



GCSE EXAMINERS REPORTS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

January 2019

UNIT 1

General comments

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. There were responses written to questions on all the other novels, including some by students who had studied *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Chanda's Secrets*. Although much more prevalent on Foundation Tier, a significant number of candidates on both tiers wasted a lot of their time reading extracts and answering questions on novels they had never read or studied. This remains a serious problem for candidates who may well have studied one of the texts over a long period of time but, in answering a range of extract questions, will only have been awarded a mark out of ten for their efforts.

Examiners needed to take account of the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. In most essay responses, some detailed and focused understanding was shown of how social factors at the time the novels were set affected characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. There were few responses where there was no explicit commentary on the context of the novel studied. Most candidates on both tiers used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there remains some confusion and misunderstanding about where on the paper context is assessed. Sometimes in the extract question, for example, candidates focused more on aspects of the novel outside the scope of the extract itself. Answers to the question on the presentation of Slim in the *Of Mice and Men* extract sometimes elicited a wider commentary on him as 'the prince of the ranch' and how the fight between Lennie and Curley came about. There was not always a close focus on Slim's frame of mind in the extract itself.

A fairly common but very damaging error in the past has been essay responses on the novel text which were overwhelmed by context with limited reference to the novel studied. There was less evidence of this on this occasion. Knowing about the Dust Bowl or the stock market crash or the lives of black people in 1930s America will not, on its own, gain many marks and most candidates were aware of this. While there were some responses to text essay questions which were less focused on how the society of the time influenced characters' thoughts and behaviour, most candidates included some contextual references which examiners could credit.

There were a number of responses to the question on Curley which showed some misreading of the question, or which showed some confusion about the character. Some candidates, on both tiers, wrote about Candy rather than Curley while others, mostly on Foundation, misnamed the character they wrote about. These errors can be costly for candidates who know their text but do not address the questions set carefully.

The poetry comparison question was generally handled with a clearer understanding of the need to cover both poems and the comparative element. Few candidates wrote about the poems but did not compare them or mistimed their responses so that only some elements of the task were covered. Strong responses, as always, looked closely at the language and imagery used in the poems and focused more on meaning and interpretation, what the poets had to say about the experience of war, rather than simple identification of devices. There was still some tendency to 'spot' techniques with limited commentary on effects. In weaker Higher Tier responses, a significant number of responses discussed punctuation, enjambement and alliteration but did not show how the use of these devices added to or helped to convey meaning and ideas. Better responses on both tiers included a range of sensible interpretations of ideas and comparisons while those at the highest level on Higher Tier looked very closely at the way language and imagery was used to reveal subtle differences in tone and meaning.

Extract questions

Of Mice and Men

The Steinbeck extract question asked candidates to focus on Slim's behaviour and speech in this scene and most were aware of the significance of the scene in revealing different aspects of the character. Successful responses focused on the details and the language used to describe Slim's reaction to the fight between Lennie and Curley. Various interpretations were offered: Slim was seen by some as even-handed, fair and caring whereas others focused on his natural ease with leadership as shown by the way he takes control of a difficult situation. As always, responses where there was apt, detailed support for these ideas could be awarded high marks, as well as a thorough tracking of the twists and turns of Steinbeck's characterisation here. Some highly perceptive answers homed in on Slim's manipulation of Curley and the way he 'smiled wryly', showing perhaps some quite cunning undertones to his otherwise admirably calm and controlled behaviour. The way the other characters were shown to defer to and depend on Slim also featured in better responses. Slim's horrified shock at the damage inflicted on Curley gave candidates some pause for thought; some saw his grim humour at the end of the extract as an attempt to lighten the mood while others explored how carefully he concealed a conflicted sense of fear and shock as well as sympathy for Lennie.

Weaker Higher Tier responses tended to focus on the more obvious features of Slim's behaviour here and repeated that he was 'caring' or 'kind'. Foundation Tier responses were less successful when candidates wrote generally about the character, recognising his sympathy for both Curley and Lennie but rarely locating these qualities in specific areas of the extract. Occasionally, on both tiers, the focus of the question was lost and most comments concerned how Curley or Lennie behaved rather than Slim. Contextual information about ranch life during the Depression also leaked into some extract responses and although examiners did not deduct marks where this occurred, candidates' time and effort was often wasted on comments which could not be credited.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Higher Tier candidates explored the complexities of Dolphus Raymond's character and analysed the writer's technique in creating a complicated and nuanced character and the children's responses to him. Candidates were generally confident in exploring why Dolphus Raymond behaves the way he does and why he protects his lifestyle. As always, the development of ideas and the level of detailed references to support them tended to determine how high in the mark range it was possible for examiners to go. On Foundation Tier, most candidates who attempted this question had not studied the novel and were unable to distinguish properly between the impression the character generally gave of himself to the world and the truth which he divulged to the children in the extract.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

There were some genuine Higher Tier responses here from candidates who had a good knowledge and understanding of the novel. The extract gave plenty of scope for candidates to discuss Maya's character, thoughts and feelings. Most picked up on the racist undertones of the receptionist's behaviour and some more able candidates explored the meaning behind Maya's final comment that she 'accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer' which provoked some thoughtful debate. All candidates made clear attempts to engage with the language used by Angelou to show the sense of burning injustice and defiance that she felt at the time.

Chanda's Secrets

Relatively few responses from candidates who had studied the novel were submitted here but most were given marks in Band 3 and above on Higher Tier. More able candidates explored the complex, changing emotions of Mama and worked through to the end of the extract where her behaviour changes significantly. This led to some thoughtful and often quite insightful discussion.

Characteristics of good extract responses:

- Clear and sustained focus on the specific extract, not the context of the novel or storylines
- Selection of short, apt references to support points made
- Clear grasp of subtext, what's 'really' going on in the extract

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Clear knowledge of what is being assessed here and what is not
- More thorough 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, not relying on surface meanings

Essay Questions - *Of Mice and Men*

The question on Curley asked about both his character and what Steinbeck's characterisation of him shows us about the values and attitudes of the society in which he lived. Better candidates showed a sound understanding of the character's underlying attitudes and motivations at different points in the novel and had clear and well considered views about the impact of contextual factors on his actions and attitudes. Such interpretations were often insightful and perceptive, suggesting that Steinbeck wanted to draw attention to the imbalance between the landowning, employer class and their insecure migrant workers in Great Depression America in the 1930s. Many saw Curley as a somewhat pathetic figure, hiding his chronic insecurity beneath exaggerated, opportunistic violence. In some thoughtful responses, the mismatch between his status as the boss's son with the actual contempt most of the workers felt for him gave candidates a rich source of discussion, both of his character and the expectations of his society. The ranchworkers' real fear of being 'canned' on the whim of such a volatile character was described insightfully by one Foundation Tier candidate as 'the ultimate humiliation of having to be careful around this total thug'. Other aspects of his character, as well as his bullying, were seen as typical and reflective of social norms at the time. Detailed reference to support these ideas included references to his neglect or ill-treatment of his wife, his casual racism towards Crooks or his deference towards Slim, the actual 'prince of the ranch' whose natural authority usurped his own. Some candidates also saw in Curley an aggression and hyper-vigilance which seemed to pervade society at the time or perhaps how the weight of expectations of the landowning, employer class was too heavy for a rather inadequate, insecure figure such as Curley.

Weaker responses focused narrowly on Curley's antagonistic behaviour, particularly towards Lennie, or in trying to address the ways in which social attitudes are reflected through his character candidates drifted away from Curley and onto his wife or Crooks. For example, many responses included references to his wife's avowed dislike of Curley or the fact that after two weeks of marriage he still visits brothels, but in some instances the response tended to drift into further discussion of her dreams of Hollywood or her racist attack on Crooks, rather than maintaining a focus on Curley himself. Similarly, Curley's casually racist view of Crooks sometimes drifted into an extended discussion of how Crooks' character is presented, his loneliness and his interactions with others which did not feature Curley at all. Likewise, film references to scenes which were not in the novel sometimes skewed responses: 'Curley shows how much he hates his wife when he tells her to go in the house or when he breaks her records.' Occasionally, speculation about whether Curley beat his wife or whether his dream was to be a boxer tended to overwhelm more insightful approaches which were more rooted in the text. While examiners could credit candidates' knowledge of the text and context, it is essential for the higher marks on both tiers that the focus of the question is consistent and thorough.

The alternative question on Steinbeck's use of animals and the natural world was less popular but often elicited thoughtful responses on both tiers. Most candidates could show how the writer consistently uses the attributes of animals to add layers of characterisation to his presentation of Lennie and Curley. Most also knew the significance of the mice in depicting Lennie's strength and limited self-control and many made reference to Candy's dog. References to the beauty of the landscape at the beginning and end of the novel were also quite common on both tiers. While these approaches were credited for the knowledge of the text they showed, even at the most basic level, there was a wide range of marks given for the ways in which candidates developed and supported their ideas and especially how successful they were in linking these ideas to the social attitudes of the time. In better responses, for example, the callous, unsympathetic treatment of Candy over the killing of his beloved dog was thoughtfully interpreted as reflecting the low status of old people in a culture which prized masculinity and physical prowess over care and kindness. The beauty of the natural landscape was described by one candidate as 'a haven of calm and peace, away from the brutal, violent world of ranch life for Lennie who can't compete in that dog-eat-dog world'. Some weaker responses tended to list the various references to animals in the novel with less developed commentary on how Steinbeck uses them and on both tiers there were responses which showed limited evidence of candidates' understanding of context.

To Kill A Mockingbird

Candidates had the freedom and opportunity to explore a wide range of ideas about various relationships in the first question. Miss Maudie, Calpurnia and Boo Radley were common choices and most candidates were able to give details of the ways in which they influenced the children. This approach often led naturally to a discussion of contextual factors, such as Miss Maudie's defiant stance against the narrow, judgmental views of society at the time. Less successful responses lacked the depth of discussion and referenced incidents and events briefly before discussing context on a more general level.

For the alternative question on the theme of justice, there was often a detailed consideration and discussion of the unjust treatment of and various incidents and events in the novel. The weaker responses focused more on the trial and lacked the range of ideas expected. On the whole, however, the knowledge and understanding of context was impressive in Higher Tier responses to this question and was linked confidently and assuredly to the events discussed.

Chanda's Secrets

Essays on which character changes the most were, for the most part, focused and thoughtful, covering a range of incidents and events from the text. All candidates had clearly covered contextual elements regarding AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa very carefully and were well informed. Candidates chose to write about Mrs Tafa, Mama and Jonah here and all made convincing cases showing how their chosen character changed. The question required some careful tracking through the text and all candidates had sufficient textual knowledge to do this successfully.

The alternative question was a very rare choice by candidates who had studied the novel.

Characteristics of good essay responses:

- Clear appreciation of how context shapes characters
- Selection of a range of apt events and quotations to develop and support thoughtful ideas
- Some analysis of how the writer's message is conveyed through characters and events

Ways in which performance could be improved:

- Practice in how to use the wording of a question to show knowledge and insight
- Practice in creating clear, cohesive arguments which address the question asked
- More focused discussion of how contextual factors affect characters' personalities, choices, ambitions, stories
- Practice in selecting detailed textual evidence for ideas

Poetry Comparison

Most candidates on both tiers understood that both poems and the comparison between them must be addressed to give them the best chance. Examiners rewarded comparison wherever they found it although most candidates looked at each poem first before making comparisons. Some compared all the way through their responses while others discussed the first poem and then compared it with the second, making comments on meaning, imagery and mood about both poems as they did so. A minority sacrificed a close examination of the poems themselves in trying to compare them and there were also some whose comparison between poems was much weaker than their examination of the poems. On the whole, however, only a few candidates on both tiers mis-managed their time and limited their achievement as a result.

Higher Tier candidates were given the rubric that 'both poets describe their experiences during a time of conflict' and better responses focused on the different kinds of impacts the conflicts had on them and the people around them. The best responses began to develop interpretations which included some perceptive ideas: the all-pervasive fear and loss of innocence war inflicts on children, the ways the mind takes refuge in unlikely places at times of extreme stress, the betrayal of the young by older generations and the traumatising effect on a whole generation that grows up during conflict.

'More Dangerous Air' was generally better understood than Lowell's poem and most candidates wrote sensibly about the sense of panic and fear evoked in the early stanzas and were able to support their comments by apt selection of references. Many interpreted the 'streak of light' as looking for some relief or hope while there were also some perceptive comments about the loss of authority and certainty from a child's perspective implied by the terror-stricken teachers and media. The flimsiness of the desk which the children were told to 'pretend' would protect them was a common source of thoughtful discussion, as was the contrast between the terrified children and those who had no sense of the danger of the situation. The idea of children having to 'grow up fast' was often mentioned, for example. The use of sensory language, single word sentences and the image of the poet's heart as 'rough and brittle' also featured in better responses to the poem, with some focused comment on why these techniques were used and the effects they gave.

The strange tone of Amy Lowell's poem gave able candidates plenty to discuss. Many saw in the imagery of natural beauty, the 'tumbling of leaves' and the 'water falling through sunlight' a picture of a Edenic version of city life, suggesting that the 'little boys' enjoying a carefree sunny day in the park were symbolic of innocence. The language used to depict this idyllic scene was carefully explored by some, showing a real sensitivity to the nuances and ambiguities of style and imagery. One popular interpretation suggested that the little boys were actually casualties of war and the 'tumbling of leaves' was reminiscent of fallen soldiers at war. While most strong interpretations saw the poem as hopeful in tone and atmosphere, looking forward to the day 'there will be no war', others argued that the beautiful scene belied a powerful melancholy. The beauty of the day could not be enjoyed because the blight of war hung over everything.

Lowell's 'broken world' was often compared with Engle's 'reality's gloom' and some thoughtful comparison points were explored based on the sense of people coping in different ways with conflict. The effect on children of war and conflict also proved a fruitful comparative approach. There were children in both poems, according to some, who coped by simple denial and a refusal to be fearful, although the voice heard in both poems was considered similarly weighed down by war or the prospect of war. Weaker responses, as is often the case, looked for more literal, surface links between the poems and sometimes also for the same or different poetic techniques used by the poets. Spotting metaphors or looking for rhymes or non-rhymes sometimes became detached from meaning and ideas and as such was difficult to credit.

The Foundation Tier poems were generally quite well understood. More successful candidates were able to pick out some of the graphic vocabulary used by Thrilling in the first poem, such as 'ripped' and 'ricocheted' and the final image of 'the sky/lay broken on my floor' was considered thoughtfully some at the top of the mark range. Weaker responses relied on simple summaries of the poem's content though sometimes with little or no direct references made.

The second poem, 'Playground', provided some challenge for those who were able to see beyond the simple scene of a boy on a swing to the trauma suffered by him and his family. The repetition in the poem was noticed by some with some sensible suggestions about how it helped to build up the tension. The sound of the swing – 'clank' and 'creak' – was also discussed in some responses. One candidate identified the use of onomatopoeia here and went on to say that 'the sounds are ugly and discordant making even the noise horrible as well as the abandoned park'.

The very different tone in the two poems was compared quite successfully, if simply, by many candidates. In better responses, candidates were able to locate in the poems the language which set the tone. Weaker responses tended to summarise to say what was happening in each poem but there was little actual comparison. Some candidates struggled to find the idea of a bomb attack in 'Playground' and in both poems would have benefited from a closer reading to ensure that the basic scenario is understood.

Characteristics of good poetry responses:

- Coverage of both poems and a developed comparison of ideas, techniques and effects
- Probing of subtext, tentative interpretation rooted in the poems
- Strong focus on images, language and effects

Ways in which performance can be improved:

- More exposure to ways in which poets use language in different ways
- More focus on how ideas are conveyed through imagery
- Careful reading of poems to avoid misunderstanding
- Practice in supporting ideas about mood and meaning with detailed reference to the poems



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