



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

**ENGLISH LITERATURE (NEW
SPECIFICATION – WALES)**

JANUARY 2017

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ENGLISH LITERATURE (NEW SPECIFICATION – WALES)

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2017

UNIT ONE

General comments

After each section there is a summary of the Principal Examiner's findings under the headings: 'Characteristics of a good response' and 'Ways in which performance could be improved'.

On both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was clearly the most popular of the texts, as in previous years, with *To Kill a Mockingbird* also quite popular on both. One aspect of the newly introduced online marking system this year was the highlighting of the number of candidates on both tiers who responded to questions on texts which they had not studied. Even on Higher Tier, there was a surprising number of responses to all questions on the paper, all the extract questions or a range of questions on different texts. On Foundation Tier, many candidates wasted their time addressing questions on texts which they had not read. While examiners could sometimes award marks for careful tracking of extracts and any insight into characters or mood in the passage, essay responses were obviously very weak and, perhaps more importantly, had eaten up time which candidates could have much more productively spent on discussing the texts they had studied in class.

Students of all abilities clearly found much to engage their interest in the texts and examiners also noted some detailed and focused understanding of how social factors at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives, relationships and aspirations. More able candidates managed to interweave their comments on context with their observations on characters and themes, while others sometimes included some knowledge of context but struggled to select and comment on details relevant to the question. Across the ability range as a whole, however, it was clear that the study of how contextual factors affected characters, themes and the writers' ideas and intentions has become an intrinsic part of candidates' learning and these approaches benefited them in the examination. A small number of candidates, on both tiers, who clearly knew their texts well, showed some confusion about where on the question paper their knowledge of context was required. Centres are reminded that AO4 'Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts' is not assessed in the extract question and examiners cannot award marks for such commentary.

The poetry comparison question was also handled with sensitivity and assurance by some candidates and examiners gave very high marks on both tiers for thoughtful responses which engaged with the ideas, language and imagery in the poems. A grasp of the poets' main ideas and attitudes to the subject matter of the poems was noted by examiners in most responses, although for candidates willing to probe the subtext, particularly through the language and imagery used, the higher bands and marks were made available for examiners to award. On both tiers, however, even quite able candidates sometimes resorted to rhyme counting, device spotting with either no conclusions about their function or some assertive claims and interpretations. This lack of confidence in discussing the ideas and language of the poetry was frequently noted by examiners, even where the novels were handled with sensitivity and engagement.

Higher Tier: Extract questions

Of Mice and Men

The scene selected gave candidates plenty of opportunity to show their understanding of how mood is created here. Those who were able to articulate the tense, awkward and emotionally laden atmosphere in the bunkhouse as Candy's dog is led away to be killed found detailed support for their ideas in the language of the extract. Some able students commented on the uncharacteristically 'regretful' or 'guilt-ridden' reactions of Carlson and Slim in this scene. Some cited apt details such as the word 'gently' to describe Carlson's movements or the emotionally charged way that Slim 'subdued one hand with the other' as if he 'held down' his guilt or empathy towards Candy. The repetition of 'silence' and its personification as a hostile force which 'invaded the room' also often featured in these high-level responses. Some candidates looked at each character's reactions in detail, from Candy's paralysed, palpable distress to George's failed attempts to lighten the mood and distract attention from the awkwardness in the room and Whit's frustrated outburst at the end. The best responses drew on an empathetic, insightful understanding of what was happening for each character but also looked closely at the impact of Steinbeck's language choices in creating mood and atmosphere.

Weaker responses were often less secure about the meaning of characters' reactions, missing the failed attempts made by Slim and George to relieve the unbearable tension in the room or reading the other men's reactions to Candy as showing that they didn't care about Candy or his dog. A natural sympathy for the poor dog also sometimes became the limited focus of responses or there was a similarly narrow focus on Candy's reactions alone. Weaker responses were also typically less engaged with how the mood is created here and relied more on describing the kind of atmosphere in the room at different times. This sometimes precluded examiners from awarding higher band marks for AO2.

Anita and Me

The scene selected for the extract focused on Anita's quite complicated and conflicted reaction to the departure of her mother. Examiners awarded high marks where candidates were able to comment on the way Anita's pain and distress leaks out beneath her hostility and aggression towards Meena. The way the writer highlights her vulnerability was noted in better responses through her ill-fitting uniform and the 'matter of fact tone' in which she recounts her discovery of her mother's disappearance. These candidates understood the meaning of her aggression towards Meena and were able to locate her emotions in the language of the extract.

Weaker responses tended to be less probing and relied on describing the interactions between the two girls with more limited supporting references to the details. In some, there was some confusion between Anita's behaviour and Meena's reactions to it. In these less secure responses Meena's account of how she would feel if her mother left were sometimes attributed to Anita.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Candidates were asked to comment on the mood and atmosphere created in this scene in which the news of Tom Robinson's death is brought to the Finch household. Better responses gave detailed support for their comments and explored how each character in the scene reacted and what these reactions contributed to the shocked and distressed atmosphere in the room in response to Jem's tears. Some at this level recognised Lee's d

eliberate contrast between the superficiality of the ladies who ‘chattered happily’ in the dining room while the characters take in what has happened. Alexandra’s reactions provided a sensible focus for many candidates, particularly her shock and distress which was seen by many as an important step towards empathy for black people. One or two candidates wondered whether Alexandra was more concerned for Atticus than Tom and noted how quickly her voice became ‘flat’ and her appearance ‘weary.’ Atticus’s sometimes bitter, sometimes resigned and defeated reactions were carefully tracked in better responses and these candidates were able to show how an undercurrent of anger was created in the scene.

Weaker responses focused on one or two parts of the extract but were less confident in pinpointing or describing the quite complex atmosphere in the scene. Some missed the bitterness of Atticus’s comments about the prison’s brutality against Tom and saw his behaviour as evidence of mere tiredness rather than a world-weariness and despair at his community’s actions and attitudes.

Characteristics of good extract responses:

- **Clear and sustained focus on the question asked and on the details in the extract**
- **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:

- **A wider range of vocabulary to describe mood**
- **More detailed coverage of the extract**
- **More selection of supporting references rather than general impressions**
- **More practice on probing subtext and interpreting what is really going on in the extract**
- **Less reference to contextual factors when AO4 is not addressed in this question**
- **Careful adherence to the rubric requirements of the paper to ensure that candidates are only answering questions on the texts that they have studied**

Essay Questions

Of Mice and Men

The character question on Crooks was more popular than the alternative on ‘violence and the threat of violence’ although both questions elicited responses across the mark range. Crooks’s main attributes – his isolation from white people, his loneliness and cynicism - were addressed by candidates of all abilities to some extent, many of whom explored the horrendous impact of Great Depression American society on this one individual. At the highest level, responses often focused on how Steinbeck used the character to highlight important themes in the novel as well as aspects of context. His suffering was seen as characteristic of black people’s lives in various ways and better candidates explored his interactions with other characters in some detail. Detailed references to specific scenes and specific descriptions of his behaviour at different points in the novel by Steinbeck were included in these responses. Crooks’s apparently cruel treatment of Lennie was aptly selected for comment, as was the poignancy of his response to Curley’s wife’s threats,

although more successful candidates were able to show a more subtle understanding of the legacy of slavery and racism embodied by Crooks in these incidents. Some at the top of the mark range explored how Crooks's vulnerability is conveyed in different ways, such as the symbolism of his disability and constant pain and his defensive, self-protective behaviour.

Weaker responses commented on the main features of Crooks's character but were less able to anchor their comments in specific examples of events and relationships which illustrated them. Broad, sweeping generalisations about social factors ('all black men were treated like slaves/weren't allowed to talk to white people') tended to weaken responses at this level. Similarly, weaker candidates sometimes, where apt events were selected, such as Curley's wife's threat of lynching, candidates retold the story but did not discuss its implications or its significance. A limited awareness of the author behind the characters and of his conscious crafting of the characters meant that for some candidates the higher bands were not really accessible. In a few cases, responses drifted from focus on the character and became dominated by discussion of historical context, unconnected with the character and sometimes with only brief references to the text itself.

The alternative question invited candidates to consider to what extent 'violence, or the threat of violence affect relationships' in the novel. At the top of the mark range, examiners found much to reward where candidates addressed the question evaluatively and kept their eye on the second part of the question on how violence affected relationships. Some, for example, considered key relationships such as that between George and Lennie and discussed how the relationship was defined to some extent by George's fear of Lennie's potential for violence and his failure to control it. Some argued that Steinbeck's grim world in the novel reflected the 'dog eat dog' world of wider society where the threat of violence was ever-present for some of the characters, such as Crooks. At the highest level, an appreciation of the writer's shaping of our reactions to characters and events was evident throughout and ideas about themes, characterisation, language and context were interwoven in convincing arguments.

Weaker scripts were characterised by less assured or less relevant use of contextual factors or by sketchy outlines of relationships in the novel. In some responses, lists of violent incidences were given but there was limited discussion of their significance or the impact on relationships between characters. In others, context was almost entirely forgotten and even where there was otherwise some detailed reflection of the text, examiners could not award marks in the higher bands as a result.

Anita and Me

Both questions, as in all the text essays, required candidates to link their knowledge of the text with an understanding of how the characters' behaviour, attitudes and actions are affected by the social mores of Britain in the 1960s. The first question elicited some thoughtful ideas about how Meera Syal's central character charts her way through a sometimes troubled childhood and candidates were able to weigh up the influence of other characters on her attitudes with some skill. Able candidates often understood that Syal created characters whose influence on Meena was ambiguous: many included Anita as a pernicious but necessary influence on Meena's understanding of her place as an Indian girl in British society. In this way, some candidates were able to use a solid grasp of context to inform their response to the text. Others at the top of the mark range explored how the relationship between Meena and Anita or between Anita and Sam is essential to Meena's growing up and leads to her realisation that the society around her is hostile and capable of brutality. Nanima was also a popular choice as a positive influence on Meena and there was much informed consideration on her ability to reconnect Meena with her Indian heritage while retaining her sense of humour and love of family.

Weaker responses were typically less rooted in detailed reference to characters, events and relationships and tended to be more general in character and did not really explore the ways in which British society at the time comes under scrutiny in the portrayal of these influences on Meena.

The second question required some critical reflection on the way Meera Syal presents Meena's family and some high level responses explored ways in which it was surprising that there was both warmth and humour, considering the racism and casual prejudice which they suffered. Reference to specific events and relationships in the novel helped to build an argument focused on the question.

Weaker responses were less rooted in a discussion of events to show specific understanding of what life was like for Meena and her family. Contextual information was not always accurate or did not go beyond basic statements about the prejudice of white people against those of Indian heritage.

To Kill a Mockingbird

The question on Calpurnia elicited responses across the mark range. Better answers showed that candidates were aware of how Harper Lee used the character to shed light on the potential for respect and equality between the races as well as the more obvious highlighting of racial prejudice at the time through Alexandra's dismissive attitudes towards Calpurnia. Key relationships with Atticus and with the children were discussed in some detail. A range of events, such as the visit to the First Purchase Church and the shooting of the rabid dog, helped to illustrate some of Calpurnia's main characteristics and in many high level responses there was some clear discussion of ways in which Lee holds up Calpurnia as an example of strength and the potential for society to change for the better. Weaker responses here tended to remain general and impressionistic rather than detailed and evaluative. Comments about Calpurnia's relationships with Atticus and the children lacked focus and detailed selection and although often quite credible, comments were only rarely supported by illustration from events in the text.

The question on Lee's use of Maycomb as an important backdrop for the novel also drew a range of responses from candidates, some of them very highly rewarded for perceptive and wide-ranging commentaries. Examiners allowed for a range of ideas about what kind of society Maycomb was and for a wide variety of approaches to understand its inhabitants. In the best responses, Lee's use of the social mores of the time was explored with reference to the specific conditions of life in the American South in the 1930s. A few candidates also considered the writing of the novel in the 1960s at a time when civil rights were once more under scrutiny and showed how the depiction of innocent, unjustly treated characters shed light on the plight of black people.

In less successful responses, various residents of Maycomb were listed and there was often some mention of Maycomb's 'usual disease' but ideas were not developed and were only rarely supported by detailed reference to the text.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- **Clear appreciation of how contextual factors influence characters and storylines**
- **Selection of a range of apt events and specific details to support thoughtful ideas**
- **Some analysis of the writer's intentions when creating characters and plots**

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- **More focus on developing a personal engagement with the text rather than formulaic answers**
- **Practice in creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked**
- **More focused discussion of how contextual factors affect characters' personalities, choices, ambitions and stories**
- **Practice in selecting detailed textual evidence for ideas**
- **Careful adherence to the rubric requirements of the paper to ensure that candidates are only answering questions on the texts that they have studied**

Poetry Comparison

Examiners looked for and rewarded comparison of the poems wherever and however candidates compared the texts but in most cases there was some cross-referencing of details as well as some comparison of mood and imagery. Able candidates could home in on the different perspectives of the poets, showing how Vivian Smith created the persona of the quiet, unheeded observer while Rachel Sherwood's persona seemed to intrude on domestic life as the sun set in a more urban landscape. The key images and details were the focus of some probing discussions at the highest level: the chalice lily and the religious overtones of the language used to describe it were explored as were the slightly ambiguous glimpses into a possibly violent domestic scene in the second poem. The image of the cockroach was described by one thoughtful candidate as 'showing how even reviled, secret creatures of the night are revealed to be beautiful and worthy of our notice'.

Weaker responses tended to focus on general impressions and to look for points of similarity or difference between the poems which were not very substantial or significant. The time of the day described – the dead of night rather than 'early evening' – was much cited as a point of comparison but at this level there was less discussion of how these particular times were specifically invoked by each poet.

More damaging than doubtful interpretations was the tendency to resort to counting rhymes or lines or instances of enjambment or other devices. In the weakest responses where these comments predominated, there was little real engagement with the language, meaning and ideas at the expense of less fruitful consideration of enjambment, caesuras etc. Often, more straightforward discussions of mood and the language choices which contributed to it in each poem helped candidates move towards a more meaningful approach.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- **Detailed coverage of both poems and developed comparison of ideas and language**
- **Probing of subtext, tentative interpretation rooted in the poems**
- **Strong focus on imagery, language and the effects they create**

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- **More exposure to ways in which poets use language imaginatively**
- **More focus on how ideas are conveyed through imagery**
- **Careful reading of poems to look at how subtexts emerge**
- **Practice in supporting ideas with detailed reference to the poems**
- **Less reliance on feature spotting**

Foundation Tier: Extract questions

Of Mice and Men

There were some detailed and focused answers to this extract question and many Foundation Tier candidates showed an instinctive understanding of Candy's despair here as well as some of the ways in which the other men reveal their discomfort at what is happening. A clear sympathy for Candy was common but at the highest levels candidates were able to consider how Steinbeck created this sympathy. Slim's and George's interventions were seen for what they are – hopeless attempts to release the tension in the room which many saw as represented by the personification of silence as it repeatedly descended on them.

Weaker responses were patchy in their coverage of the extract or some of the unspoken tension was not interpreted with as much understanding. For example, George and the others were sometimes castigated by candidates who felt their flippant comments betrayed a lack of any real grasp of Candy's plight. In some cases, overlong explanations of how Candy came to be in this position tended to overwhelm the response to the extract itself.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Better responses to the extract kept a steady focus on Alexandra's reactions to the news of Tom's death and tracked her initial shock and stunned body language to her evident concern for Atticus. Each idea was aptly supported by focused references to the details in the extract.

Weaker responses tended to be brief and sketchy or focused on tangential or more generalised impressions of Alexandra's shock without close reading of the whole extract. At this level candidates tended to describe what was happening in the extract rather than offer some focused response to what Alexandra is feeling and thinking.

Characteristics of good extract responses:

- **Wide-ranging coverage of the extract**
- **Sustained focus on the character and question**
- **Textual references to support points made**

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- **Practise going beyond simple paraphrase to give some informed comment on what is happening in the extract**
- **Practise making a range of focused points, each with a supporting quotation**
- **More awareness of what is being assessed here, i.e. AO1 and AO2 but not AO4**
- **Careful adherence to the rubric requirements of the paper to ensure that candidates are only answering questions on the texts that they have studied**

Essay questions

Of Mice and Men

Most candidates chose to write about Crooks and there was a very wide range of responses to this question. The best followed the bullet points to help them structure their responses and where there was a detailed discussion, examiners could award high marks for responses which offered some reference to specific events and some apt quotations to support their ideas. The racial abuse and segregation suffered by the character gave most

candidates a good starting point for their ideas and helped them to focus on the contextual factors which made this suffering so real. Crooks's nostalgic view of an innocent period of childhood was relevant here and other events, such as his conversation with Lennie and the threats meted out to him by Curley's wife, were also often commented on by candidates given marks at the top of the range. Steinbeck's commentary, through the portrayal of Crooks, on his own society of the time was understood at this level and there was some discussion of the impact of his loneliness and ill-treatment on the reader.

Weaker responses tended to follow the bullet points but with only brief and general comments on each. Many also made very limited reference to the wider social context, although it was rare for no mention at all to be made of context. Quite a few were aware of Crooks's main attributes but made very little reference to the text to show how these were presented or what the writer was trying to highlight about his society.

The alternative question on violence and the threat of violence was less often attempted but there were some good responses to it. Where candidates considered particular characters and relationships in some detail and discussed how and why these characters relied on or were subjected to violence, it was possible for examiners to award high marks. This was especially the case where the impact of the Great Depression on migrant workers and the brutal and often violent nature of ranch life at the time was considered. Some candidates approached the question by showing how violent events erupted quickly because of a distrustful atmosphere borne of poverty and lack of opportunity.

Where fewer marks were awarded it was often because candidates made no real mention of contextual factors. Lists of violent events, often narratively with limited comment on them were fairly common and although focused on addressing the question they were often under-developed and lacking specific reference to the text.

To Kill a Mockingbird

The question on Calpurnia gave candidates a chance to show a clear knowledge of the text and some were able to structure their responses to include comments on how Harper Lee uses the character to highlight the usual segregation and lack of respect suffered by people in the black community of Maycomb. Where candidates could range across the novel as a whole with some sustained discussion of Calpurnia and provide some commentary on how contextual factors such as the racial discrimination of Alexandra reflected the prevailing mores of the time, examiners could award very high marks. Most were able to include comments on her relationships with Atticus and the children and followed the bullet points to address some of the important events of the novel, such as the trial of Tom Robinson.

Weaker responses were thinner and there was often a much narrower range of ideas. There was usually some implicit reference to racial discrimination in Maycomb but less explicit discussion of context as a force which influenced and shaped Calpurnia's attitudes and behaviour.

The alternative question was rarely attempted on this tier. Some candidates were able to make apt selections, such as the trial of Tom Robinson, to show how Maycomb was typically prejudiced against black people, even when innocent. There was a reliance on simple narrative in weaker responses.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- **A clear understanding that context means the wider society and its values and that these affect characters**

- **Relevant use of contextual factors which are specific to the question**
- **Selection of events which help to illustrate points made**
- **Development of ideas and supporting references rather than assertions and general impressions**

Ways in which performance can be improved

- **Develop an awareness of texts as related to/commenting on the society in which they are set**
- **Practise supporting points with references to events in the text**
- **Develop an understanding of the main ideas or themes in the text and how they are shown**
- **Careful adherence to the rubric requirements of the paper to ensure that candidates are only answering questions on the texts that they have studied**

Poetry comparison

Most candidates were able to find some links between the two poems in terms of subject matter, mood and ideas. Many were able to comment on the different kinds of landscapes conjured up in each poem, with some discussion of the words and language used to evoke them. The despoiled and neglected environment of the Thames in the James Smith poem was often readily noted, with some of the ugly details of the litter around the banks of the river lending themselves to selection and comment. The characters who appear briefly in the poem were also often noticed, sometimes with thoughtful ideas about the way in which old people may have remembered the river bank when they were young like those who spoil it now. In comparison with this ugly scene, many candidates saw 'The River' as depicting a more rural idyll in which the river behaves mostly in an innocent and carefree way. Many commented on the river's potential for destruction and the change in tone towards the end when the metaphors used become less benign. In better responses, candidates saw the metaphors in the Bloom poem as devices to help evoke a particular image and in some cases there was some pinpointing of the effects created by some of them, such as the river as a gurgling baby or ravaging monster. In these cases, particularly where there was a sustained focus on how the language in each poem contributes to the impressions given, examiners were able to award very high marks.

Weaker candidates struggled with the figurative language in the Bloom poem, often being led into some literal interpretations of its content. Where this occurred, the idea of the river described in various metaphors was missed and the poem was thought to describe a tramp and a tenuous link was then made with the inclusion of apparently homeless people in the Smith poem. Sometimes the metaphors were recognised but were only sketchily mentioned and the coverage of each poem was thin and patchy.

Characteristics of good poetry comparisons:

- **A thorough examination of both poems**
- **Clear comparison of ideas, mood and some reference to how the poets use language**
- **Detailed selection from each poem and comments on these selections**

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- **Exposure to a range of poems and poetic techniques, including imagery and figurative language**
- **Developing the use of supporting references to support often intuitive understanding of subtext**
- **Experience in reading poems where similar topics are handled differently by poets**



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