



GCSE

English Literature

8702/1 Shakespeare and the 19th century novel

Report on the Examination

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Contents

The below table is interactive. You can press the control button click on the title of the question to go directly to that page.

Contents	Page
Summary	3
Assessment objectives	5
Individual questions	9
Further support	13

Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Students have responded very positively to the paper, demonstrating a clear understanding of how to answer the questions effectively in both sections. Senior examiners have been impressed by the fluency of many answers, with students across all ability levels evidencing an effective working knowledge of each text.

In the main, students have a very strong understanding of timing within the confines of the exam. However, some students write more extensively about the first text, leaving the second to be answered in a rushed and abrupt manner.

Students have clearly been well prepared for this examination. References in previous reports to the writer's use of characterisation, focussing on how and why characters change, have clearly been put into practice by centres, resulting in some detailed explorations of the human condition across a range of ability levels.

The questions were accessible to students across all levels and many students appeared to bring enjoyment and enthusiasm to their essays.

Areas where students excelled

- Students' knowledge of the texts has been highlighted as a clear strength by senior examiners. Students have been able to explore a range of ideas and opinions by moving dynamically around the text and extract, drawing on a wide range of references. Students were able to move between the extract and the wider text with ease, often signposting this simply and effectively with phrases such as 'elsewhere in the text' or 'earlier in the text.'
- Students have engaged with the questions effectively, including some interesting and detailed personal responses. There was a real sense of students understanding the wider concepts and universal ideas within the texts across all levels.
- There was clear evidence of students understanding AO2 in a broad sense. There were many interesting comments on stage craft and characterisation, as well as the more traditional methods of metaphor and wider imagery being used carefully and appropriately.
- There has been a strong focus on students crafting their answer by writing thesis statement introductions across all levels and abilities. Examiners have reported that this is more focused and precise than in previous years, resulting in answers that are anchored far more securely to the question throughout the entirety of the response.

Areas where students struggled

- Students are encouraged to read the question stem carefully and note the difference between a 'how' question and a 'how far' question. Where students really explored the question '*How far* is Macbeth presented as an ambitious character', they constructed a clearer, more focussed thesis and developed a more coherent response.
- Examiners are increasingly concerned about the use of social media and its influence on students' answers. This is often evident in pre-prepared paragraphs being shoehorned into an essay, regardless of what the question is asking. Students are encouraged to be discerning in what information they use from social media, especially when it is used in place of developing their own independent thinking or opinions.
- There is a significant increase in students trying to include critical theory, especially Freudian interpretations. Senior examiners reported seeing this more widely in answers on *Macbeth*, whereas previously this has focussed on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Whilst some students are able to apply a Freudian analysis in an insightful, succinct manner, others are including this in a very 'bolt-on' way. Students can get very lost in convoluted explanations of the ego, superego and id, which do not contribute to showing a clear understanding of the texts involved. Centres and students are advised to be mindful of this in future series.
- Timing was a noticeable issue for some students. The marks for the essays in each section are equal, with AO4 being applied additionally to Section A. Students are reminded to spend their time equally on both sections, leaving time to proofread and amend as necessary.

Assessment objectives

AO	Strengths and areas to develop
A01 Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: • Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. • Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	The structure and organisation of responses reflected growing maturity in students' writing. Some responses do rely on a rigid, formulaic structure, and that is appropriate for some students. However, there were fewer responses following rigid PEEL-style templates; instead, more students adopted a flexible, essay-style structure, moving between ideas in a coherent and well-sequenced manner. Overall, many students demonstrated a keen focus on the task. Students do need to take care choosing quotations from the extracts. There were a number of cases where an individual word was taken out of context and used to build an explanation of a character, which it didn't really merit. For example, "bloody instructions" from Macbeth's soliloquy, is primarily about his fears and anxieties about killing Duncan, not his innate violence. It can be helpful to read the whole sentence, and place the word or image in context, to develop a convincing and coherent explanation. There was a real sense of students understanding that 'textual references' refer to a point in the text, not necessarily a direct quotation. There were some exceptional high-level responses to <i>Macbeth</i> where students referenced Macbeth's conversation with the witches at the beginning of the play, demonstrating his ambition in entering into a 'Faustian pact,' as he is trading with evil. In <i>A Christmas Carol</i>, students used the reference 'I am as light as a feather' to highlight that kindness not only benefits the poor but also brings fulfilment to the giver. Many students concluded that the novel shows it is not materialistic wealth that matters most but the richness of the heart. References do not have to be lengthy and simple references to doors and locks in <i>The Secret Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i> enabled students to start to build coherent and successful arguments about hidden lives and secrecy. Some responses relied on pre-learned analysis of a quotation, often that did not fit with what the question was asking. For example, there were several quotes analysing Lady Macbeth's

	character that were not linked to ambition or to Macbeth himself. References that do not link to the question add little value overall. Students are reminded of the need to link their references and quotations to the question in order to best support their argument.
AO2 Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	There was a marked improvement this year in terms of students understanding AO2 in its broader sense. Responses that moved beyond the more traditional analysis of literary devices were able to enrich their answers with reference to characterisation, stagecraft, setting, motifs and relationships between characters. Examiners are interested in students' understanding of why the writer has used words and images, not solely on the name of a specific technique: terms themselves don't carry any inherent value. For example, chremamorphism was referred to ubiquitously in <i>Macbeth</i> essays this series. Very few students used the term effectively in their analysis; essays that did not refer to the word itself, but instead focussed acutely on the connotations of the words 'something wicked,' often demonstrated more effective analysis. Students were often able to evidence their clear thinking about the writer at work, by using tentative, exploratory language. Answers that considered more than one interpretation of an image, idea or technique were often analysing effectively. For example, some students looked beyond 'hidden lives and secrets' solely in terms of reputation, and explored the potential suggestions of repressed homosexuality in <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>. A noticeable strength in AO2 was seen in students who recognised the characters as archetypes, or as a microcosm of a sector of society. Students were thereby able to make effective links between AO2 and AO3, and were able to develop more holistic explanations of the methods they were interrogating. This was particularly apparent with <i>A Christmas Carol</i>, but there was also a lot of good work around Utterson in <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>, as representative of a dry, reserved Victorian gentleman, with his own secrets. Similar work on characterisation was seen with the Friar and the Nurse as parental figures in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>, and the importance of people like these - especially when relationships with parents are strained. The most important advice for AO2 is to focus on the effect of the words and images, not on the technique itself. Students

	who really explored the connotations of the language, those who were clearly focussed on layers of meaning, were often doing very well with AO2.
A03 Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	There continues to be a significant amount of historical detail being diligently recited, which while accurate, does not really develop the argument or explanation. For example, in <i>Macbeth</i>, there was a lot of information about the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings, and whilst this can be helpful, it must be brief. Information about King James 1 and The Gunpowder Plot appeared frequently but added very little to explanations about the extent of Macbeth's ambition. Exploring the universality of the human condition sits at the heart of our qualification and students who could step back and explore the human concepts of the question achieved well in terms of AO3. Ambition in <i>Macbeth</i> was often explored effectively in terms of it being both a destructive and a humanising force within the play, enabling students to look closely at how Macbeth wrestles with ambition compared to others. There were several sensitive interpretations of AO3 in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> and the wider roles played in an <i>in loco parentis</i> capacity by the Nurse and the Friar. Students often explained with thought and sensitivity Juliet and Romeo's relationships with their parents, and, significantly, why they sought the advice of the Friar and the nurse. Here, information about Elizabethan society and the patriarchy was often woven carefully into a more personal response to the characters' situations. In <i>A Christmas Carol</i>, exploring the value of emotional wealth as more important than material wealth was a very successful way of exploring kindness. There was also sensitive exploration of the link between Scrooge's childhood as isolated and his isolation as an adult, showing that he too had been a victim of lack of kindness. Moral and religious lines of argument were very effective in exploring the importance of kindness in <i>A Christmas Carol</i>. Exploring ideas about social attitudes, reputation and repression, enabled students to explore hidden lives and

	secrets very effectively in <i>The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>. There was a significant increase in students applying critical theory to their responses, most notably Freudian interpretations, often without demonstrating a clear understanding of what they are writing. These points often appear pre-prepared and are not adding value to the student's answer. Overall, students who focused closely on the key concept of the question, drawing on an understanding of how writers are exploring human nature, were addressing AO3 effectively.
AO4 Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	Students are advised to be mindful of timing and ensure they have time to both plan and proofread their essays. Students should note the correct spelling of writers' names, the characters' names, and the names of the texts themselves.

Individual sections

Section A

What students did well

As in previous series, *Macbeth* is overwhelmingly the most popular Shakespeare text, with *Romeo and Juliet* in second place.

Responses to Shakespeare across the ability spectrum demonstrated a real understanding from young people about the human condition. Morality was often used as a vehicle to explore Macbeth's burgeoning ambition; students could draw critical conclusions about Macbeth as a human and the range of emotions he experiences throughout the play. Students demonstrated empathy with Juliet and her father's treatment of her; however, some empathised with Capulet, recognising the confines of society in which he was operating. Some students recognised a sadness in Romeo due to the seemingly distant relationship with his parents, drawing conclusions about searching for a paternal figure in the Friar due to this distance.

Students found the *Macbeth* question very accessible, and were able to write at length about how far Shakespeare explored ambition within his character.

Students found numerous ways to consider ambition, exploring the many facets of Macbeth's character, how other characters viewed Macbeth and how he changes within the play. Many students explored the reasons behind his ambition – was it instigated by the supernatural, was he manipulated by Lady Macbeth, or was he driven by his own immorality? In doing so, students were able to provide a sustained focus on methods and wider meanings of human nature in relation to ambition. One fascinating interpretation explored Macbeth as the only childless man in the play, and his ambition was his desperate desire to prove his manhood.

Several students discussed whether Macbeth is truly evil and ambitious, or whether he is a pawn in a sinister plan orchestrated by the witches; many discussed his ambitious intent being in conflict with moral elements of his character. There were some interesting responses that referred to 'Tarquin's ravishing strides' suggesting that by referencing Tarquin, Macbeth was revealing a dark, immoral side of his character that was truly base, suggestive of a man whose ambition and lust for power needed no encouragement. Many students explored ambition and Macbeth's recognition of his own waning morality in relation to the juxtaposition in 'stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires.'

The *Romeo and Juliet* question about parents and children resonated with many and produced detailed responses across all levels. Some students expressed sympathy to Capulet citing his anger as being a symptom of his frustration and fear for Juliet's financial security, but also criticised him for forcing marriage no matter the suffering it causes. There were many who focussed on status and how this causes division between families; there were some mature responses to this when discussing how love is often overlooked when the head of a family determines who will marry who. Many students recognised the Friar and the nurse as

surrogate parents and thus their importance as role models, which led to detailed responses on the relationships between parents and children.

There were some strong responses discussing the portrayal of women in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which seemed to generate impassioned and heartfelt responses. *The Merchant of Venice* was also treated effectively, with attitudes to wealth being considered through Shylock, Portia, Bassanio and Antonio. There were very few answers seen in relation to *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*.

Common misunderstandings

There were very few misunderstandings about the questions overall; however, some students use quotations out of context and students should ensure that their quotation supports what they are saying.

Students need to ensure that material from across the play is used. Looking at the character across the whole play, leads to a more holistic and rounded interpretation. For example, just taking material from the opening act can be somewhat limiting. Recognising the character's overall development, can give more to analyse and explore.

Some students rely too heavily on online material, which results in paragraphs that don't fit with the overall question or don't show students' individual thinking.

Section B

What students did well

A Christmas Carol remains the most popular Section B text, with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* second. There were fewer answers seen this year on *The Sign of Four*, but answers were seen on all of the set texts, many of which were very insightful.

Students across all levels evidenced strong ideas and thinking about the nature of life in 19th Century Britain and how this impacted on moral perspectives and, ultimately, the joys and sorrows of human experience.

Students demonstrated real empathy and understanding about the true nature of kindness, and how material wealth is insignificant compared to emotional wealth and happiness in *A Christmas Carol*; students expressed empathy with Dr Jekyll and the harsh reality of living a life governed by duplicity and duality in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Some students were able to discuss how Stevenson was criticising the hypocrisies that lie behind the behaviour of Victorian gentlemen.

A Christmas Carol is clearly well understood, and students were more than able to consider the extract. There was lots of very effective analysis of the Cratchit family, as well as of Scrooge. Most noticeable in leading to stronger responses was the recognition that Dickens was using the characters to represent certain groups or demographics. An interpretation that

followed this line of enquiry was automatically integrating an explanation of methods with a discussion of ideas and themes, which led to effective and fruitful analysis of the text, as they were exploring how Dickens was presenting his ideas about society.

A similar approach was very effective with *Jekyll and Hyde* - recognising that Jekyll and Utterson represent the Victorian gentleman and using that as a stepping stone to explore ideas about social attitudes, reputation and repression. For example, students recognised that Hyde was a construct through which Dr Jekyll could explore his debauched desires without tarnishing his reputation and were able to link this to wider understanding of how gentlemen had to behave in Victorian society. Students also recognised that Utterson was created to represent yet another identical puppet in Victorian society's pantomime of false respectability.

In *A Christmas Carol*, many students focused on the holistic development of Scrooge and his increasing generosity and kindness, as a result of the ghosts' involvement. Many students also explored the characters of Fred and Fezziwig in relation to kindness and generosity. Some answers focussed on the sensual and visual nature of the text, contrasting the cold, loneliness of the rich with the warmth of the poor, as represented by the Cratchit family.

In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* students were able to explore a wide range of ideas around 'hidden lives and secrets' including reference to Enfield being out at '3am on some black winter morning', the labyrinthine nature of the streets of London, locked doors and sealed envelopes, and the tension between light and darkness within the novella. Many explored the idea of duality and empathised with Jekyll in his acknowledgement that 'my devil had long been caged, he came out roaring', which provided some fruitful analysis about the tensions within humans.

Students commented on the use of pathetic fallacy and the foggy weather that permeates *Jekyll and Hyde*. Many answers explored how fog creates a clandestine atmosphere within the novella, mirroring the secrecy within which gentlemen had to exist. In *A Christmas Carol* it was suggested that fog was designed to mirror Scrooge's obscured view of society as he remains in blissful ignorance.

Some responses to *Jane Eyre* used explorations of Jane's loneliness and isolation as a child making her vulnerable and explored how this later becomes her strength, as she can deny happiness with Rochester and follow her own moral code - even if this means being alone. Contrasts were used in answers in *Frankenstein* referring to Victor's first recollections of his parents being his 'father's smile' which contrasts to the monster being called a 'wretch' from the beginning, and how this creates an imbalance in appearance and acceptance.

Common misunderstandings

Students should be mindful of making sweeping statements about life in 19th century Britain, or about the authors themselves. Many students are proclaiming that Dickens is a socialist, full stop. Students would be better placed exploring how his work is criticising social injustice and poverty. In *A Christmas Carol* some students generalise Dickens' message ("he wanted people to be kinder") without acknowledging the specific social problems he was reacting to — like the Poor Law or workhouses. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, less successful answers often mention

“Victorian society” in vague terms, without showing how societal pressures actually cause characters to keep secrets.

Some students rely too heavily on online material, which results in paragraphs that don’t fit with the overall question or don’t show students’ individual thinking.

Advice for students

- Be careful about relying on the internet and social media influencers to pre-prepare an answer. This is not helpful and does not show **your** thinking about the question. The examiner is interested in what **you** think and why **you** think it.
- Spend your time revising a range of ideas about the different characters and themes in order to show what **you** think about the play or the novel.
- Read the question carefully – does it ask you to write about ‘how’, or does it ask you to write about ‘how far’? If it is asking you ‘how far’ you should include your own judgement and look at different aspects of the character or theme; if it asks you ‘how’ you should explore a range of methods that look at different aspects of character or theme. Both question stems require you to develop a detailed response.
- Read the extract carefully and think about how it links to other parts of the text. The extract is there to help you answer the question – spend a few minutes thinking carefully about the extract and plan what you will write in your answer. You don’t need to start with the extract – it is up to you which part of the text you start with, but you must include references to the extract and the whole text.
- Don’t try to include literary terms that you have been told will ‘unlock a high grade.’ Terms like chremamorphism do not guarantee you a high grade. Your analysis of the writer’s words and images is much more important in terms of securing marks - what is the writer telling us and why have they chosen to use specific words / images?
- Try not to repeat lots of historical information, as this isn’t helpful to your answer. Focus on the key theme or idea in the question and link that to your understanding of how the writer is exploring these universal ideas.
- Try not to repeat ideas about critical theory that you might not fully understand. Sometimes this leaves answers feeling very clunky and not actually answering the question. Everything you write about needs to be linked back to the question, so write about what you are comfortable with and what you can discuss in detail.
- Timing is really important. Try to spend an equal amount of time on both sections. Don’t leave yourself a short amount of time to complete the second section.
- Focus on showing the examiner what **you** think about the question. We know that you have lots of interesting ideas to discuss and we look forward to reading them.

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