
AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2A Literary Genres: prose and poetry: aspects of tragedy
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.

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 poor choices that led them away from the task. These poor 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 2A

Although the most popular choices were Keats and *The Great Gatsby*, responses were seen to all the set texts and good answers were seen on all of them when there was tight focus on the questions. As was the case last year, students tended to write better on authorial method when they were writing about poetry though there were many students who were able to write about relevant structural issues and the writers' choices of narrators in the prose texts and this was pleasing to see.

When answering the questions on poetry, students have to engage with printed extracts. This means that there are no short cuts when studying the poetry text as students have to be prepared for an extract from any of the poems in the selection. The extracts are chosen to help students to construct their arguments and most students do find them helpful. Given that this is an open book exam, they can also look again at the poem from which the extract comes and briefly contextualise it. However, if students do not know their texts well they tend to struggle. It was certainly the case this year that some students had little understanding of the extracts, sometimes responding as if they were reading them for the first time. As a result they did not use them confidently as a base for their arguments.

Question 1: John Keats selection

In this question students needed to focus on the tragic aspect of the ‘mixture of goodness and evil’ that exists (or does not exist) in protagonists. Most were able to respond to this task and most made good choices.

The selected extract here was from an early section of *The Eve of St Agnes* in which Porphyro, having entered the castle of Madeline’s family, proposes a plan to Angela that will enable him to see Madeline. The two stanzas provided plenty of good material for students to work with as they discussed Porphyro’s potential evil and goodness. Most students successfully incorporated other parts of the poem in their debates. Good work was also seen when students chose *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and took either the knight or the faery child as the protagonist, discussing how they can both be seen as having a mixture of goodness or evil. Discussions of *Lamia* also worked well when the focus was on specific parts of the poem. When students did not perform well it was often because they did not write about the protagonists and instead discussed minor characters like the Beadsman, Angela or the brothers in *Isabella*. There were also a few who wanted to write about villains and victims and wrote their own question.

There was generally some good analysis of Keats’ methods in the printed extract, the best being on structure and voices. Language analysis worked when it was firmly connected to the question and Porphyro’s character; it was less successful when words were discussed in an isolated way.

Most students saw that the contexts they were required to work with were literary and moral but some still thought they needed to write about Keats’ personal life, his Romanticism, his tuberculosis and his relationship with Fanny Brawne and this did not lead to focused writing.

Question 2: Thomas Hardy selection

There were several responses to the Hardy poetry selection this year and Hardy was often chosen alongside *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as the prose text. This pairing often worked well in shoring up ideas and confidence. The key tragic concept in the question was that happiness has no lasting impact and only sharpens pain. The printed extract was from the middle of *At Castle Boterel*. Students producing the best responses understood the poem and saw the scene in the extract as a moment of extraordinary happiness being recalled by a speaker in a much gloomier present. The scene in the extract could have been used to support the premise set up in the question - or to counter it given that the scene Hardy describes was ‘of such quality’. However, there were several students who did not use the extract in any constructive way as they clearly did not understand the poem and struggled with the extract and its story. Many just wanted it to be evidence of Hardy’s unhappy relationship with Emma and picked out ‘negative’ words from the poem to ‘prove’ their point.

Most students who achieved high marks made good choices of other poems to argue their cases and there was some impressive work seen on *Tess’s Lament*, *Under the Waterfall* and *Lament*. Some students were clearly thinking about what happiness might mean in Hardy’s poetry and in terms of the tragic genre. They were also thinking about whether or not it has a lasting impact – for both characters and readers – and whether it *only* sharpens pain or whether it has other functions.

Comments on authorial method were generally well integrated and there was particularly good discussion of the various speakers used to tell the tragic stories in the chosen poems.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

Several centres offered the *Poetry Anthology: Tragedy* as their poetry text and on the whole it did not seem to be done as well as it was last year. The reason for this was that many students did not understand the extract from *Paradise Lost* and several wanted to write about Satan's biblical backstory in terms of his being grand and magnificent rather than the story being told by Milton in the extract. Some students seemed to think that it is impossible for Satan to be grand simply because he is Satan; they were unable to see how Milton's construction of the character is far from straightforward.

Even so there were some very good answers where students engaged with the complexity of Milton's presentation of his tragic hero seeing something majestic in Satan's defiance of God. In these responses there was some insightful work on authorial method, particularly the voice of Satan and the language he uses. The quality of students' answers often depended on the choices they made of other poems from the collection. Some very good work was seen in the discussions of Tithonus, Cuchulain and The Titanic which all proved to be good choices for the question. Some students who chose Miss Gee thoughtfully argued that she is not grand or majestic apart from in her dream.

Question 4: The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby was again the most popular text and the question elicited some really good responses. The answers were much better than those produced last year. The key aspect here was 'admirable' and those students who debated whether Gatsby is an admirable tragic hero did very well. When students did not perform as well they often ignored the word 'admirable' and just wrote generally about Gatsby as a tragic hero, missing the key word. The sentence given before the question (Nick Carraway says of Gatsby 'there was something gorgeous about him') helped many students in the construction of their debates. Some very interesting work was seen by those who argued that Fitzgerald and Nick are not the same and that Nick is himself a construct with a bias towards Gatsby which may or may not be shared by Fitzgerald.

There seemed to be a little less obsession this year with the American Dream, Fitzgerald's life with Zelda and 1920s America, though such material was still to be found and was rarely used to further a relevant debate.

Question 5: Tess of the D'Urbervilles

This text was offered by a number of centres, and on the whole it was well done. Students really seemed to enjoy writing about Alec D'Urberville and whether or not he is likeable. In the best answers there was some good discussion of Alec's villainy, his preying on Tess, his raping her and his deceit. There was also good discussion of aspects of his character that might be seen as likeable including his willingness to help Tess' family, his charisma and his wanting to take care of her. Many students expressed strong and energised personal views about Alec and the text was generally well used to support ideas. It was good to see students engaging with Hardy's methods in this question and there was some good writing about the partiality of the narrator towards Tess, the structure of the text in terms of when Alec appears and the melodramatic way he is described and constructed by Hardy.

Unfortunately some students did not write about method at all and this affected the mark they achieved.

Question 6: *The Remains of the Day*

Although there were not many responses to this text, examiners reported that they saw some excellent debates on whether Lord Darlington is an innocent or a villain. The question really seemed to have inspired the imaginations of many and there were plenty of thoughtful ideas which were grounded in details of the novel. Most students were able to see how the debate depends on how readers respond to Ishiguro's use of Stevens as a narrator. Many considered how Stevens tries to protect and exonerate Lord Darlington but that Ishiguro opens up channels for readers to see the aristocrat rather differently.

The weakest answers were by those students who did not know the text well enough to select and explore key passages in the construction of their arguments.

The key messages for centres as they prepare students for the 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.