal by WJEC or on the Eduqas subject page.
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Executive Summary

The assessment for Component 1, Shakespeare and Poetry, compared favourably with previous series, with candidates from across the ability range being able to access the questions and demonstrate their understanding effectively. Performance in both Shakespeare and the Poetry Anthology showed strong engagement, with examiners commenting positively on candidates' knowledge of texts and their ability to approach tasks in a variety of valid ways.

Section A assessed candidates' understanding of Shakespeare through extract and essay questions, requiring knowledge of plot, character, themes and dramatic techniques, alongside analysis of language, structure and form. Spelling, punctuation and grammar are also assessed in the essay response. Examiners noted particularly strong engagement with the Shakespeare questions and reported some improvement in candidates' attention to AO2 analysis within the essay responses.

In Section B, candidates were assessed on their understanding of the anthology of poetry, including making connections and exploring relevant contexts. In this final year of the current anthology, candidates answered questions 71 and 72 particularly well. Hughes's *Hawk Roosting* proved accessible to candidates of all abilities and generated a wide range of successful responses. In the comparison question, candidates selected a variety of poems for comparison, and examiners reported fewer brief or incomplete responses than in previous years.

Despite these strengths, examiners highlighted an ongoing concern regarding examination rubric compliance: a small but significant minority of candidates attempted more than one extract question, limiting their performance and indicating the need for teachers to ensure candidates are thoroughly familiar with the examination structure and requirements before the assessment.

Component 2 assessed candidates' reading, analysis and evaluation skills across post-1914 literature, 19th-century prose and unseen poetry. AO1 and AO2 were assessed throughout the paper, with AO3 assessed in Section B and AO4 in Section A. Overall, candidate performance suggested that the paper was as accessible as in previous years, with responses spanning the full ability range.

The resource-based essay format continued to support candidates on this component: most candidates used the extracts effectively to help them to draw on wider textual knowledge. In Section A, *An Inspector Calls* remained the most widely studied text, although significant numbers also answered on *Lord of the Flies* and *Blood Brothers*. In Section B, *A Christmas Carol* was the most popular text, followed by *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Across both sections, most candidates demonstrated secure knowledge of characters, themes and key events, drawing on textual detail with varying levels of precision.

Examiners noted continued improvement in AO2 skills. Candidates generally used subject terminology appropriately and showed greater focus on meaningful analysis rather than feature spotting. Stronger responses explored the effects of language, structure and imagery in depth and maintained a clear focus on the question. Contextual understanding in Section B was often integrated naturally and effectively, with fewer candidates relying on formulaic or 'bolted on' contextual references.

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Section C featured the unseen poems *River Swimming* by Owen Sheers and *Draped With Water* by James Berry. The pairing was highly successful, with the familiar topic enabling strong engagement from candidates of all abilities. Most demonstrated a sound understanding of both poems and approached comparison confidently. However, a small increase was noted in overly speculative interpretations, often where candidates overlooked the introductory statement outlining the poems' subject matter.

Overall, the summer 2026 examination for Eduqas GCSE English Literature reflected strong engagement, secure textual knowledge and improved analytical skills.

Characteristics of good responses:

- Strong responses used extracts purposefully, selected relevant references from across the whole text and maintained a clear focus on the question
- Successful candidates provided close analysis of language, structure and writer's methods, explored deeper meanings and subtext and wrote in a clear analytical style
- Stronger responses analysed the poems in detail, made perceptive comparisons of ideas, mood and imagery, and supported interpretations with well-chosen textual references.

Areas for Improvement:

- Candidates should use the question bullet points to shape responses and avoid narrative retelling or rubric infringements
- Responses should focus on exploring meaning and effects rather than feature spotting, over-analysis of vocabulary, or unsupported interpretations. Context should be relevant and integrated naturally
- Candidates should analyse both unseen poems fully, make a wide range of comparative points and manage time effectively
- Ensure work is legible and technically accurate.

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCSE

Summer 2026

Component 1: Shakespeare and Poetry

Overview of the Component

In Section A, extract questions assess AO1 and AO2 and essay questions assess AO1, AO2 and AO4. Section B assesses AO1, AO2 and AO3 in the first question and AO1, AO2 and AO3 in the comparison question.

Shakespeare and the poetry anthology are assessed. Candidates are assessed on their ability to show their knowledge of dramatic techniques and demonstrate their understanding of plot, characterisation, events and key themes. They are assessed on their ability to analyse language, structure and form. In Section B they are assessed on their understanding of the poems and the relationships between them and the contexts in which they were written. Spelling, punctuation and grammar are also assessed in the Shakespeare essay questions.

The assessment compared well with other series. Candidates of all abilities were able to access the questions, approach them in diverse ways and achieve their potential. Examiners were impressed with the enthusiasm and knowledge shown across all the texts and felt that engagement with the questions was stronger than in previous series, with many noting that, in the final year of the current anthology, questions 71 and 72 were tackled particularly well. Hughes's "Hawk Roosting" proved accessible for the whole ability range, with a range of poems selected for comparison in 72, which had fewer very brief or not attempted answers than ever before. Examiners were also impressed with the quality of responses to the Shakespeare text, with some seeing improved attention to AO2 in the essay questions. However, as in previous series, a small but significant minority of candidates infringed the rubric of the exam by attempting multiple extract questions, underlining the necessity of ensuring that all candidates are familiar with the paper's layout and requirements prior to sitting the exam.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Extract Questions

Romeo and Juliet

The extract proved to be very accessible to candidates, with almost all placing it correctly as following the balcony scene. Most were able to look at the relationship between Friar Lawrence and Romeo, with many beginning by noting the Friar's surprise at the sudden switch in Romeo's affections from Rosaline to Juliet and seeing the paternal nature of his advice. Candidates had plenty to say about both characters, with almost all commenting on Romeo's fickle nature and impulsivity, with the Friar's "young men's love then lies / Not truly in their hearts but in their eyes" a key selection, while discussion of the Friar and his motives tended to be more wide-ranging and varied. In the latter half of the extract, most candidates looked at the Friar's pivotal decision to marry Romeo and Juliet "to turn (their) household's rancour to pure love" and his warning to Romeo "they stumble that run fast", with some noting that, in agreeing to Romeo's request, the Friar is disregarding this aphorism himself.

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Stronger responses tended to track the extract closely, combining relevant observations and references for AO1 marks with thoughtful comments on language choices and dramatic methods for AO2. They explored the relationship between the characters and the tone of the Friar's response to Romeo's news, with candidates variously seeing it as teasing, loving, anxious, mocking or frustrated. There was appreciation of the dramatic irony regarding the Friar's decision to assist Romeo, with many seeing a foreshadowing of the play's tragic ending in the closing lines. Many did well by exploring key words and phrases such as "alliance", "young waverer" and "grace for grace and love for love". Some higher end responses were able to explore the use of rhyming couplets and the sonnet structure of the dialogue that follows Friar Lawrence's speech, referencing this and the shared lines it incorporates to support comments on the closeness of their relationship. Weaker responses sometimes seemed to think that Romeo is still in love with Rosaline at this point; they also sometimes featured smaller-scale misunderstandings, such as thinking "chid'st" means childish. Some made brief, sweeping comments about the Friar's shock and Romeo's impulsivity without development or attention to AO2, with examiners citing a lack of focus on specific language choices as inhibiting marks.

Macbeth

The majority of candidates seemed to know the extract from Act 2 Scene 2 well and were able to recognise both its place within the sequence of the play's events and its importance in presenting the Macbeths' contrasting behaviour in the aftermath of Duncan's murder. Examiners encountered a broad spectrum of views of Lady Macbeth at this dramatic moment: at one end, her controlling, dominant attitude was seen as a practical reaction to Macbeth's return from killing Duncan still carrying the murder weapons, motivated by the desire to avoid being caught. At the other, she was viewed as an evil, sadistic bully, taunting her traumatised husband – with some responses, sadly, veering into the realm of misogyny noted in previous series. Most candidates were able to see Macbeth's guilt and his realisation of the enormity of his crime and were able to explore the power dynamic between the Macbeths at this point. Popular selections included Lady Macbeth's use of imperative verbs, "Infirm of purpose!", and "great Neptune's ocean…", which was often contrasted to good effect with Lady Macbeth's "A little water…". Many interpreted "I shame to wear a heart so white", although those who saw this as Lady Macbeth feeling ashamed of her own behaviour or the "heart so white" as representing Macbeth's innocence or moral goodness didn't really convince.

More successful responses, as always, tracked through the whole extract, ensuring they were able to make use of the stage directions and the rising tension that they create, and reaching Macbeth's telling final lines. They were able to give equal attention to both characters, seeing them as complex rather than one-dimensional, while probing the structural patterns and rich imagery in their speech. They were also able to link briefly to subsequent events in the play, such as Lady Macbeth's "A little water clears us of this deed" with her hallucinating blood on her hands in Act 5 Scene 1. A few candidates noted how Lady Macbeth leaves the stage in the middle of the extract, giving Macbeth a short but significant soliloquy. Less successful efforts were brief or only covered part of the extract. A very small number thought this was prior to the regicide; a few more understood the basic situation, but neglected opportunities to probe language choices so struggled to address AO2. As with previous series, though, the biggest factor in underachievement was wasting time with contextual details, particularly regarding attitudes towards gender and regicide in Jacobean England. With AO3 not assessed here, while a brief nod to context can be rewarded under AO1, anything more is likely to waste valuable time that would be better spent on more attention to AO2.

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Othello

Examiners reported that this extract worked well at all levels, with the vast majority understanding where in the play this interaction between Emilia and Iago occurs, and many identifying it as a pivotal moment in the plot, where Iago obtains the handkerchief he uses to provide Othello with "ocular proof" of Desdemona's supposed infidelity. Much was made of Emilia's description of Iago as "wayward", and many used her comment "I nothing but to please his fantasy" as a way into discussing their relationship. There were some interesting discussions on what lay behind "What do you do here alone?". Strong feelings were expressed regarding Iago's description of Emilia as "a foolish wife" and "good wench", and many candidates went on to explore Iago's misogyny and Emilia's conflicted loyalties.

More accomplished responses tended to begin by looking at Emilia's soliloquy and ending with Iago's, while less effective ones mostly confined their discussion to the dialogue in between. They also explored linguistic and structural aspects of the extract for AO2 marks, including the use of soliloquy, exclamations, imperatives, insults and the stage direction "snatching it", along with dramatic irony and the imagery of poison and hell in Iago's words at the end. Weaker answers often neglected AO2 or became side-tracked by context, with some overstating the importance of the references to "the Moor". Some wasted valuable time by moving far beyond the extract itself, often into wider discussion of Iago's soliloquies elsewhere in the play.

Much Ado About Nothing

This extract, featuring the popular characters Beatrice and Benedick, was well-received by candidates of all abilities, with most recognising that this is a joyful scene and that the love between the characters is being displayed in public at last. The vast majority understood that this scene occurs towards the end of the play, although a small number misread it as occurring straight after the gulling scenes. Candidates commented on the transformative power of love, the extent to which the characters do not want to appear vulnerable, and the impact of the fear of rejection on how they present themselves. Most recognised that the Beatrice and Benedick have changed for the better and that this is a satisfactory ending for the audience. Some brought in the other characters, whereas others focused entirely on Beatrice and Benedick.

AO2 was generally handled well, with much to say about audience, language and character development. The mirroring, parallelism and repetition within Beatrice and Benedick's language was used to discuss how alike the characters are, and the ways in which they try to rationalise love. Many candidates appreciated that this scene is a payoff from the rest of the play and that an audience would probably respond joyfully, particularly in the context of this being a comedy. More confident candidates recognised that the first part of the extract is light-hearted, while the less aware took Beatrice and Benedick's words literally. Stronger responses tended to explore the sonnet and the letter, the kiss and Benedick's final speech, where he reflects on his previous views of marriage. In particular, the line "For man is a giddy thing and this is my conclusion" was used effectively, with many seeing that his "conclusion" and the kiss offer the audience a happy ending to their story. That said, there were plenty of comments on how the kiss ends Beatrice's voice in the play, perhaps suggesting her final submission to societal expectations and constraints, with examiners noting that they saw some really evaluative comments on whether or not this is a happy ending for her. Less successful responses tended to be brief or wander away from the extract, particularly towards earlier skirmishes in Beatrice's and Benedick's "merry war", which did not prove helpful.

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Twelfth Night

It appears that no centres had taught this text for this series, meaning that the responses examiners saw were the result of rubric infringements and were, therefore, answered as unseen. This inevitably limited marks to the lower end of Band 2 or below.

The Merchant of Venice

Examiners reported that this was an enjoyable question to mark, with some lesser characters taking centre stage. Most candidates recognised roughly where this scene occurs in the play and had an understanding that Jessica is eloping with Lorenzo. Candidates discussed the love between Lorenzo and Jessica and their clear bond, although a few who didn't appreciate that the scene is set at night took their initial questioning to mean that the characters didn't know each other at all well. Many recognised that this is a tense scene but that it also contains some comedy, particularly related to Jessica's disguise. Opinions on Jessica varied: she was considered by some to be greedy, rebellious and betraying her father, while others had more sympathy, feeling that she was escaping abuse and was truly in love. Audience response was an interesting angle, with many candidates recognising that different audiences would respond in different ways, depending, for example, on the attitudes towards antisemitism. As ever with this play, candidates had mixed feelings. Stronger responses appreciated the significance of Jessica's flight from her father and her faith, and the effect this will have on Shylock, without being side-tracked by events to come. They tracked through the extract, selecting and analysing language choices, and made good use of the final third, commenting on Jessica's decision to "gild" herself with "moe ducats" on the way out and exploring Lorenzo's speech about his love for Jessica, although some wondered if there was some irony in his description of her as "wise, fair, and true". Less successful responses struggled to place the extract within the play's events or appreciate its significance, wasted time on events outside it, or neglected AO2 comment.

Characteristics of good extract responses:

- Clear and sustained focus on the question asked and on the details in the extract
- "Placing" of the extract within the play's events and giving some overview of its significance and key ideas
- Selection of short, apt references to support points made
- Critical probing of inferences, implicit meanings and subtext as well as more surface ideas
- Wide-ranging coverage of the extract
- Close examination of how the language/imagery used helps to convey meaning.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- More detailed coverage of the extract, managing to comment on the beginning, middle and end, and not straying beyond it
- More selection of specific supporting references rather than general impressions
- Less reference to contextual factors when AO3 is not addressed in this question
- More practice on probing figurative language and connotations of key words to accumulate AO2 marks
- Practice in responding to both soliloquies and extracts with characters interacting and responding to each other.

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Essay Questions

Romeo and Juliet

Quite reasonably, a large majority of candidates chose to write about Juliet for this question, but examiners were happy to see other approaches, with a significant number choosing to write about several female characters and evaluating for whom they had the most sympathy, and some taking the opportunity to write about either the Nurse or Lady Capulet. Examiners saw very successful examples of all of these; the few that chose to write about Rosaline or Lady Montague were inevitably doomed by a lack of material. We saw quite a number of responses that framed the idea of sympathy for Juliet (and to an extent other female characters) based on their position in a patriarchal society, and although these were informed by contextual understanding, they avoided excessive contextual detail and often enabled candidates to make thoughtful, well-argued cases. Many candidates saw Juliet as a young woman trapped by her social position and being sold into marriage, with her agency limited by this throughout the play.

Examiners were pleased to see fewer narrative responses than usual for a question on a central character, with the focus of sympathy encouraging candidates to select key moments across the play rather than re-telling. As always, candidates who took a little time to plan seemed to perform better. Those that tracked sympathy for Juliet in the play tended to make decent selections to support their points and then use them for analysis of language choices and structure. Most looked at Lord Capulet's changing attitude towards Juliet, from "let two more summers wither…" to "hang, beg, starve, die in the streets". The Prologue was often used to show how dramatic irony creates sympathy; other popular scenes and selections included Act 1 Scene 5, "My only love sprung from my only hate!", Act 2 Scene 2, "Too like the lightning", Act 3 Scene 2, "O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!" and, inevitably, Act 5 Scene 3, "O happy dagger". Weaker responses tended to be brief or narrative in nature. Some wasted time with excessive context or tried to compare the reactions of a modern and an Elizabethan audience at the cost of engaging with language or structure for AO2 marks. A few candidates were reliant on terminology rather than exploring the effects of Shakespeare's linguistic or structural choices. This year, *oxymoron* and *juxtaposition* seemed more popular than ever, although these terms seemed to be used interchangeably and were not always applied accurately, or in a way that developed analysis.

Macbeth

Candidates seemed relatively well-prepared for a question on deception and trickery, and there was no shortage of material to work with, although examiners reported that some appeared to have been expecting a question on the supernatural, and limited themselves somewhat by focusing almost entirely on the Witches. It was with the Witches that many answers began, often looking at how Shakespeare sets the tone for deception with "Fair is foul and foul is fair", but most also looked at Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's deception of others, each other and sometimes themselves. Those who covered the early scenes in the play also looked at the original Thane of Cawdor, and how Duncan is deceived by him, as well as his successor. Examiners were impressed with the sheer range of scenes discussed: Macbeth and Banquo's encounter with the Witches in Act 1 Scene 3; the dagger soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 1; Lady Macbeth fainting to distract from Macbeth's attempt at justifying why he killed Duncan's guards in Act 2 Scene 3; the appearance of Banquo's ghost and Lady Macbeth's covering for her husband's reaction in Act 3 Scene 4; Macbeth's second visit to the Witches in Act 4 Scene 1 and Macduff's revelation that he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" in the final scene.

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More accomplished responses tended to look at a broad range of relevant events and characters, with precise selections in support and key quotations such as “Stars, hide your fires…”, “Look like th’innocent flower…” and “There’s daggers in men’s smiles” offering ample opportunity for AO2 analysis. Candidates who worked through the play chronologically, or tracked particular characters across the play, and discussed the impact of their trickery and deception, tended to do better than those who looked at events or key quotations in isolation. Some stronger responses made the distinction between deception motivated by selfishness or malice, and deception for more laudable reasons, such as Malcolm lying about himself to Macduff in Act 4 Scene 3. Others that looked at how Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth and encourages him into deception then went on to look at how the tables are turned in Act 3, with Macbeth ensuring that Lady Macbeth remains “innocent of the knowledge” of his later machinations. Less successful answers tended to be narrow in scope, perhaps just looking at the Witches or Lady Macbeth, or taking a narrative approach without clear focus. As always, some candidates limited themselves by not taking the opportunities to analyse the content of key quotations or identify turning points to accrue AO2 credit, although, overall, examiners felt that such responses were slightly less frequent than last year. As with the extract question, lengthy explanation of contextual details rarely added much to answers.

Othello

Examiners saw plenty of impressive responses to this very open question, with candidates taking a wide range of approaches. Some discussed examples of physical and mental suffering; others looked at whether suffering is deserved or not; many explored how the racism and sexism of Venetian society cause particular characters to suffer. Most, in the end, looked at how Iago is the key driver of suffering and how he causes others to suffer across the entire play. A number of candidates explored the extent to which suffering spreads through the characters across the plot, and we saw responses that looked at the suffering of Othello, Desdemona, Brabantio, Roderigo, Emilia, Cassio, Iago and Bianca, although naturally it was the play’s protagonists who were dealt with in most detail. For AO2 marks there was exploration of animalistic and racist language, Iago’s language choices used to manipulate others and cause suffering, and Othello’s increasingly fractured speech and use of prose. Candidates also did well for AO2 by identifying turning points and shifts in characters’ behaviour, along with appreciation of dramatic irony and foreshadowing.

Stronger responses were able to maintain a strong focus on suffering and explore its presentation and effects across the whole play. Once again, examiners were impressed with the good use of textual quotations as both effective support for discussion and material for close analysis of language and structure. The majority of candidates began with the opening scene and then tracked how Iago creates suffering for others, particularly Othello and Desdemona, with higher-achieving candidates looking at a range of key events, some confidently exploring moments such as Othello “striking” Desdemona in Act 4 Scene 1, the Willow song, or Iago’s prolonging of suffering by vowing silence at the end of the play. Some examiners were concerned that a number of candidates seemed to feel that Othello suffers more when killing Desdemona than she suffers as his victim; on the other hand, they saw a number of top-level responses which dealt astutely with the suffering endured by all three of the female characters in the play. Weaker responses tended to be brief, or lacking in appropriate textual support, or showing a reluctance to address AO2.

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Much Ado About Nothing

Candidates engaged well with this question, enjoying the freedom to discuss one or more characters through the idea of sympathy. Hero was the most popular character for whom candidates felt sympathy, followed by Beatrice. There was also discussion of Don John, Claudio, Benedick, Borachio, Leonato and Don Pedro. Where Hero was selected, candidates explored the extent to which she is commodified and objectified early in the play, and how her marriage is decided for her by her father with her having no agency. Many discussed how she doesn't speak much at the beginning of the play and how her fate is foreshadowed early in the play. As ever with Hero, there was much sympathy for her character and recognition that she is innocent and blameless. Candidates explored how she is used by Don John for his evil plot, and there was the usual condemnation for Claudio. Some explored Hero's role in the gulling scenes and how we see a different, freer side to her character, with one candidate noting how Hero is "bound by the restrictions of womanhood". Those that selected Beatrice explored the extent to which she is a lonely character early in the play, and that she is mocked for not being married. Despite being the play's villain, Don John was chosen by a minority, often eliciting thoughtful comments, with candidates exploring the lack of respect that he receives and the way in which he is treated as an outsider.

Stronger responses maintained a clear focus on sympathy, and whether they discussed a single character or several, they were able to make evaluative comments, drawing on specific textual references. AO2 was generally handled well both through structure (as the question encouraged candidates to select key moments, turning points and character development) and through language (with metaphors suggesting the objectification of Hero and the transactional nature of her relationship with Claudio used to good effect.) There was often a clear sense of how Shakespeare uses characters to convey ideas and messages, such as the unfairness towards women, the entrenched misogyny and the importance of reputation and honour. Less successful responses were brief, lacked clear focus or tended to offer narratives that didn't make much use of key quotations for AO2 comment, or pause to examine why and how sympathy is created at particular moments in the play.

Twelfth Night

As previously stated, no centres had taught this text for this series, meaning that responses examiners saw were the result of rubric infringements and therefore answered as unseen. This inevitably limited marks to the lower end of Band 2 or below.

The Merchant of Venice

This question worked well across the whole ability range. Most candidates chose to discuss sympathy for Shylock and there was a significant amount of sympathetic understanding towards him. Many candidates argued that his behaviour in the play is to a large extent justified due to mistreatment and anti-Semitism; some felt that his punishment was overly harsh, as the Christians get their justice and their revenge, but Shylock does not. Many discussed the extent to which he ends up unhappy and alone, having lost everything. His loss of identity when he has to convert to Christianity was cited as a key reason for sympathy, as he will no longer fit in with either world. Some candidates selected Antonio as the character with whom they sympathised most, discussing his sadness at the start of the play, and whether his love for Bassanio is the cause of it. They tended to see his key moment of sympathy as when he gives up and accepts death. A minority of candidates discussed sympathy for Morocco, including the racism he faces and the extent to which he is not valued or understood; a few others discussed sympathy (or lack of it) for Bassanio.

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Popular selections for AO2 comment included the language of the trial scene and the extent to which this is a key moment in the play. Many candidates discussed the dehumanising and animalistic language used to describe Shylock, and the slurs and anti-Semitism levelled at him. Many candidates utilised Salanio and Salarino's reporting of his crying in the street over the loss of "his daughter, and his ducats" in Act 2 Scene 8, and Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech was discussed with clear understanding by many. Some thought Jessica's elopement helped to humanise Shylock, viewing him as a protective father who wants to save his daughter from the abuse he suffers from himself. Better responses tended to select from across the whole play, with many of these covered key events involving both Shylock and Antonio, becoming evaluative and exploring the power balance within the play. Weaker responses tended to be narrative, without much attention to AO2 or brief and struggling to select enough moments from the play to discuss. Examiners felt that many responses could have been improved with more incorporation of specific textual detail in order to develop ideas further and provide more material for language analysis.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- Close tracking of a character / relationship / theme across the whole text
- Selection of a range of apt events and specific details to support thoughtful ideas
- Probing of linguistic and structural choices in quotations used to support points
- Some analysis of the writer's intentions when creating characters and plots
- Highlighting of important turning points and key contrasts and their effects
- Careful spelling and punctuation, with vocabulary and sentence structure used to control meaning effectively.

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Tracking a character / relationship / theme across the whole text, with effective coverage of the play
- More focus on including short quotations that can be analysed for AO2; fewer contextual comments
- Practice in creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question posed
- Practice in selecting detailed textual evidence for ideas
- Practice in proof-reading responses to avoid technical errors, such as forgetting use of capital letters for character names, neglecting punctuation and abbreviating character names.

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Anthology Poetry

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Examiners reported that candidates seemed well-prepared for a question on the presentation of nature in Hughes' "Hawk Roosting", and even those working at the lower levels were able to demonstrate some understanding of the poem's central ideas. Some treated the hawk as if it was separate from nature, while more effective responses understood that it was as much part of nature as its surroundings. Candidates tended to begin with the opening line "I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed", recognising that this referred to both its literal position but also its place as an apex predator at the top of the food chain, immediately bringing in a key aspect of context. They went on to explore the hawk's arrogance and how it exemplifies nature's brutality, often selecting key language choices for AO2 comment, with "hooked head and hooked feet", "The convenience of the high trees!", "I kill where I please because it is all mine" and "My manners are tearing off heads" proving popular choices. Many candidates discussed the extent to which the hawk might be seen as an allegory for dictatorship and tyranny, and whilst this was sometimes overstated, it was usually supported well by selecting appropriate details from the poem. Context was often a mixture of relevant information on the natural world (the food chain, natural selection) and biographical information on Hughes, although examiners found that this wasn't always accurate: Hughes was not a fighter pilot or a Romantic poet, for example. AO3 was addressed most effectively when clear links were made between contextual details and the poem itself.
Less effective responses sometimes struggled to keep a clear focus on nature, with power taking over in some cases – though some were able to rescue this with clear discussion of the power of nature. Not addressing AO2 or AO3, as always, was a significant limiting factor for some. Many candidates read "allotment" as meaning a rented piece of land used to grow vegetables rather than an allocation, which led to some interesting interpretations of "the allotment of death". Stronger responses tracked through the whole poem, analysing well-chosen quotations and making clear links to the theme of nature and relevant contextual details, often using tentative language for the latter. Overall, examiners were impressed by how well the poem was handled, both here and in question 72.

72

Engagement with the comparison question this year was better than in previous series: there were fewer unanswered or incomplete 72s, and examiners reported greater knowledge of the chosen poems, stronger language analysis and more sustained comparison than previously seen. Teachers are to be commended on the continued improvement in responses to this most challenging of all the questions on the specification. The most popular choices for comparison were "Death of a Naturalist", "To Autumn", Ozymandias" and "The Prelude", but examiners also saw poems such as "Mametz Wood", "The Soldier" and "As Imperceptibly as Grief" used very successfully. As always, the choice of poem really mattered, with those making their selection clearly based on the theme of nature invariably being more successful than those who did not: candidates that chose "Living Space", for example, no matter how well they knew it, found it very difficult to maintain focus on the question for AO1. For those that invested in a few minutes of planning time, it tended to pay off, as comparisons were often structured more effectively as a result.

"Death of a Naturalist" was handled well across the ability range and provided candidates with the ability to explore different sides of nature. A range of links and contrasts with "Hawk Roosting" were made, for example on the power of nature, the love of nature and the idea of change in nature. Candidates were able to explore and compare aspects of language, whether sensory, violent or childish, and context, often of a biographical nature on Heaney, was generally integrated well. "Ozymandias" comparisons mostly focused on the power of

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nature, though the hawk's self-serving arrogance and resistance to change was also frequently linked to the figure of Ozymandias himself. Some candidates compared Shelley's view of nature as a Romantic with Hughes' realistic presentation of nature's savagery. "To Autumn" enabled candidates to contrast nature's abundance and sensuality with the Hawk's brutal killing, along with the idea of change in nature. Similarly, "The Prelude" encouraged exploration of changes in time and perspective, as well as the love and appreciation of nature's benefits.

Stronger responses featured cross-comparisons between the poems, integrating AO2 comments and AO3 links throughout. Many higher-level responses were able to make comparisons across the AOs, for example in comparing contextual details or imagery, rather than just content and ideas. Less successful answers tried to deal with the poems separately, perhaps, with a brief comparative "hinge" between them – an approach which is inevitably limiting. They were sometimes the result of a poor choice of poem, but more often down to candidates struggling to remember key quotations and specific details from their chosen poem, thereby losing out on support for AO1 and material for AO2 analysis. As always, learning key quotations and contextual details from the comparison poem is key to success.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- Careful tracking of the poem set for 71, with detailed coverage of the whole poem
- Probing of subtext, with tentative interpretation rooted in the poems
- Strong focus on imagery, language and the effects they create
- Interweaving of relevant contextual detail into discussion
- Sensible selection of poem to suit the theme for comparison in 72
- Probing of linguistic and structural choices in quotations used to support points
- Detailed, developed comparison of ideas, language and context in 72.

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- More detailed coverage of the whole poem set in 71
- Practice in supporting ideas with detailed reference to the poems
- Selection of an appropriate poem for comparison, with a strong focus on the theme of the question
- Effective revision of anthology poems to ensure the ability to recall key quotations and make good use of textual detail
- Practising a structured approach to comparison, ensuring effective coverage of both poems and detailed comparative comments in 72
- Incorporation of relevant contextual detail to support overall discussion in both 71 and 72.

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCSE

Summer 2026

Component 2: Post-1914 Prose/Drama, 19th Century Prose and Unseen Poetry

Overview of the Component

This component assesses AO1, AO2 in all sections. AO3 is assessed in Section B only. AO4 is assessed in Section A only.

In Section A, candidates were assessed on one of the following post-1914 prose/drama texts: *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding; *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal; *Boys Don't Cry* by Malorie Blackman; *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill; *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (drama) by Simon Stephens; *Leave Taking* by Winsome Pinnock; *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley; *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett; or *Blood Brothers* by Willy Russell.

In Section B, candidates were assessed on one of the following 19th century prose texts: *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens; *Silas Marner* by George Eliot; *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells; *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen; *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë; or *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

In both these sections, candidates were assessed on their knowledge and understanding of aspects of plot, characterisation, events and key themes as well as their evaluation and analysis of how language, structure and form are used by the writer to create meanings and effects. In Section A, candidates were assessed on the accuracy and range of their vocabulary, sentence structures, spelling and punctuation. In Section B, candidates were assessed on their understanding of the various contexts of the text.

In Section C, candidates were assessed on AO1 and AO2, and their consolidation of skills developed across the specification, in a comparison of two unseen poems: *River Swimming* by Owen Sheers and *Draped With Water* by James Berry.

The most popular Section A text continues to be *An Inspector Calls* with significant numbers electing to study *Lord of the Flies* and *Blood Brothers*. All the other texts were studied by sizeable minorities of candidates.

The most studied text on Section B continues to be *A Christmas Carol,* with *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* also popular. All the other texts in this section were answered by a significant number of candidates.

The paper contained a range of character and theme questions across Sections A and B. As intended, the resource-based essay format was again successful in offering support in the closed book, untiered exam. The questions worked across all texts for all abilities and the full range of responses were seen.

The two linked poems on this untiered paper, *River Swimming* by Owen Sheers and *Draped With Water* by James Berry, were well received and the pairing was extremely successful. The subject matter of swimming was familiar to the candidates and allowed the vast majority to engage on some level, with plenty of opportunities to stretch all abilities when discussing AO1 and AO2.

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Across all questions, there seemed to be nothing in the performance of candidates to suggest that this component was more or less accessible than previous years.

Generally, in both Section A and Section B, most candidates were able to show their knowledge of key characters and their development throughout the texts. Events and details of chosen texts were referenced in varying detail and accuracy.

In all sections, the majority of candidates were also able to demonstrate some good AO2 analysis and evaluation skills with relevant subject terminology. Centres appear to have continued to respond positively to ongoing professional learning advice as there was again less emphasis on feature spotting and forced subject terminology than previous years. This helped the fluency of responses. More able pupils demonstrated exceptional AO2 analysis across all texts, striking the right balance of exploring the closer impact of key words, techniques and images, where relevant to the question.

Although context was not explicitly assessed in Section A of the paper, many candidates used it relevantly as part of discussion of the focus of the question, for example, Priestley's perceived Socialist motives in writing *An Inspector Calls*; Hill's use of Victorian Gothic pastiche in *The Woman in Black*; or experiences of the Windrush generation in *Leave Taking*.

In Section B, where context is explicitly assessed, it was generally well integrated and the majority of candidates avoided the 'bolted on' approach, though there were, of course, exceptions.

In Section C, understanding of the first poem was generally sound across both poems, with many confident and assured responses to both poems. In Question 3.2, most candidates took time to explore the second poem before comparing with the first, which has been a steadily improving trend since the early days of the specification.

This year, more candidates seemed to have missed the statement in the question which gives an overview of what the poems are about at a surface level. This meant that there was a slight increase in forced, often implausible interpretations of what the poems might have been about.

Overall, candidates gave every impression of having enjoyed writing about the poems and levels of engagement were very high.

The vast majority of candidates used the extract within their essays. Many candidates dealt with the extract and then moved on to discuss the text as a whole, while others took a linear approach and discussed the extracts at appropriate points in their essays (for example, many candidates dealt with the *An Inspector Calls* extract towards the end of their essays as the extract was taken from towards the end of the text). A minority took a more integrated approach by dipping in and out of the extract to make links across the whole text. All approaches are valid and effective.

Pleasingly, following previous reports and professional learning advice, most candidates now avoid spending too much of their time focusing on the given extract and allow themselves more time to demonstrate their knowledge of the wider text.

In Section C, most candidates used an integrated approach to question 3.2, with some discussing the second poem first then making comparative or linking points.

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Characteristics of good responses:

In Sections A and B:

- using the extract purposefully, at a relevant point in the essay, to support wider discussion of the text and to provide useful AO2 comments
- keeping a sustained focus on the question through reference to a range of relevant points across the wider text, with a focus on well-chosen key events or scenes, significant characters/relationships to link to the question and wider themes
- supporting discussion with direct textual references showing good coverage of the text (referencing events spanning the beginning, middle and ending of the story)
- clear planning and progression of the response, with 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
- relevant and clear appreciation of how contextual factors influence characters and themes, particularly in Section B
- suitable analytical style of writing.

In Section C:

- providing a thorough analysis of the first poem in 3.1
- providing a thorough analysis of the second poem in 3.2, either as a discrete element or as part of the comparison
- recognising the stated overview of the poems (underneath the question)
- clearly comparing ideas, mood and imagery and in some cases writers' intent
- discussing and referencing how the poets use language
- making detailed selections from each poem with supporting comments exploring the meaning and effects of these selections.

Areas for improvement:

In Sections A and B, candidates should:

- pay attention to the bullet points built into the start of every question and use them to shape responses
- be selective in their use of the extract to demonstrate their AO2 skills
- provide more detailed coverage of the extract and wider text, including the beginning, middle and end
- avoid 'over analysis' of vocabulary, for example, by repeatedly labelling or naming every word class
- make sure contextual details are relevant to the question and closely tied to discussion of the characters, events and details
- learn key spellings such as character names and authors, as well as key words associated with each text
- plan where coverage of the extract will be best placed in the essay

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- avoid unfocused narrative and retelling of the story
- adhere to the rubric requirements of the paper to ensure that candidates are only answering questions on the texts that they have studied
- avoid reference to plays and films when discussing prose texts
- practise and develop an analytical style of essay writing
- make sure responses are legible.

In Sections C, candidates should:

- use the format of the paper to aid their understanding and responses to both questions
- ensure that the first poem is adequately analysed in 3.1
- ensure that the second poem is adequately analysed in depth in 3.2
- 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
- rehearse timings across the exam to ensure sufficient time is given to the poetry
- make sure a range of comparative points are made in 3.2
- make sure responses are legible.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Section A – Post-1914 Prose/Drama

Lord of the Flies

The question proved to be very accessible, with most candidates discussing with confidence the struggle for power and control in terms of Jack and Ralph's relationship.

The placing of the extract by some candidates was not always accurate: they tended to be unsure if the fight in the extract was the one after the fire went out and the ship passed them by, or the one after the discovery of the beast. However, this was generally a minor issue as the points made were relevant even when errors in the timeline occurred. Many candidates took the opportunity to comment on the symbolism of the conch; Golding's use of dialogue in the extract to build tension; and many candidates picked up AO2 credit by exploring the repeated use of questions in the extract as a way of gaining control on the island. Some lovely ideas included, 'the more Ralph insists on the rules, the more the boys slip away' and 'Jack is trying to build a new home while Ralph is trying to keep the old one'.

In the wider text, most candidates sensibly chose to focus on the growing struggle between Jack and Ralph in regard to their priorities and decision-making. This often widened and developed into discussion of conflicting attitudes and beliefs, settings and ideologies. The very best discussed key events from the whole novel and often included the election of chief; finding the conch; the assemblies; the killing of the pig; Piggy's death and the acceptance of responsibility at the end of the novel.

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Anita and Me

It was very pleasing to see the continued uptake of *Anita and Me* by centres with many candidates producing engaged, sustained and knowledgeable responses. Most made excellent use of the extract to explore Nanima's role as a grandparent, focusing on her joyful personality, mischievous nature and the positive influence she has on Meena.

Candidates frequently analysed Syal's language choices, particularly the significance of the word "Junglee" and the contrasting interpretations offered by Meena's father and Nanima. There was also a great deal of effective AO2, with candidates exploring the sensory imagery, with many commenting on the novel's olfactory descriptions, as well as the dialogue, shifts in tone and differences in language between speakers, explaining perceptively how these shaped meaning.

The strongest responses confidently used the wider text to demonstrate Nanima's pivotal role in Meena's development. Many argued that Nanima acts as a bridge to Meena's history, traditions and cultural heritage, identifying her arrival as a key turning point in Meena's maturity and acceptance of her dual identity. Candidates often contrasted Nanima's influence with Anita's, producing valid and insightful comparisons, while also tracing Meena's earlier desire to become a "Tollington wench" before ultimately embracing her dual heritage. The highest-scoring responses demonstrated comprehensive textual knowledge, selecting apt quotations to support their arguments. Key discriminators at the top end included discussion of how Nanima reshapes Meena's perceptions of Anita and Sam, alongside thoughtful consideration of Robert and the significance of the hospital experience in Meena's emotional growth.

Boys Don't Cry

This relatively new text is working well for a growing number of centres and the full range of candidates across the entire ability range. The question, how Dante is presented in the novel, provided candidates with an open opportunity to discuss any aspects of the main character.

Many candidates sensibly used the extract as a starting point for their exploration of the character, coming as it did, from the very beginning of the novel. There was widespread recognition of Dante's ambition and future plans at this point, with most candidates then going on to explore how Emma's arrival completely upends Dante's agency.

From the wider text, there was much discussion of Dante's attitudes towards Emma, and how he dehumanises her by using the pronoun 'it'. Many extended this to explore the various turning points in the novel, including Dante defending his daughter at Bar Belle. Many candidates explored structure by contrasting Dante's attitudes at the beginning and end of the novel. Whilst nearly all candidates understandably focussed on Dante's attitudes and changing relationship with Emma, many more widened out the focus to include other characters like Adam, Josh, Tyler and Aunt Jackie. There was much relevant discussion on toxic masculinity, the meaning of the title, and how society perceives single parents.

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The Woman in Black

The question asked candidates to explore important turning points for Arthur Kipps in the novel. Many candidates chose to discuss Kipps's discoveries about Alice Drablow and well-chosen moments often included discussion of his discoveries and ghostly experiences at Eel Marsh House, his realisation about the truth of the phantom pony and trap, and the deaths of Stella and Joseph at the end of the novel. The roles played by a variety of characters such as Bentley, Jerome, Daily, Spider and the woman in black herself, were well discussed in terms of how they contributed to turning points in Kipps's account and how they shaped his character.

Most candidates showed good understanding of Hill's techniques, and frequent AO2 comments included her use of first-person, use of aural imagery and discussion of the structure of the novel. Key concepts such as the conspiracy of silence, the use of setting in the novel and first-person narrative were often explored well.

Film references continue to be a particular issue for a significant minority of candidates on this text, especially as they often deviate dramatically from the events of the novel. More selective use of the film version as a teaching aid is advisable.

Oranges are not the Only Fruit

The question gave candidates an open invitation to explore any aspect of times that Jeanette is treated unfairly in the novel. There was much discussion of Jeanette's early life with her mother, Mrs Winterson, and her parent's binary viewpoint. Mature responses often linked this to Jeanette's development and how she comes to realise the unfairness of these attitudes and treatment towards Jeanette's 'otherness' or 'queerness'. Jeanette's relationships with her biological mother, Melanie, Katy, Elsie and the church were often explored thoughtfully with often perceptive discussion of the complicated nature of love and human relationships on display in the novel.

In terms of AO2, many candidates referenced the significance of oranges as a motif for Jeanette's unfair treatment. It was also pleasing to note that there continues to be a growing frequency of purposeful references to the text's mythic, fairy tale and biblical elements. Comments on the allegorical nature of these elements tended to be signifiers of candidates achieving marks in the higher bands. Also, discussion on the use of humour in the novel continues to develop, particularly amongst candidates working at the higher levels.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

The question on lies and deception was very successful in providing the opportunity for some thoughtful, perceptive and heartfelt responses from candidates. It enabled many to evaluate whether Ed can be forgiven for misleading Christopher, the damage caused to Christopher's relationship with his parents, and the challenges involved in raising a child with autism.

Many candidates commented successfully on the extract, in particular the confusion Christopher experiences when he reads the letter and his listing of the known facts afterwards in an attempt to rationalise this confusion.

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Candidates who study this play really seem to engage and connect with it, and answers don't tend to contain the 'bolted on' context (not assessed) that some of the other text choices in Section A seem to attract. However, there were a significant number of weaker responses where candidates either copied the extract completely or copied large chunks of the extract without making any comment.

Leave Taking

This was the second year that this text had been examined and it again proved very successful, working well for the full range of candidates across the ability range. The question, on the relationship between Del and Enid, provided candidates with an opportunity to discuss the characters' backgrounds, interactions and connections to the play's themes.

There were some impressive responses that dealt with the cultural and societal challenges Enid and Del face with sensitivity and great understanding, attempting to unpick the reasons behind the characters' fragile relationship. Many of these discussed the characters' differing attitudes to racism, physical abuse and generational attitudes to their heritage.

In the wider text, many candidates discussed Enid's reaction to Del's pregnancy. The moment Enid slaps Del was much discussed. Some candidates compared the relationship to Enid's relationship with Viv and this was a valid approach. The end of the text and the partial reconciliation between Enid and Del was also a rich seam of discussion.

Occasionally, candidates spent too long on the extract, dealing with it thoughtfully, but then only picking out a couple of other moments in the wider play to discuss. This is obviously self-penalising and something to be avoided.

An Inspector Calls

An Inspector Calls continues to remain the most popular of the Section A texts by a considerable margin. The play gave candidates an open opportunity to select any of the relationships within the Birling family and this proved to be very accessible to the vast majority candidates, across the ability range, who were able to engage with the extract and demonstrate secure knowledge of the wider text.

A wide range of valid approaches was evident. Understandably, many candidates focused on the relationships between Mr Birling and one or both of his children, using these to explore the generational divide. Others adopted a broader approach, examining several relationships across the play. Some candidates concentrated on a single character, most commonly Sheila, and analysed their relationships with others. All approaches were valid, but the strongest responses maintained a clear focus on the question, whereas weaker responses sometimes relied on narrative retelling or attempted to reshape prepared essays on responsibility to fit the task.

The extract provided an effective starting point for most candidates. Many explored the tension between Eric and his father, Sheila's willingness to accept responsibility, and the contrasting reactions of the older and younger generations. More successful responses analysed the dialogue alongside the stage directions, often commenting on Eric's unease, the characters' positioning on stage and Priestley's dramatic methods. Some candidates moved confidently between the extract and the wider play, selecting evidence to support a sustained argument, while weaker candidates often relied heavily on the extract or, conversely, made only limited reference to it. A minority treated the extract as an isolated passage without considering its place within the wider dramatic structure.

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In the wider text, Eric's isolation on stage was frequently interpreted as symbolic of his emotional distance from the rest of the family. There was also thoughtful discussion of Sheila's development, particularly her changing relationship with her parents and Gerald. Some perceptive responses considered her refusal to immediately accept Gerald's engagement ring at the end of the play, recognising that 'No, not yet. It's too soon. I must think' is not an outright rejection but suggests a more complex and uncertain future. Stronger candidates were also able to explore how relationships were shaped by class, gender and power, considering the impact of capitalism and patriarchy alongside Priestley's socialist message. On that note, this illustrates that while context is not explicitly rewarded in Section A of this component, it understandably has an integral part to play in the teaching of this text. However, some responses focused so heavily on responsibility or political ideas that the central focus on relationships became less secure. Narrative responses remained evident, particularly where candidates recounted each character's involvement with Eva Smith instead of analysing the relationships required by the question.

AO4 continues to be assessed in this question. As in previous years, there were frequent variations in the spelling of key names, particularly Priestley, Sheila and Birling, alongside inconsistent use of capital letters for proper nouns. Handwriting and proofreading also presented difficulties in some scripts.

Overall, the vast majority of candidates demonstrated a secure knowledge of the text and responded confidently to a question that allowed for a wide range of thoughtful and rewarding interpretations.

The History Boys

The majority of candidates were extremely well prepared for the set question on the presentation of Posner in the play. Responses were mainly sophisticated, detailed, analytical and frequently original. Evidently, *The History Boys* continues to be a text that is well chosen by centres who know their candidates' ability to respond sensitively to its humour, themes and messages about the human condition.

Candidates found Posner to be a highly sympathetic character, writing sensitively about his unrequited love for Dakin, his feelings of rejection by the other boys, and his wider sense of alienation from both society and his peers. Many also explored his love of learning as a source of both comfort and isolation. The extract was frequently used as a starting point for discussion of Posner's admiration for Hector and his distrust of Irwin, particularly his resentment at the way Irwin exploits him.

Candidates supported their arguments with a wide range of textual evidence to demonstrate Posner's status as an outsider. Common references included his description as "dictionary boy", discussion of whether his definition of "otiose" reflects his own sense of redundancy, his exclusion from the boys' more adult conversations, his failure to "fit the bill" for pillion duty, and his assignment to the female role in *La Maison de Passe*. These examples were generally treated with maturity and used effectively to reinforce his marginalisation.

Many responses also demonstrated strong awareness of the play's dramatic methods. It was rare not to see discussion of the non-linear structure, the use of prolepsis, the breaking of the fourth wall, and Lintott's account of Posner's future. Candidates often analysed Posner's appearance as "Man" in the interview with Irwin, including his choice to call himself David, as a means of exploring questions of identity. This frequently led into discussion of his poignant admission, "I'm small… I'm fucked", which many interpreted as encapsulating his profound sense of inadequacy and alienation.

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Pleasingly, there was a noticeable reduction in references to the excellent but different film adaptation, compared to previous years, with very few commenting on things that don't happen in the play.

Blood Brothers

The question worked extremely well across the full range of abilities. The vast majority of candidates had a very good knowledge of the play as a whole. Inevitably, weaker students often relied on the extract, making only generalised references to the wider play, or occasionally no wider detail at all.

The extract was clearly very familiar and was a useful starting point for the majority, especially given where it occurs in the play. The chronological approach to the friendship of Mickey, Eddie and Linda was the most popular way to deal with the question although this did sometimes result in some very lengthy responses which drifted into a narrative approach or didn't quite reach the play's final moments.
Many started with the "friendship" between the two mothers, and this was valid, often leading to thoughtful discussion about friendship, class and whether they were ever really friends.

Linda's motherliness in comforting Mickey in the extract fed nicely into the idea of her becoming a mother later in the play and her protective nature towards Mickey throughout his life. Discussion of how she understands his character, their shared background, and her ability to use humour to lighten his mood were also well-handled. The motif of the gun, Eddie's defiance of his mother's rules, the significance of the "gang" all contributed to the most confident treatments.

Many candidates used the theme to explore Mickey and Edward's friendship and took the opportunity to explore the inequality between social classes. Context is not explicitly rewarded in Section A, but some stronger candidates dealt with this efficiently, mentioning class, poverty, and nature versus nurture to support points they were making about the boys' friendship. Occasionally, less successful candidates displayed an over-reliance on context and sweeping generalisations regarding the rich and poor, but these were reduced compared to previous years.

In terms of AO4, missing capitalisation of the play and the characters' names was also frequent. As always, there were many variations of the spellings of "Johnstone" and "Russell".

Summary of key points

Characteristics of a good Section A response:

- use the extract purposefully, highlighting key details that help focus on the question and provide useful AO2 comments
- use the extract as a springboard into a wider discussion of the text
- focus on well-chosen key events or scenes, significant characters/relationships to link to the question and wider themes
- have a sustained focus and direct textual references with good coverage of the text (referencing events spanning the beginning, middle and ending of the story)
- clear planning and progression of the response, with development of ideas and supporting references, rather than assertions and general impressions.

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Ways in which performance can be improved:

- remind candidates of the bullet points built into the start of every question and use them to shape responses
- encourage candidates to be selective in their use of the extract to demonstrate their AO2 skills. There is no requirement on Component 2 to analyse the extract in detail. Instead, use the extract as a springboard for a wider discussion, with a few key words or images explored that can then be broadened out to show knowledge and understanding of the whole text
- avoid 'over analysis' of vocabulary, for example, 'Gerald and Sheila have an engagement party. The adjective 'engagement' suggests they are getting married'
- avoid repeatedly labelling or naming every word class. Be selective. Also, avoid forcing techniques and subject terminology into their responses to the extract – either incorrectly or very tenuously, for example, 'the use of a descending tricolon causes conflict between the boys'
- similarly, avoid focus on analysis of sentence length, punctuation features or more non-fiction rhetorical devices, which again, can be an unproductive use of the extract. It also would be better to avoid unnecessary terms such as semantic fields or lexical sets and replace with simple reference to 'words' or 'phrases'
- plans containing points to cover and some key words are helpful and can be practised as part of examination preparation. However, full pages of quotes written down before the question often lead to shorter responses and should be discouraged
- contextual details should only really be included in Section A if relevant to the question and then still need to be closely tied to discussion of the characters, events and details. For example, Priestley's intentions in writing *An Inspector Calls* still needed to be closely tied to discussion of the play. Too often, context is confused and very general (for example, 'in the 1960s all women stayed at home having babies and were housewives'). These are not particularly helpful, relevant or accurate
- encourage pupils to learn key spellings such as character names and authors, as well as key words associated with each text and so likely to be employed
- proof-read responses to Section A to eradicate simple errors such as capital letters or missing apostrophes and avoid combined words such as "alot" and the increasingly prevalent "eachother"
- responses must be legible.

Section B - 19th Century Prose

A Christmas Carol

The theme of sadness and suffering allowed candidates to demonstrate secure knowledge of the novella and most were able to select appropriate material from across the text. Popular areas of discussion included Scrooge's lonely childhood, his relationship with Belle, the suffering experienced by the Cratchit family, the presentation of Ignorance and Want and the death of Tiny Tim. Many candidates tracked Scrooge's development through the novella and explored how exposure to suffering contributes to his redemption.

The extract provided opportunities for discussion of Dickens' presentation of Ignorance and Want, and many candidates explored the significance of the Spirit repeating Scrooge's earlier comments about prisons and workhouses. More successful responses used this to discuss Dickens' criticism of contemporary attitudes towards poverty.

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AO2 was generally strongest when candidates focused on Dickens' methods and analysed the effects of language and imagery. Less successful responses relied on extensive quotation and narrative retelling. In some cases, candidates demonstrated secure knowledge of events but offered limited analysis of how Dickens presents ideas within the novella.

Contextual understanding was often secure. References to Malthusian ideas, the Poor Laws and Dickens' own experiences were frequently used. The most successful responses integrated contextual material into discussion of the text. Less successful responses sometimes included contextual information which was not closely connected to the focus of the question.

A recurring misconception was the belief that Belle was Scrooge's wife or ex-wife rather than his former fiancée. There were also occasional responses which appeared to rely on film adaptations rather than the details of the novella itself.

Silas Marner

The theme of loss enabled candidates to discuss a variety of events and experiences from across the novel.

Many candidates explored the loss of faith, friendship and community experienced by Silas before discussing the theft of his gold. More successful responses demonstrated an understanding of how Eliot presents loss as part of a wider process of growth and renewal. The extract offered opportunities for discussion of Eliot's presentation of loneliness and emotional devastation. Stronger responses analysed the imagery of emptiness and isolation and considered the significance of Silas' attachment to his gold.

The best responses explored the contrast between Silas' relationship with his gold and his later relationship with Eppie. Less successful responses tended to focus on narrative detail and were less confident when analysing Eliot's methods.

The War of the Worlds

The focus on the impact of war allowed candidates to draw on a wide range of events and characters from the novel.

Many candidates discussed the fear, panic and suffering caused by the Martian invasion. Responses frequently considered the experiences of ordinary civilians and explored the collapse of social order as the invasion progresses.

The extract encouraged discussion of fear and desperation, and many candidates commented effectively on Wells' presentation of the fleeing crowds. Better responses moved beyond the immediate events of the extract and considered the wider consequences of the invasion.

Contextual discussion was often a strength. Candidates frequently referred to imperialism, colonisation, Darwinism and contemporary concerns regarding scientific progress. The most successful responses linked these contextual ideas closely to Wells' wider concerns and messages.

A common weakness was limited discussion of the novel's conclusion. Less successful responses focused heavily on the invasion itself and did not fully consider Wells' final reflections.

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Pride and Prejudice

Most candidates responded confidently to the theme of pride and selected examples from across the novel.

Many responses focused on Darcy's pride and personal development, while others explored the pride displayed by Elizabeth, Lady Catherine, Mr Collins and Wickham. More successful responses recognised that Austen presents pride in a variety of ways and does not always present it as entirely negative.

The extract enabled candidates to discuss Darcy's growing self-awareness and humility. Better responses used the extract as a starting point before exploring how attitudes and relationships develop elsewhere in the novel.

Context was often woven successfully into discussion of social status, marriage and reputation. Less successful responses sometimes focused exclusively on Darcy and did not consider the wider presentation of pride across the novel.

Jane Eyre

The theme of rejection proved accessible and produced many thoughtful responses. Candidates frequently discussed Jane's experiences at Gateshead and Lowood before exploring her relationships with Rochester and St John Rivers. The strongest responses tracked Jane's experiences throughout the novel and explored how rejection contributes to her independence and development.

Many candidates responded well to the extract and analysed the tension between Jane and St John. More successful responses explored both the emotional and ideological aspects of rejection presented in the passage.

A common weakness was excessive focus on the extract at the expense of the wider novel. Some responses demonstrated detailed knowledge of the passage but lacked sufficient coverage of Jane's experiences elsewhere in the text.

Contextual discussion was generally secure, although some responses introduced feminist ideas without fully linking them to the specific focus of the question.

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

The focus on secrets generated some of the strongest responses in Section B. Many candidates discussed Jekyll's experiments, Hyde's identity, Lanyon's discoveries and Utterson's investigations. The question encouraged candidates to range widely across the novella and move beyond a small number of frequently used episodes and quotations.

The extract provided opportunities to discuss the impact of secrecy on both Lanyon and Utterson. Stronger responses explored Stevenson's use of mystery and suspense and examined how secrets influence relationships throughout the novella.

Context was frequently integrated effectively. Discussions of Victorian reputation, respectability, science and duality were often used to support analysis of the text.

A recurring misconception was confusion between the roles of Lanyon and Utterson. Less successful responses occasionally demonstrated uncertainty regarding the events surrounding Lanyon's decline.

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Summary of Key Points

Characteristics of strong Section B responses:

- clear and sustained focus on the question throughout the response, with discussion closely linked to the chosen theme or character
- purposeful use of the extract at an appropriate point in the essay to support discussion of the wider text
- secure knowledge of the whole text, demonstrated through coverage of the beginning, middle and end of the novel
- well-chosen textual references and quotations used to support interpretation and argument
- close analysis of language, imagery, methods and structural features, with comments focused on meanings and effects rather than simple feature identification
- exploration of implicit meanings, alternative interpretations and writer's intentions
- relevant and integrated discussion of context, linked directly to characters, themes, events and authorial concerns
- a coherent, analytical style of writing, developing a clear line of argument across the response.

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- plan where use of the extract will be most effective within the essay rather than treating it as a separate exercise
- ensure discussion covers a broad range of relevant material from across the whole text, including key events, developments and the ending
- use more precise supporting references rather than relying on general narrative summary or broad assertions
- avoid excessive retelling of the plot at the expense of analysis and evaluation.
- develop confidence when exploring subtext, inference and the significance of events and relationships
- create clearer, more cohesive arguments which remain focused on the wording of the question throughout
- integrate contextual discussion naturally into analysis of the text rather than using contextual 'bolt-ons' or stand-alone paragraphs
- avoid relying on film adaptations or details not found in the text itself
- continue to develop an analytical writing style, focusing on how writers present ideas rather than simply what happens
- ensure responses are legible and clearly organised.

Section C - Unseen Poetry

Question 31: *River Swimming*

Most candidates engaged positively with the poem and demonstrated a secure understanding of its presentation of swimming and immersion in the natural world. Many explored the sensory experiences presented by the speaker and commented successfully on images such as the "black dress", "nothingness of its depth", the fish imagery and the "liquid sun". Better responses focused closely on language and explored the effects created by individual words and images.

Stronger responses considered ideas of freedom, risk, enjoyment and connection with nature. They supported interpretations through detailed reference to the poem and developed their points effectively.

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A significant number of less successful responses imposed meanings which were not securely supported by the poem. Common interpretations included death, funerals, mourning, depression, mental illness, abusive relationships, relationship breakdown, pollution, drowning and a variety of symbolic readings which overlooked the explicit focus on swimming established by both the title and introductory statement. In these responses, evidence was often selected to support a predetermined interpretation rather than allowing interpretation to emerge naturally from the text.

The image of the “black dress” generated particularly varied responses. While many candidates explored ideas of elegance, beauty and immersion within nature, others interpreted it exclusively as funeral attire and subsequently attempted to sustain a reading centred on death throughout the remainder of the poem. Similarly, “slip” was sometimes interpreted as an accidental fall leading to danger or drowning rather than as a suggestion of ease and fluid movement. Interpretations of “taking the air” occasionally led candidates towards unsupported discussions of drowning or a final breath.

Discussion of structure was generally less successful than discussion of language and imagery. The strongest responses remained closely rooted in the language of the poem and the experience of swimming described by the speaker.

Question 32: Comparison of *River Swimming* and *Draped With Water*

Most candidates were able to identify a range of similarities and differences between the poems.

Successful responses focused on the different experiences of swimming presented by the two poets. Many compared the calm and reflective nature of *River Swimming* with the more energetic and confident voice of *Draped With Water*. Candidates frequently explored the differences between “slip” and “launches”, as well as the contrasting presentations of movement, confidence and physicality.

Many candidates compared the use of clothing imagery, animal imagery and references to nature. Better responses explored these comparisons in detail and supported their ideas with evidence from both poems. Comparisons between the “black dress” and the “water-dress” often provided opportunities for thoughtful discussion of the swimmers’ immersion in, and connection with, the natural world.

Some candidates relied heavily on material from Question 31, with a significant number of typed responses including copied-and-pasted comments from their earlier answer. This should be avoided. In some cases, candidates reproduced large sections of their response to Question 31 before adding comments on the second poem, resulting in a largely sequential approach rather than a comparative one. Consequently, opportunities for sustained and perceptive comparison between the two poems were often missed.

A number of candidates who had adopted highly speculative interpretations in Question 31 were able to modify these when moving into the comparison. Others continued to pursue increasingly complex symbolic readings, including interpretations involving journeys to the underworld, portals to other dimensions, drug-induced hallucinations, sexual awakening, loss of a loved one or broader psychological allegories. Such approaches were rarely as successful as those rooted securely in the language and experiences presented by the poems themselves.

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As in previous years, some candidates devoted significant attention to identifying rhyme schemes, stanza lengths, enjambment and caesura. However, these features were often labelled rather than explored meaningfully, with limited discussion of the effects created by the techniques or their contribution to the poem's meaning and impact. As a result, analysis frequently remained descriptive rather than evaluative. The strongest responses tended to focus instead on language, imagery and the ways in which the poets present their ideas and experiences. Candidates who explored differences in vocabulary, tone, perspective and movement generally produced more convincing comparisons than those who relied heavily on structural terminology alone.

Summary of Key Points

Characteristics of strong poetry responses:

- a thorough and focused exploration of the first poem in Question 3.1
- a detailed exploration of the second poem in Question 3.2, either as a separate discussion or as part of a sustained comparison
- recognition of the guidance statement beneath the question and secure understanding of the poems' surface meanings before exploring deeper ideas
- close analysis of language, imagery, tone and voice, supported by carefully selected textual references
- interpretations rooted firmly in the words and experiences presented in the poems
- meaningful discussion of the effects created by particular words, phrases and images
- sustained and purposeful comparison in Question 3.2, exploring similarities and differences in ideas, experiences, mood, imagery and methods
- thoughtful engagement with both poems, showing understanding of the poets' presentation of ideas and experiences.

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- use the statement beneath the questions as a starting point for understanding the poems and their subject matter
- ensure adequate time is devoted to both questions, particularly the comparison in Question 3.2
- analyse both poems in sufficient depth and avoid giving disproportionate attention to only one poem
- avoid feature spotting, technique labelling and identification of structural features without discussion of meaning or effect
- focus less on naming techniques and more on explaining how language and imagery contribute to the poet's ideas
- avoid unsupported or overly speculative interpretations that are not securely rooted in the text
- develop analysis of imagery, figurative language, tone and perspective through close reference to the poems
- ensure comparison is sustained throughout Question 3.2 rather than treating the poems separately
- make a wider range of comparative points about ideas, experiences, language and presentation
- ensure responses are legible and clearly organised.

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