
AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 1A Aspects of Tragedy
Report on the Examination

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Introductory Comments

Although the entry for AS was smaller than in previous years, the students who had taken the AS course and had been prepared for the exam had clearly gained much from it. They had understood how to read and write about texts through the lenses of tragedy and comedy and they seemed to have enjoyed their studies. All examiners reported that they saw some really interesting and engaged work. The AS examination is very straightforward in its design and is clearly accessible to students. For those schools offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of genre and it allows them to study and write about their four texts in discrete ways while still seeing their connection to generic conventions. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers on each paper.

As with previous years, 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 sharing the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. 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 25 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.

As with A-level, there are two essentials for success on Specification B:

- thorough knowledge of the set texts
- answering the questions in all their details.

The importance of students knowing their texts

This might seem obvious, but those students who had a clear sense of the order of events in their texts (who knew how the stories of the texts begin and end and where climaxes and crises occur) had a clear advantage over those who did not. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had a good understanding of the characters, ideas, ideology and genre of their texts and who understood how writers have constructed their narratives to shape meanings. Having good textual knowledge enables students to confidently address the questions and select material appropriately. Making good choices is crucial and the student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood.

Although Papers 1A and 1B are closed book exams and Papers 2A and 2B open book, there is an expectation in both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. This should be prioritised over any critical reading or background and contextual information about writers' lives and times.

Clearly for this specification, 'knowing the text' also requires students to have an understanding of the text's genre both in terms of how the text connects with a traditional pattern and how it may diverge, as seen if the writer consciously plays with and subverts genre. Several students still 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 answering the questions set in all their details

When students are armed with secure textual knowledge then they have to be trained to answer questions that are set and not to subvert them or only partially address them. In all AQA courses, official communications and support materials for Specification B, 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 or requirements that are not asked in the questions. When students 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.

Section A: passage based and extract 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 to 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 and not just pick out themes and words to comment on.

The main difference between the sections of text 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 to 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 as this 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' wider 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 immediately enables them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

Section B questions

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that students are invited to debate a view or construct an argument around key aspects of tragedy or comedy (signaled either by 'Explore the view that' or 'Explore the significance of'). This is also the case with the poetry questions which have an extract. 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. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students needed to centre their debates are also clearly set up in the question, for example Gaunt's and York's having more greatness and nobility than Richard in *Richard II*, Lady Bracknell and whether she is the principal source of comedy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Daisy's ultimately being a victim in *The Great Gatsby* and Bernard Bligh's being nothing more than a figure of fun in *Small Island*.

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 specifically to further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

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.

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. Some students wrote about features that they did not understand, for example iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose. Many students did not seem to know what the terms mean and they invariably got into a muddle. The same was true of many who wrote about rhyme schemes. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and students integrated these into their arguments.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which are set up in the questions and which emerge naturally from texts. 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 write about writers' lives or the times in which they lived. In the least secure 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 this helped them to construct powerful arguments. To write well 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.

Taking ownership

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material regardless of the question.

There is no requirement for students to compare texts. There is no requirement to incorporate historical or biographical context. There is no requirement to do anything that the question does not set up.

It is also 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 best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read.

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 2019.

Paper 1A specific comments

Section A

Section A asks students to answer one of two passage-based questions on either *Othello* or *King Lear*. As in previous years, *Othello* was the more popular choice but *King Lear* was also well-represented with many students showing a real sense of engagement with the complex issues in this play and producing interesting and thoughtful responses.

The questions in this section ask students to consider specific aspects of dramatic tragedy in relation to the extract and the play as a whole. Where students rooted their response firmly in what was going on in the extract they were more likely to reach the higher levels of the mark scheme. It is important that students see the trajectory of the extract – how it moves the plot forward, especially in terms of tragedy, and how it highlights the significant aspects of tragedy which are identified in the bullet points. The bullet points are in the question to help candidates identify which elements of tragedy might be considered important in the passage and it is important that students write about these aspects. The final bullet point will always give students the opportunity to write about ‘any other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy’ but this is not an opportunity to write in very general terms about tragedy in the whole play: it does, of course, mean aspects of tragedy which are significant in the extract.

Question 1: *Othello*

This was a popular choice and students had obviously engaged enthusiastically with the play. Many students were able to identify the mood of this extract – a quiet, sad, intimate moment set between the violence of Othello striking Desdemona which precedes it and the masculine world of plotting between Iago and Roderigo which follows it. They were able to comment on the use of the Willow Song to establish this sombre mood and the setting of Desdemona’s bedchamber which heightens the intimacy of the exchanges between the two women and links to Desdemona’s death in the same setting shortly afterwards.

The first two bullet points asked students to consider the presentation of Desdemona and of Emilia. The most successful responses focused on the two women in this scene, making short, sharp and perceptive links to elsewhere in the play; the least successful responses gave an account of everything that happened to these characters in the play, losing focus on the extract and the task. Much was said about Emilia’s views about relationships and about men. The best responses were able to identify her cheerful pragmatism (‘ ’tis a wrong in your own world and you could quickly make it right’) and the humour of her response to Desdemona’s refusal to believe that she would do such a deed ‘by this heavenly light’. Some students took this as proof of Emilia’s moral depravity and missed the wit of her response here.

Responses which wrote about AO2 in terms of setting, structure, tone and contrasts were much more successful than those that tried to make points about prose and blank verse or about sibilance and lists of three. Micro-analysis is rarely the most effective way of writing about writers’ methods, especially when writing about a play.

Context also proved slightly problematic for some students in this question. Generalisations about the plight of women in Jacobean England abounded and, despite much having been written in previous Examiner’s Reports about it, many students claimed that the Jacobean audience would have been shocked by Emilia’s boldness.

Question 2: *King Lear*

Much good work was seen on *King Lear* and many students had obviously been moved by the poignant spectacle of Lear carrying Cordelia's dead body at the start of this extract. There was much useful discussion about the first bullet point, the presentation of Lear, and most students could make relevant links to elsewhere in the play, looking especially at Lear's relationship with Cordelia and his physical and mental suffering here and elsewhere. The best answers kept a tight focus on the extract and the ideas raised in it but less able students wrote at far too great a length about the 'love test', Lear's relationships with his other daughters and Gloucester's blindness (using the line 'Mine eyes are not o' the best' from the extract as a springboard).

The second bullet point asked students to consider the dramatic action of the extract, enabling writing about dramatic methods such as the tableau effect of Lear entering with Cordelia's dead body, the messenger's entrance to report Edmund's death and the use of stage directions and physical actions to present events. Comments on the generally brief dialogue, compared to the longer speeches from Lear were often fruitful but attempts to write about blank verse and prose, here and elsewhere, were less effective. Similarly, many students commented on Lear's opening words ('Howl, howl, howl!') and made relevant points about him being inarticulate in his grief. Those who then went on to write about assonance or onomatopoeia, linking it to examples of these poetic (not dramatic) methods elsewhere in the play, added little to their responses.

Section B

The questions in section B ask students to consider a statement or point of view about their chosen text. The mantra which runs through all the papers on this specification is that students must answer the question, something which seems obvious but which some students seem to lack the confidence to do. Obviously, writing about the specific viewpoint offered in the question will mean that students select relevant parts of the play or characters or ideas to write about, therefore inevitably leaving out other material they have learned and revised. They need to have the confidence – and the knowledge of the text – to do this. Students do not need to give a balanced argument, although good candidates will usually see some complexity in the statement; a driving argument either agreeing or disagreeing with the point of view given can be as effective as one which considers both sides of a question.

Question 3: *Richard II*

Few responses were seen on this play but those seen were usually engaged and knowledgeable. The question provoked some lively debate with students able to identify the potentially noble qualities of Gaunt and York, yet generally deciding that, despite his faults, Richard redeemed himself by the end of the play and showed nobility appropriate for a tragic hero before his death. Most students were able to write about genre effectively, linking Richard's nobility at the end of the play to his role as a tragic hero.

Question 4: Death of a Salesman

This was the most popular question in this section. The question asked students to consider whether the suffering of Willy's family is as painful to watch as that of Willy himself. Students who addressed the question generally did well and engaged and interesting work was seen from students of all abilities, showing that they had enjoyed studying the play and were genuinely engaged with the ideas and the characters. There was a range of responses, all equally valid: some students felt that Willy's suffering was more painful to watch because Miller's use of Willy's memories of the past gave the audience a unique insight into his thoughts and feelings and therefore made us able to relate more to him, and some students felt that the suffering of Willy's family was more painful to watch because they were blameless, their suffering caused by Willy. The best responses were specific about the suffering of the family and realised that Linda, Biff and Happy are all affected by the events in the play and suffer in different ways. On the whole, students handled context well, making well-integrated comments about the role of the American consumerist society in the suffering of the Loman family.

This play does not really lend itself to an Aristotelian view of tragedy and some students tied themselves in knots trying to impose a classical model on a modern play. There is absolutely no requirement to use words such as 'anagnorisis', 'hamartia', 'peripeteia' and so on, especially when they get in the way of students answering the question clearly. It was disappointing to see a number of students include sections of an answer to the question from last year's paper, which was about Willy's lack of ability to communicate, perhaps because this was a question they had answered in their mock examination and had remembered.

Question 5: A Streetcar Named Desire

Those students who had studied this play had strong views about the cruelty and suffering in the text and about the ending. There was much interesting discussion about whether the ending was uplifting for the audience or for the characters. A small number of students just wanted to write about Stanley and/or Blanche, perhaps mentioning their suffering or lack of it but without a clear focus on the ending. Some students provided a clear focus on the use of music, dramatic action and recurring motifs; very few students were side-tracked into writing about individual words or language features.

Conclusion

Overall, it was very pleasing to see students of all abilities enjoying texts as drama and having the confidence to really engage with views about their set texts.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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