
AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1B Literary Genres: drama: aspects of comedy
Report on the Examination

7716
2017

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Introductory Comments

This is the second year of the reformed AS examinations for LITB and although the entry was smaller than last year, it was still healthy and plenty of excellent work was seen on Aspects of Tragedy and Aspects of Comedy. For those centres offering AS as a springboard for A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of genre and texts. Students seem to have enjoyed reading and exploring their texts through the lens of literary genres and examiners reported that, on the whole, the performance of students was better this year with answers being more tightly focused on the tasks. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers.

As with last year, it is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and, to an extent, are interdependent. They share the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the AOs are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. This year all papers were marked online using RM Assessor.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts. Indeed, if they do compare, it invariably gets in the way and adds nothing or little to the answers. Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, as expected, very similar.

The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details

In all AQA courses for Specification B, in all official communications and in all our support materials on the website, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess. When they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy that are not required by the question. Although students are studying the genres of tragedy and comedy, the tasks do not require them to write everything or anything known about the genre including what Aristotle, Hegel and other theorists have said. If students subvert questions they usually get into a muddle.

In 1A and 1B Section A, there is an imperative to write about the specific tragic and comedic aspects set up in the bullets and those that are also evident in the passage itself and which connect to the wider play. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students needed to centre their debates were also clearly signaled, for example Willy Loman's tragic flaw in *Death of a Salesman*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the comedy's being always trivial and never serious, Gatsby's being an admirable tragic hero in *The Great Gatsby* and distressing events and optimism in *Small Island*.

The importance of students knowing their texts and then reading them through the lens of genre

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts *through* the lens of genre and not *at* the lens of genre itself. They are not required to write about various generic theories or indeed about literary theory in general. The text, its story and the narrative arc must have priority before other work can begin. Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation in both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Although this might seem obvious, they need to know what happens and how the story ends. They also need to be able to write relevantly about specific parts of the text and have ideas about what can be analysed in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations, though knowing quotations and using them judiciously always helps.

Students who had a secure understanding of the chronology and characters of their stories could make good choices. They could focus on particular events, use appropriate details and write in an informed way. Making good choices is crucial. The student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. Having secure textual knowledge gives students confidence; it is the base from which all else springs. Some students made bad choices that led them away from the task. These bad choices were often made because of inadequate textual knowledge and this resulted in students struggling with the tasks, often writing in a general, vague and inaccurate way. Several students tried to disguise their lack of knowledge by making things up, particularly quotations, and they then wrote about the significance of their invented words as if the words belonged to the authors. Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from students' arguments. If students do not know quotations then they would be best advised to simply explain their ideas using their own words and, providing that their explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, they will be credited.

Clearly it is imperative for this specification that students also have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how the texts connect with a traditional pattern and how they may disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there is a tragic or comedic absolute or template which writers are always trying to model. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view or explore the significance of particular aspects. This is also the case with the poetry questions. The word 'significance' in the Shakespeare passage based question – and where it is used elsewhere - is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly

understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

The passage based questions

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or their poetry text. The passage is provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play or poetry text. In all cases students need to read – or reread - the extract carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place.

The main difference between the passages selected for Papers 1 and 2 is that the Shakespeare passage is longer with the expectation that students will spend most of their time writing about the passage (with guided bullets), linking appropriately to the wider play, whereas the extract from the poetry text is shorter and has been selected to lead students into the debate set up in the question. Students are expected to use the passage for part of their answer and then range more widely around the text, as they construct their argument. This is made clear in the questions.

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and bullets and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the bullets are addressed there is no directive as to how much time is spent on each. When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. Students have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words which is rarely productive and usually takes students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

In the Section A questions of Papers 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and since students have their texts with them in the exam they can easily contextualise the extracts in terms of the wider text. This will immediately enable them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

Authorial and dramatic methods

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. In Papers 1A and 1B, it is specifically dramatic method, where, in relation to the question, students need to give a sense of how the play has been shaped by the dramatists. In Papers 2A and 2B the focus is on the shaping of stories in poetry and novels.

Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analysis of single words or comments about rhyme and metre. A particular problem for some students was that they wrote about features that they did not understand. This was particularly true of iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose. Many students do not seem to know what the terms mean and they ended up writing inaccurately. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Fortunately fewer students this year were writing about punctuation, but there were still some who tried to find meanings in commas and full stops.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

Writing skills

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is of course essential in a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. To write impressively does not mean to flood writing with critical, tragic and comedic terminology, often using that terminology for its own sake and not really understanding it anyway. Some students unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward and cluttered, sometimes making little sense. Such writing was often marred by technical errors. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Several students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty and which did not gain them marks.

Freeing students up and giving them ownership of their writing

Too often, some students were burdened with terminology or material which they seemed to feel they had to include. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but others included the gratuitous inclusion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology which was not often understood. Such terminology often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if as many as possible appeared in their writing. It is very rare that words like anagnorisis, stichomythia, and zeugma, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence. Often English, rather than Greek or Latinate, expressions make much more sense and are understood more by those who are using them.

Similarly some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic and comedic aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students references to other texts got in the way.

It is important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Writing about what is not understood leads to very confused writing.

The importance of clear and independent thinking

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. They need to approach the paper and questions without any preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded.

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2018.

Specific comments about 1B

Fewer students took this option this year but there was still much good work to be seen. The *Taming of the Shrew* was a little less popular than *Twelfth Night* but in responses to both texts there was good understanding of dramatic comedy. In Section B *The Importance of Earnest* was overwhelmingly the most popular text. Unfortunately there were not many answers on *She Stoops to Conquer* or on *Educating Rita*. Those that were seen were often more focused on the task than some of the responses on *The Importance of Earnest*.

Section A

In the answers to Questions 1 and 2, on the whole, students made good use of their time, making sensible choices about how much time to spend on each bullet and how much time to spend making relevant links between the extract and the wider play. While most students did make 'relevant' links, some links were tenuous. In these cases students tended to spot ideas in the extract or be aware of characters that appeared and then write generally about them in terms of the whole play often abandoning the extract altogether.

The best answers showed that there was a good understanding of the narrative of the extract and how this contributed to the whole drama and comedy.

Question 1: *The Taming of the Shrew*

There were some excellent responses to this question by those students who contextualised the extract accurately and those who saw it as part of Petruchio's taming school strategy. The first bullet asked students to consider the presentation of Petruchio and most were able to write about his confidence, his bullying, his extravagant behaviour and how this is shown through his actions and his exchanges with Grumio, the Tailor and Katherina.

In the second bullet students were asked to consider the roles of the Tailor and Grumio, an interesting task since the concept of 'role' here is multifaceted with Grumio, as a servant, playing a secondary role orchestrated by Petruchio in deceiving Katherina and the Tailor, all the time fulfilling his comedic role to excite laughter. While the best responses engaged with 'roles' some students struggled to see that Grumio is playing a number of roles and that the extract is only a part of a more complex story.

The students who struggled had insecure knowledge of the play and did not see that Katherina is the intended audience for the behaviours of Petruchio and Grumio. Some thought that Petruchio was just being mean to the Tailor criticising his work and they did not seem to know that later in the play Petruchio tells Hortensio to pay the Tailor anyway. Some students mislocated the extract and thought that this scene happened before Petruchio's wedding and that he was choosing clothes for himself. The strongest students were able to do much with the third bullet and write about Katherina and Hortensio in terms of dramatic comedy. Good references were made with other aspects of Petruchio's plan and with other moments in the play when Katherina has more of a voice than she has here. In the best answers there was very secure understanding of Shakespeare's dramatic methods with good discussion of the visual comedy, the altercations about the gown, the farce and absurdity of Petruchio's treatment of his servants and the quick fire language exchanges.

Question 2: *Twelfth Night*

Most students were able to locate this extract accurately in terms of the wider play and there was good focus on the bullets. The majority of students had a lot to say about Malvolio and about disguise and they welcomed the opportunity to express their ideas. However, not every student centred their comments on the extract and some just wrote about character and theme in a general way. Only a few focused on the dramatic narrative of the extract, of how it begins with Maria's call for Feste to don his disguise and how it ends, after the mockery of Malvolio, with Sir Toby's saying he has had enough of 'this knavery' and that Malvolio needs to be 'conveniently delivered'.

The first bullet, which required students to consider the treatment of Malvolio and his responses to that treatment, elicited some very good ideas. Students were able to write about the comedy of the dissembling against Malvolio and its cruelty. There were some very personal responses to this bullet and most were well argued. The strongest responses engaged with the notion of how cruelty in comedy works and how there is a dark edge to much comedy which is uneasy. Some students, however, resorted to general and sweeping comments about particular audiences. Invariably it was claimed that the Elizabethans would have laughed at Malvolio's treatment because everyone laughed at mad people then whereas today we know this is cruel and we don't find it funny. There were also assertive – and often inaccurate – comments about how Elizabethans would have responded to Malvolio as a puritan. It is most unhelpful to make claims about audiences as if they all thought the same at every performance of the play.

The second bullet required students to write about disguise and most produced some thoughtful ideas about Feste masquerading as Sir Topas and about the counterfeiting of Maria and Sir Toby. Some very interesting ideas were raised about the visual impact of disguise and how Feste's costume is for the benefit of his onstage audience of Maria and Sir Toby and the theatre audience since Malvolio cannot see him anyway. The students who focused tightly on the extract in relation to disguise were able to make a range of telling points in relation to dramatic comedy – how Feste is used to mock the clergy in general when he says he wishes he were the first 'that ever dissembled in such a gown', how he delights in dressing up and showing off his skills of impersonation, how Maria and Sir Toby enjoy Feste's performance themselves playing supporting roles and how the whole idea of trickery fits in with comedic disorder and the revelry of festive comedy. Those students who saw the bullet as an opportunity to write about Viola and her disguise as Cesario sometimes moved so far away from the extract that they found it difficult to re-engage with it though they were still credited for relevant comments made.

In response to the third bullet, in the best answers there was good discussion of the role of Maria (both in the extract and in the wider play), of Malvolio's gulling in Acts 2 and 3 and of comedic chaos and disorder.

Section B

Question 3: *She Stoops to Conquer*

There were few responses to this question. Those who had studied Goldsmith's play did not seem to have any difficulty writing about the significance of the Hardcastles' home as a comedic setting. These students seem to have enjoyed the play and they could make a range of points about the home as the setting which opens the dramatic action and which is transformed in the eyes of Marlow and Hastings into a country inn. Some relevant links were made to the comedic genre when Kate was discussed as the dissembling barmaid in home/inn setting and when Tony Lumpkin was discussed as the instigator of the confusion.

Weaker answers tended to be far too general and there was little engagement with significance. In order to make telling points about dramatic comedy students need to know details of the text. This is especially true when they are writing about the specifics of language and the comic interplay between characters. Only the strongest students could engage with the language Hardcastle uses to show his forbearance and discontent in relation to Marlow and Hastings treating his home as an inn or in the subtleties of Kate's shifts in register as she changes role.

Question 4: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

This was by far the most popular text on the paper and while the question was well answered by many, there were also many who did not perform well because they did not focus enough on the play. The question required students to explore the view that the comedy of the play is 'always trivial and never serious'. Clearly there were a number of key words to focus on here and while most attempted to engage with trivial and serious, not all considered the words 'always' and 'never' which provided the real opportunity to debate.

Students seemed to have been aware of the importance of the word 'trivial' because they knew Wilde's subtitle and some also knew that Lady Bracknell's final words of the play are her accusation that Jack seems to be 'displaying signs of triviality', yet many students were unsure of what the word 'trivial' actually means and they got into difficulty. There was better understanding of the meaning of 'serious' though unfortunately several students based their arguments on ideas outside of the play. Indeed, this was the main issue that examiners noticed in this question. Too much of the discussion was based on general assertions about Victorian society, the patriarchal world, the powerlessness of women, the repression of homosexuals and Wilde's own unhappy biography. Although some students were able to use contextual material helpfully by linking it to ideas within the play, many were not. While it was apt to write about Wilde's critiquing the double standards of Victorian society by focusing on the represented world within the text, it was unhelpful to write about duplicity in Victorian England in a general sense. When students did this they often made things up, simplifying history in an unhelpful way.

The best responses were focused tightly on the play and task, and many students were able to write insightfully about Wilde's critiquing of the leisured classes through the behaviours and speech of Jack, Algernon, Cecily and Gwendolen who have so little to do. There was also good discussion of the serious issue within the play of the lack of truth in relationships which many argued is disturbing and far from trivial. For those who understood trivial, there was plenty of material within the play that was used to support views, for example the lighthearted attitudes to love and marriage, the plot's hinging on the story of a baby being abandoned in a handbag and of course the absurdity of valuing the name of Ernest.

Most students could write sensibly about Wilde's dramatic methods but writing about method is difficult if the argument rests on what happened – or was thought to have happened – in history.

Question 5: *Educating Rita*

There were even fewer responses to this text than to *She Stoops to Conquer*. The few that were seen were focused on class differences and some tried to tease out significance but too often details of the play were not known so comments were rather general.

In the best answers there was good discussion of the contrast of Rita's working class background and the professional, educated middle class background of Frank and how this contributes to the dramatic comedy. When students knew details of the play they could make valid points about the characters' speech patterns and their lexical choices. The very best answers had a clear eye on Russell's construction of his characters.

The key messages for centres as they prepare students for future AS exam are:

- ensure that students have secure textual knowledge
- ensure that they know how to focus on the questions set.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.