

GCE



Chief Examiner's Report
English Literature

Summer Series 2017



Foreword

This booklet outlines the performance of candidates in all aspects of CCEA's General Certificate of Education (GCE) in English Literature for this series.

CCEA hopes that the Chief Examiner's and/or Principal Moderator's report(s) will be viewed as a helpful and constructive medium to further support teachers and the learning process.

This booklet forms part of the suite of support materials for the specification. Further materials are available from the specification's microsite on our website at www.ccea.org.uk.

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GCE English Literature

Chief Examiner Report

Assessment Unit AS 1 The Study of Poetry 1900-Present and Drama 1900-Present

Section A: The Study of Poetry 1900-Present

With the advent of a new specification, it is inevitable that opportunities will arise and challenges be faced. Among this season's candidature, those who were successful embraced the new pairings of poets, made effective use of contextual knowledge, demonstrated skills in critical analysis and kept the question's key terms always in focus. Less successful candidates struggled with prescribed pairs of poems (perhaps suggesting incomplete preparation), and/or with integrating AO2 into their responses in a meaningful fashion; many resorted to narration and description; many struggled to keep the key terms of the question to the forefront of their responses, and often synonymic variations were presented which eroded the original key terms.

Examiners considered this paper to have been appropriate, both in enabling the candidature "to showcase their knowledge and critical skills" and in discriminating between candidates' abilities. Candidates were judged able to engage with the questions set and examiners reported that the language of the examination was "easily accessible" and that a "fair opportunity for pupils" was presented.

With the inclusion of a new Assessment Objective on context included in this module, many candidates seemed to view this as an opportunity to legitimise the offloading of large quantities of biographical or other contextual material. With this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify the expectations surrounding AO3 in this unit. AO3 is at its best when judiciously used to the benefit of the point being made. A light touch of biographical material is all that is required to illuminate a candidate's point. At no point is there reason for lengthy contextual recounting. Candidates should be repeatedly reminded that the driving objective for this component is the analysis of poetic methods (AO2) and that a simple discharging of contextual information (AO3) will be unlikely to reach a grading above "broad and general".

Furthermore, the appearance of "ghost questions" from previously-written essays, frequently coupled with resonances of the previous specification, appeared often; teachers should emphasise to students the folly of attempting to shoehorn a pre-determined plan or previously written essay to suit key terms which are not identical to those of the question set.

Similarly, as often noted in the previous specification, the tendency to diminish this component to a methods-spotting practice is still conspicuous. I would encourage teachers to focus on their pupils becoming accomplished in handling a selection of the important critical terms with the aim of producing quality linkages between the identified method and the key term in question. Pupils should be discouraged from simply "tagging on" the question's key terms in the erroneous belief that this creates a viable point. Equally, the importation of a lexis from what seems to be GCSE English Language is still to the fore. Thus, the overplaying of the poetic impact of pronouns (e.g. "the first-person pronoun "I" shows the love involved in being a parent"), or the analysis of poetic intent in terms of unqualified, elemental language such as verbs, adjectives etc. should, unless there is potential for a substantial point to be made, be avoided.

I would also like to take this opportunity to restate some of the advice given previously regarding the effective use of quotations. This is not a “closed book” situation, and it is expected at AS level that pupils are aware of the requirement to offer an exemplifying quotation in its entirety when evidencing figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, enjambment or caesura. Too often a lack of true understanding of the effect of the noted figure of speech is demonstrated by an ineffectually quoted example. Thus, exemplification of a simile must include the elements under the comparison linked by “like” or “as”, of a metaphor must represent the association being made, enjambment must demonstrate the run-on line and caesura must exemplify effect by quoting before and after the caesural mark.

Furthermore, the referencing of versification needs to be handled in a more considered fashion. There seems to be an ongoing problem with the distinctions between poetic forms - the stylistic traits of, among others, lyric, sonnet, blank verse and free verse are frequently misunderstood. Often form and structure are explored in isolation and alienated from the question with no genuine discussion of authorial choice or effect. Equally often, spurious claims are made for the “shape” the lines of a poem make (often when turned sideways) or unconvincing linkages between the form/structure and the key terms are hypothesised.

Frost and Heaney

This proved the most popular pairing of poets and the question on “farm work” was generally fairly well handled. In many cases quality teaching was evidenced, with candidates demonstrating good knowledge of the poems and a sound ability to locate methods and provide meaningful analysis. That said, there were many cases of confusion about whether the baler was a person or a machine and Frost’s personification of his speaker’s “whispering scythe” was often handled with little subtlety. Similarly, there was much misunderstanding surrounding Derek Hill’s role, both contextually and symbolically. It is worthy of note that this pairing of poets seemed often to promote an overly obscure usage of AO2. This rarely enabled the candidate, and half-digested terms such as “anadiplosis” serve only as a useful reminder to teachers of the necessity to ensure that pupils are confidently armed with a working critical vocabulary which is fit for purpose at this level.

Hughes and Plath

Although the question on “being a parent” seemed straightforward, responses to Hughes/Plath often fell foul of ambiguous assertion based around context. Many of the readings of the poems, “The Night Dances” in particular, generated outlandish claims for both meaning and the effects of methods. While it may be allowed that the nature of confessional poetry encourages individual, subjective interpretations, this is dangerous territory. Students could be more beneficially taught that, though there is no simple, definitive reading of Plath’s poetry, any interpretation must be firmly based in the text and that readings should aim to understand fully the poetic intention behind Plath’s words. It is reductive practice to simply use Plath’s life to explain the meaning of the poems or vice versa.

Jennings and Larkin

The question on “the generation gap” provoked some interesting responses from candidates, many of whom were able to identify a range of methods and make viable links to the key terms. There was some deft interweaving of AO3 related to “The Movement” with the tendency to offload chunks of irrelevant AO3 perhaps being less prevalent for this pairing of poets. Better candidates were able to explain the central images of Larkin’s slide and Jennings’ slipping into adolescence and many made effective linkages with the key terms. Many candidates struggled to convincingly explore the symbol of Larkin’s “high windows” and a number misunderstood the irony of Jennings’ ending concerning the freedom found in old age.

Boland and Bleakney

There were no responses on this pairing which is somewhat disappointing given that both poets are accessible and the particular local associations of Bleakney's verse.

Section B The Study of Drama 1900 – Present

All questions in this section were considered suitable for candidates of all abilities. Very few centres studied Beckett, and no centres, to my knowledge, studied Stewart. Williams and Miller featured very heavily.

Examiners reported their impressions that the candidates had enjoyed studying these texts, and that they had arrived at a good level of knowledge of the plays.

A common problem reported by the Examining Team was poor integration of quotations. For example, the insertion of quotations which rendered their host sentences grammatically incorrect, the inclusion of quotations which seemed unrelated to the discussion, and the insertion of quotations as free-standing sentences.

In relation to AO2, there was a tendency for candidates to focus on "micro-methods" (alliteration, sibilance, etc.), rather than the more meaningful and significant dramatic techniques at work in these plays. There was also a significant number of candidates who displayed knowledge of dramatic methods without successfully linking them to the key terms of the question. Another problem was evident in the way that many candidates seemed to have been taught to structure their responses in separate sections dealing with character interactions, language, form and structure, etc. Whilst it is possible to do this well, in practice the approach proved limiting; instead of prioritising AO5 (and so structuring the response around a series of points of argument), these candidates ended up trying to shoe-horn methods into the essay in a way that often lacked relevance to the key terms.

In terms of AO3, a reasonable number of candidates were able to use context in a way that illuminated their discussion of the text. The most successful way of engaging with this Assessment Objective was to provide a range of concise contextual references throughout the response, rather than including separate, lengthy paragraphs with information about, for example, Arthur Miller's wives or Tennessee Williams' sister. There was still a significant number of context-heavy scripts in which candidates simply off-loaded information, often at great length.

AO5, the driving Assessment Objective for this component, proved elusive for many candidates. Lots of candidates simply did not engage with the key terms of each question. Most candidates, disappointingly, began their essays with a chunk of pre-packaged information that bore little or no relation to the question.

Q1 Friel *Translations*

- (a) This question worked well. Most candidates were able to discuss aspects of each character in relation to the key terms, "agents of colonial rule". Context was often used quite well here, with many candidates providing effective discussion of the British colonial project in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Modern context (e.g. the Troubles, Friel's life) was used less effectively; it was not, for the most part, linked to the question at hand.
- (b) This question worked quite well. The best answers grasped the concept of Baile Beag as a microcosm, and the idea of the characters as in some way representative of broader social and historical issues. Some candidates used context effectively as a way of structuring their answer, dealing in turn with the ways in which the play engaged with ideas such as poverty, emigration, language, power, etc. Conversely, however, many candidates failed to grasp this idea of the play's themes and characters as representative of broader social and historical

trends. The same problems emerged here in relation to the use of modern contextual information; the question invites references to nineteenth-century Irish society, but many candidates off-loaded information about the Troubles which needed to be argued into relevance.

Q2 Beckett *Waiting for Godot*

So few centres offered this text that it is difficult to draw general conclusions.

Q3 Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire*

- (a) This question worked quite well. Most candidates were able to engage with the key terms in a meaningful way. Some candidates confused them, coming up with variations such as “new south” and “more exciting”. The students’ understanding of the sections relating to Belle Reve, Moon Lake Casino, Laurel, and the Hotel Flamingo was sometimes quite patchy; these elements of the plot emerge through Blanche’s monologues, and seemed to have been studied less than the plot elements/sequences which unfold on stage.
- (b) Successful answers to this question explored the ways in which particular characters functioned as representatives of “a male dominated society”. Unfortunately, many candidates conducted a simple discussion of interactions between Blanche and Stanley without establishing effective linkage to the other key terms.

Q4 Miller *The Crucible*

- (a) Many candidates restricted themselves to listing a range of themes/ideas which Miller emphasised as repressive. The term “repressive” itself seemed in some cases to be imperfectly understood. Alternative interpretations to the view expressed in the stimulus statement was not often offered. This question also seemed to induce a lot of irrelevant contextual material; a series of succinct references to Puritanism would have done the trick, but lots of candidates were determined to off-load other material.
- (b) Most candidates demonstrated decent knowledge of the plot and of these characters. Some issues arose in relation to the key term “hero”. Some candidates were determined to apply terminology from Aristotle, and this generally worked to the detriment of the answer (it limited discussion rather than opening the text up). Others simply had an imperfect understanding of the nature of a literary hero; in these cases, the lack of a working definition of “hero” impeded the development of an effective response.

Q5 Stewart *Men Should Weep*

No responses seen.

Q6 Bolt *A Man For All Seasons*

- (a) This question worked well, with most candidates demonstrating a good knowledge of the character of More. A significant number of candidates argued that More could not be seen as selfish because he sticks to his beliefs; this was not a convincing approach. Context was used quite well here, with a range of references to relevant historical details and to relevant aspects of Bolt’s life.
- (b) Many candidates demonstrated an imperfect understanding of the key term “corrupts” (corruption was often simply conflated with vague notions of badness). The best essays here tended to keep things simple by dealing with relevant characters sequentially, and in separate paragraphs/sections.

Assessment Unit AS 2 The Study of Prose Pre 1900

Examiners considered this paper to have been appropriate, both in allowing the candidature to exhibit textual understanding and in discriminating between candidates' abilities. It was felt that candidates were able to engage with the questions set and there was agreement concerning the accessibility of the language used across all questions.

Many of the responses to this paper showed candidates' clear engagement with, and enjoyment of, the novel which they had studied. Whilst the majority of candidates displayed competent - often excellent - knowledge of the texts they had studied, some responses unfortunately lapsed into description/narration or simply ignored the key terms of the question. As was the case with the AS Prose in the previous specification, some candidates were unable (or reluctant) to adapt their knowledge and understanding of the novel to fit the precise key terms of the question. Many examiners formed the impression that candidates often embarked on their responses following little, if any, reflection, on what the question was actually asking them to consider.

The driving Assessment Objective for this Unit is (AO5). For argument to be credited, candidates must use the explicit key terms of the stimulus statement. Candidates who choose to substitute other terms need to be very careful that they do so accurately and precisely, in a way that enhances the development of a nuanced argument. Substitution of terms which are not precisely synonymous with those that are given simply leads to irrelevance or imprecision. Very often candidates appeared to be following their own agenda, influenced by questions prepared in class or by the sample questions. Many candidates had difficulties in deploying the skills of argument and critical thinking, which resulted in contradictory and inconsistent responses: some candidates argued from one point of view, and then, without acknowledging what they were doing, from the opposite point of view, which is not the same as offering a controlled consideration of a counter-argument. Often responses lacked clarity: candidates are advised to 'unpack' the stimulus statement and spend time planning their responses carefully.

Whilst it was evident that most candidates had studied their set text with a focus on methods (AO2), candidates should be advised to avoid identification and discussion of small-scale methods such as pronouns, verbs, adjectives, alliteration, onomatopoeia, etc. Instead, focus should be on the overarching narrative methods such as form, structure, motifs, symbolism and imagery. Those candidates who accurately identified significant and relevant narrative methods, linking them to the key terms of the stimulus statement, enhanced their argument and were richly rewarded.

In relation to context (AO3), it should be noted that candidates who produce clear, relevant lines of argument can achieve top of Band 5 with no acknowledgement of context – examiners noted a few responses which were like this. The most successful candidates were able to integrate relevant contextual information throughout their responses, clearly linking it to the key terms, to illuminate their argument.

In this paper, examiners expressed concern with candidates' poor standard of expression - many responses showed considerable weaknesses in spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Q1 Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* was a popular text, with responses to the Para) question being the more popular. Successful responses clearly defined the features of the feminist novel and constructed an argument based on weighing up these features against evidence from the novel. Candidates who did not set up a definition of the feminist novel, but who were able to write about Hester as a strong female character who challenges the Puritan patriarchal society, were able to produce reasonably convincing responses. Many candidates included convincing counter-arguments regarding the limitations of the female characters. Less convincing responses focused on Pearl as a proto-feminist character. The least successful candidates changed the

wording of the stimulus statement by introducing their own phrase, 'much more than a feminist novel' which was not the question asked.

A number of candidates responded to the (b) question with varying degrees of success: those responses which only dealt with Dimmesdale as a sympathetic character took a limited account of the key terms which resulted in limited attempts at argument; the most successful candidates dealt with the key terms in their entirety, producing convincing responses which argued that it was indeed 'easy to sympathise with Dimmesdale because of the nature of the society in which he lives', supporting their points with relevant contextual material on the harsh, rigid Puritan society; some candidates offered valid counter-arguments, for example, Dimmesdale as a weak, hypocritical character who is denied sympathy.

- Q2** Shelley's *Frankenstein* was a popular choice. In Question (a), candidates who could clearly define the features of a horror story were very successful; even more successful were those candidates who offered very valid and convincing counter-arguments, for example, that *Frankenstein* in its consideration of the limits of scientific exploration is more than a horror story. A number of candidates, despite clear engagement with the novel, did not score highly due to a range of issues: the misunderstanding that a horror story is synonymous with the Gothic genre; attempting to argue that the novel was not little more than a horror story, which often resulted in confusing and contradictory locutions; substituting the word 'horror' with 'ghost'; adding in the word 'a' before the key terms 'little more than', then proceeding to argue that the novel was a little more than a horror story even though the evidence presented clearly showed that the novel was much more than a horror story. Writing a response based on the novel as a Gothic novel, a Romantic novel, etc., whilst valid, meant that candidates often did not link points back to the key terms of the question.

The (b) question was also a popular choice with the candidature. Examiners noted a number of excellent responses which set up a clear definition of the term 'hero' and which showed an astute understanding of Victor's character, giving evidence to support his heroic attributes and also offering very convincing counter-arguments regarding Victor's un-heroic deeds; many of these responses took a good account of the key term 'cannot' and its antonym 'can'. There were, however, many candidates who produced limited responses by focusing solely on Victor as a tragic hero – whilst this is a valid interpretation and an aspect of the hero which was used by a number of candidates to form part of their argument - it was not the question asked. Some candidates digressed into a discussion of the monster as the hero – again, the focus of the question was skewed by those candidates. A number of candidates did not have a clear understanding of the different types of hero, often presenting valid arguments regarding Victor as a Promethean hero, an anti-hero, etc., which were then undermined by statements such as: '... which shows that Victor cannot be considered a hero'.

- Q3** Examiners noted a number of centres who had chosen Eliot's *Silas Marner* as their set text and many of those candidates chose Question 3(a). As with the *Frankenstein* (b) question, those candidates who set up a working definition of 'hero' were most successful, with many arguing that Silas does possess qualities such as a bravery and selflessness. Responses which only identified kindness and honesty as heroic qualities were limited.

Most candidates who responded to the (b) question were not very successful due to taking a very limited account of key terms: many failed to explore nineteenth-century life, instead focusing on characters, whilst many ignored the key term 'convincing'. This question offered rich pickings for those very few candidates who explored the

settings of Lantern Yard and Raveloe. Good counter-arguments focused on the extremely unpleasant aspects of nineteenth-century life which are presented in a convincing way.

- Q4** Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was a popular choice. Examiners noted engaging, focused and nuanced responses to Question 4 (a). Many candidates showed an excellent understanding of the character of Catherine Earnshaw and were able to provide evidence from the text which showed how she is presented as a victim of the male attitudes of her society and, as a counter-argument, provided clear evidence to show that Catherine is also a victim of her own vain nature and ambition. Less successful responses argued that Catherine is a victim as she is forced to marry Edgar, which showed a lack of understanding. A number of candidates ignored the key terms, '... of the male attitudes of her society'; some candidates limited their responses by focusing on Catherine as a victim of the male characters. Quite a number of candidates digressed into a discussion of Cathy Linton and/or Isabella as victims.

Many responses to the (b) question indicated that only a few candidates were familiar with the conventions of a love story; many responses simply described the theme of love in the novel. As with the *Frankenstein* (a) question (which was similarly worded), there were a number of issues: the misunderstanding that a love story is synonymous with the Romantic genre; attempting to argue that the novel was not little more than a love story, which often resulted in confusion and contradiction; adding in the word 'a' before the key terms 'little more than', then proceeding to argue that the novel was a little more than a love story even though the evidence presented clearly showed that the novel was much more than a love story. Writing a response based on the novel as a Gothic novel, the novel as one of social criticism, etc., whilst valid, meant that candidates often did not link points back to the key terms of the question.

- Q5** Austen's *Emma* was chosen by a small number of centres. There were no responses to the (a) question. Responses to the (b) question were very successful indeed: a number of candidates showed an excellent understanding of the novel and engaged with the precise key terms of the question in their entirety, supporting nuanced arguments with excellent contextual material which illustrated the nineteenth-century view of women as weak and submissive. Less successful responses ignored, or did not understand, the key term 'challenges', or argued that the characters 'challenge', as opposed to Austen.

- Q6** The small number of candidates who responded to Question 6(a) on Stoker's *Dracula* produced quite good responses which showed a sound knowledge and understanding of the novel in relation to the fears of late nineteenth-century society; less successful candidates attempted to argue that the novel does not do little more than play upon the fears of late-nineteenth-century society, which resulted in responses which lacked clarity and were contradictory.

In responses to the (b) question, candidates often ignored the key term 'challenges' which inevitably led to limited arguments, or argued that the characters 'challenge' as opposed to Stoker. More successful candidates were able to provide a range of evidence from the novel to offer a counter-argument to the view expressed in the stimulus statement, for example, that in *Dracula*, some of the male characters conform to the very traditional chivalric idea of manhood.

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