

Scots language in the Scottish set text list

Qualifications Scotland's list of [Scottish Set Texts](#), taught as part of National 5 and Higher English, offer a choice of drama, prose and poetry in Scots and English.

Texts notable for their use of Scots include:

Drama: *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence; *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart; *The Slab Boys* by John Byrne.

Prose: *Duck Feet (*Part Wan First Year)* by Ely Percy; a selection of stories from *Hieroglyphics and Other Stories* by Anne Donovan.

Poetry: *Grandpa's Soup*, and *Maw Broon Visits a Therapist* by Jackie Kay; some poems from the National 5 poetry collection such as *The Bonnie Earl o' Moray* (traditional ballad), *The Twa Corbies* (traditional ballad), *A Red, Red Rose* by Robert Burns; some poems from the Higher poetry collection such as *Thomas the Rhymer* (traditional ballad), *Composed In August* by Robert Burns, *The Bonnie Broukit Bairn* by Hugh MacDiarmid, *Da Clearance* by Rhoda Bulter.

What is Scots?

Scots is one of Scotland's official languages. Its status as an official language was reinforced by the [Scottish Languages Act 2025](#), which outlined the legal obligations of the Scottish Government in supporting Gaelic in Scots, including support for Scots language education in schools.

How can I introduce Scots to my learners?

Education Scotland have produced a short video titled '[History of Scots](#)', which provides a basic introduction to Scots. For a more detailed history of the development of Scots, you can access the Angus McIntosh Centre for Historical linguistics' video 'The origins of the Scots Language', which is available in [Scots](#) or [English](#).

What about dialects?

Scots has a range of dialects, 'each of which at least in theory is equal in status to all the others each of which at least in theory is equal in status to all the others'¹. Different linguists and organisations have considered the split of dialects across Scots. The Scots Language Centre's '[Scots Dialects](#)' page has sections that give information about the following varieties of Scots: Shetland (sometimes known as Shetlandic); Orkney (sometimes known as Orcadian); North East (sometimes known as Doric); Caithness; East Angus and Kincardine; West Central; East Central North/South; South Central; Borders. The Dictionary of the Scots Language feature a [map of dialects](#) on their site.

¹ Millar, Robert McColl. (2023) 'What is Scots?', *A History of the Scots Language* (Oxford) p. 7

The representation of dialect within Scottish Set Texts

There are some Scottish Set Texts that use specific dialects of Scots, distinctive by their representations of their phonology as well as their lexical differences.

Phonology

Some of the Scots within the Scottish Set Texts use spelling to indicate how the word should sound, which may be associated with a particular regional accent or dialect. For example, in Donovan's *All That Glisters*, the narrator uses 'gonny' ('naebdy wis gonny say anythin'); canny ('he canny even get oot his bed'); widny and disny ('Donna widny rob hooses or steal sumpn oot yer purse'²). The spelling of these words differentiate them from the -na suffixes – the 'canna, widna, dinna' - of North East writing and so fits with our knowledge of Donovan as a Glaswegian writer.

Lexicology

Some of the Scots within SST uses dialect to establish setting. In *Men Should Weep*, the characters consistently use 'wean':

Maggie That's jist talk. If onythin wis tae happen tae ony o the weans, John would tak it bad. They canna staun up tae things like a wumman. They loss the heid and shout.³

The word 'wean' is, according to the Dictionary of the Scots Language, a word that developed in [west mid Scots](#) (east and west Dumbarton, south Argyll, Bute, Renfrew, Glasgow, Lanark, north Ayr), which fits with the text's setting of the east end of Glasgow:

Another example would be the use of Shetland Scots in *Da Clearance* by Rhoda Bulter:

Aa da lums ir reekin, an I hear da happy soonds
O peerie bairns skirlin, as dey play dem ower da toons.⁴

The word 'da' is the Shetland form of the English word 'the', and 'dem' is 'them'. Also, 'peerie' is Shetland Scots for small.

Older Scots

Although we may think of the Scots used in *The Bonnie Earl o' Moray*, *The Twa Corbies*, *Thomas the Rhymer*, *A Red, Red Rose*, and *Composed In August* as being older than contemporary Scots that we hear spoken in our communities today, the Dictionary of the Scots Language defines Older Scots as Scots that was spoken pre 1700. For context, Modern English is considered to be English that is used from 1650 onwards.

Although *The Bonnie Earl of Moray*, *The Twa Corbies* and *Thomas the Rhymer* may have been composed before 1700 and shared by oral storytelling, some versions are published decades or even centuries later. This means that some of the spelling conventions of Older Scots, such as <quh> for /M/, e.g. *quha* 'who', are not evident in these poems.

² Donovan, A. (2001). *All That Glisters in Hieroglyphics and Other Stories*. (Canongate)

³ Stewart, E. L. (1983). *Men should weep : a play*. (Samuel French)

⁴ Bulter, R. (2014). *Da Clearance*, in *Hairst is Coosed: The Rhoda Bulter Collection (The Shetland Times)*

Apostrophes

Allan Ramsay (1684-1758) is credited with introducing the inclusion of apostrophes within Scots words to indicate where a letter would be missing in an English word. This convention is evident in *Thomas the Rhymer* (ye maun go wi' me); *The Bonnie Earl o Moray* (Come soundin' through the toun); *The Twa Corbies* (His lady's ta'en another mate) *Composed in August* (Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find) and *A Red, Red Rose* (Till a' the seas gang dry). This spelling convention has become known as the 'apologetic apostrophe' as many believe it implies that Scots is a 'a derivative and inferior form of English'⁵ and so the writer is apologising for using it. Whether or not a contemporary writer uses apostrophes in this way is determined by themselves and their editors, but it's generally considered to be an outdated convention. While they may have originally been used to make Scots more accessible for an English-speaking audience, there are now so many options for an audience to use another means of defining a Scots word that their use may be considered ignorant, political or even offensive.

Assessing knowledge of Scots

When asked to comment upon the writer's language, candidates may select Scots words and, for example, discuss their connotations or the imagery they create. However, there is no requisite for a candidate to identify dialect, demonstrate understanding of etymology or discuss orthography. It may, however, be useful for candidates to explore how the use of Scots illustrates setting in time and place and enhances central concerns related to identity.

Useful Links

Dictionary of the Scots Language: <https://dsl.ac.uk/>

Education Scotland's [Features of Scots resource](#).

Rhoda Bulter reads *Da Clearance*: <https://www.shetlanddialect.org.uk/da-clearance>

The Open University's [Scots language and culture course](#)

The Open University's [Scots language teacher professional learning programme](#)

The Scots Language Centre's [Education page](#)

⁵ Corbett, J., McClure, J. & Stuart-Smith, J. (2003), *A Brief History of Scots, The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)