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# A-LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/1A Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy  
Report on the Examination

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7717/1A  
June 2023

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Version: 1.0

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## Introductory Comments

The purpose of this report is to focus specifically on what happened in this year's examination, but for teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, it is important for you to go to the AQA website (Go to 'subjects' - select 'English' - select 'AS and Level Lit B') and Centre Services (use the tile for teacher support and then the filters) and look at all training materials and previous reports to help you to understand how best to support your students.

Despite the disruptive effects of lockdown on education, in regard to the A-level examination, the evidence of this year shows that we are almost back to where we were in 2019. The responses suggest that students have enjoyed their study of English Literature and reading texts through the lenses of tragedy, comedy, crime and political and social protest writing. Teachers and students need to be congratulated for their hard work as circumstances have not been easy.

Consistent with national patterns in students studying English Literature, there was again a slight decline in entry but the numbers are still healthy and examiners reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the three required answers on each paper and understood the different skill-set required for answering each type of question. The best responses were by students who knew their texts exceptionally well. When students know the texts in a detailed way they can enter the exam confidently as knowledge enables them to access any question asked. In preparing students for the examination, therefore, teachers need to ensure that students know the stories of their texts, how characters develop and relate to each other, where key events are and how the narrative trajectory works. They need to know facts like who lives and who dies.

Once students are in the exam, they are on their own. At this point they need to focus entirely on the questions set, using knowledge of the set texts that they have gained during their course to sustain their arguments. Students who were performing at the highest level this year were sharply focused on the question and the text. They were also able to integrate AO2 comments into their writing in a seamless way. Understanding how stories are constructed is an essential part of 'knowing' the text and those students who demonstrated an understanding of narrative structure did well. In the best responses to the drama texts, students were able to imagine the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now.

When students didn't perform so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely and because they did not focus on the questions set, sometimes because they had their own agendas or forced what they did know into the questions. In Paper 2, weaker performances were often linked to students not using their open book thoughtfully or carefully enough to select relevant sections on which to base their arguments. Several students who struggled (across all papers) often got caught up in loose contextual discussion, single word analysis and debates not asked by this year's questions but often those of previous years.

In relation to contextual material that students imposed onto their answers, there was far more on *Othello*, Keats, Blake, Coleridge and Wilde than on the other texts but wherever it occurred it was problematic. Students should be told categorically not to write generalised (and often made up) comments about any historical period - including the 20/21st centuries - and not to write in general terms about the lives of writers or literary movements. There was much this year on Keats' life and Wilde's homosexuality. Students should not include critical opinions which are at a tangent to the question.

There were many students who wrote generally about the 16th century and invariably this took students away from the text and the questions. The 16th century, of course, spans a hundred years and one play can hardly be claimed to speak for an entire century - or even a bit of it, and for students to draw conclusions about 16th century society or people's attitudes from one play of Shakespeare is clearly unwise. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Cleopatra and Viola and Rosalind and Paulina, so it makes little sense for students to claim that in the 16th century women were all passive or submissive or dependent or abused by men. Students need to focus on the worlds of their texts - and not make generalised assumptions about the world (or worlds) outside of their texts. While evidenced context can be valid, it is always better for students to begin with the texts themselves and the possible meanings that they can find within them.

So, to be clear - and apologies now for repeating what has been said before - but students must:

- know their texts and the stories being told
- answer the precise question asked in all its detail

### **Knowing the text**

The key to 'knowing the text' is for students to be clear about the facts that happen in the stories they are studying and the sequence of events (and sequence is often complex in non-linear narratives). Facts in stories cannot be disputed (unless the writer invites this to happen or self-consciously undermines what is presented as fact as is the case of *Atonement*). For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously. In stories the facts are the events that are shown and the actions of the characters, what the characters say and do, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to and where things happen. If students get the facts of the narrative right, they are in a good starting place and do not go off course in their thinking and writing because of a premise that has not been grasped.

The stories that writers tell are fundamental to enjoyment and knowing what happens in those stories, and how events are sequenced, enables students to interpret the texts with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method in a confident and meaningful way. The stories have to come first. There is little point writing about intradiegetic narrators if students haven't got inside the stories that the narrators are telling. There is also little point in writing about 'aspects' or 'elements' or genre if students haven't grasped the actual story that is being told. The text and its story have to come first. Only then can students confidently offer interpretations and think about how authors shape meanings.

### **Answering the precise question set in all its detail**

All questions focus on interpretation and students are asked to either 'explore the significance of' or say to what extent they agree with a view. Students, therefore, have to use their textual knowledge to do just that. If students only partially address questions or rewrite their own questions they cannot achieve good marks. Answer the question is our mantra and it really is fundamental in examinations. In Specification B there are no hidden requirements, no guessing games that students have to partake in about what else might be required. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question. It is also unhelpful if they write about non-exam texts (and there were a lot of references to GCSE texts this year) or write about parts of speech (even when the word class is correctly identified) since this is a limited way to write about literary language.

## AO1

AO1 skills are also essential. Clear and fluent expression helps students to communicate effectively, so time spent during an A-level course refining phrasing is time well spent. Students are at liberty to adopt a formal style or a more personal one – sometimes the personal, almost journalistic voice works well. But, however they choose to voice their thoughts, it must be clear what they mean. For most students, it is better to go for clarity in an exam situation rather than trying to use terms which are often misapplied. Clarity and communication can also be aided when students have good control of their sentences.

It is also worth stressing that the very best responses are carefully sequenced. Therefore, it is best for students to think and plan before writing commences. Deciding an angle, organising the points to be made in their argument and selecting which parts of the text to use, are sensible things to do.

### **Specific comments about 1A: Aspects of Tragedy**

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing and there were many excellent responses to the questions. Many students focused well on what they were asked to do and there was plenty of evidence of students really thinking about texts, the relationship of those texts with the tragic genre and the questions being asked. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had been taught to prioritise the one skill that really matters: reading and understanding the texts in and of themselves.

There was also the requirement for students to be able to demonstrate the specific skills required for the three types of question. While Section B questions are traditional essay type questions where students have time to develop ideas about a question on a single text, Section A is very different, requiring close interrogation of and engagement with a printed extract. Section C requires students to answer a question using two texts which they might respond to in very different ways and where they have to fine tune their selections of material since they have less time to write about each text.

The students who performed less well often did not see the three questions as requiring different skills. There were some whose textual knowledge was insecure, so they were unable to locate parts of stories to support ideas. Given that this paper is closed book, students needed to have spent time understanding how tragic stories develop, acquiring excellent textual knowledge to draw from effectively in the construction of their arguments. This is especially true of the Shakespeare text which is used in both Section A and Section B and accounts for two thirds of the marks for this paper.

There was also a problem with those students who incorporated into their answers generalised contextual material, often writing at length about it and often writing about it with little historical understanding. The introductory comments point out the problem that unless material is evidenced, it has little purpose and almost always obscures the student's argument. Many students assume that the 16th (or 17th) century is a single one-dimensional time period where ideas were fixed and universal. If students were to think about such claims in relation to their own time period they would see that such views must be questioned. In their life time, the last eighteen years have not been fixed culturally or politically (and attitudes towards events continue to be fluid) - so to make assumptions about what Elizabethans or Jacobean would have thought and felt clearly makes little sense. A better starting point for students would be to explore the worlds of the plays and see that the plays contain a variety of ideas about gender, sexuality, race, power, religion, family, duty, identity and justice. The plays tell us that there were clearly many dissenting views; people did not all think the same then any more than they do now.

Some students seemed aware of this and took up the opportunity to explore what values characters stand for, what principles are at stake for them. These students saw the plays and their other texts as dynamic rather than static. When characters were discussed in terms of their values and not just their characteristics students' ideas were often interesting.

Ideas were less interesting and more remote and muddled when students thought they should be incorporating Aristotelian terms. The cases where the terms were used well, as a means of deepening and extending the students' responses to the texts, were relatively few. In many weaker answers, especially in the extract questions, the terms were often shoehorned into a discussion of the forty or so lines from the first scene of both plays. It would help if students understood that Aristotle used terms to apply to the structure of the play as a whole and not just to a few lines.

It seems that some students think that if they mention 'hamartia' (or even tragic flaw) then that is the work done. And since the tragic flaw is generally the same one – hubris – then what emerges is an 'understanding' of tragedy whereby Willy, Othello, Lamia, the Knight, Gatsby and Richard are, to all intents and purposes, interchangeable. So, these terms actually work to inhibit thinking, curiosity and involvement. A manufactured concept of tragedy comes to replace the experience of the tragic stories themselves. What students need is empathy and understanding and not feature spotting of Aristotelian terms.

### Sections A and B (Shakespeare)

While most students had some knowledge of their Shakespeare play, and while some had excellent knowledge, there were many students whose knowledge was insecure and sketchy. *Othello* was by far the most popular choice, but several centres offered *King Lear*. It is fair to say that although excellent answers were seen to all questions, the responses to *King Lear* were slightly stronger than those to *Othello*. Students writing about *King Lear* generally had a better understanding of the sequencing of events and of what is actually being said. The main issue with the less focused answers on *Othello* was the inclusion of writing about Othello's race, regardless of relevance.

While race is clearly an important factor in the play and while it is true that in the world of the play Othello is 'othered', students need to take care when writing about it. Firstly, students need to think about its relevance to the question being asked. Then students should think about what they are actually saying - or asserting - and the way they express themselves too in relation to the subject of race. Students need to think and write in a more nuanced way than many currently do.

For example, when students say that at the end of the play, Othello reverts to a 'stereotypical Moor', what do they actually mean? Who determines what is stereotypical? Is there a notion of stereo typicality in the play itself? Or is it just assumed from what Iago says? When students say that Venetian society is racist, what do they mean? Where is the evidence in the play? It is true that Iago and Roderigo and Brabantio make horrible racist comments, but only Brabantio makes such appalling comments to Othello directly and at that point he is smarting from his daughter's having eloped. Interestingly, in the backstory, Brabantio seems to have had a different view of the General: he 'oft invited Othello to his house, presumably enjoyed his company as he entreated him to tell stories of his exotic past (Othello says 'her father loved' him), and Brabantio didn't seem to fear Othello would practise black magic on his daughter then.

Roderigo and Iago can hardly be said to be barometers of public opinion either; they are not typical representatives of Venice (or 16th century audiences). Roderigo is a spurned suitor whom Brabantio had charged 'not to haunt' his doors in pursuit of Desdemona and Iago is full of bitterness towards humanity itself (black, white, female, male), and his particular hatred of Othello

stems from Othello's choosing Cassio, rather than Iago, as his lieutenant rather than his race. The Venetian government, and specifically the Duke, values Othello as a man and a General and calls on him to protect the state against the Turkish invasion. Lodovico, Cassio and Montano respect Othello; Desdemona loves him.

This is not to say that race isn't an issue in the play and it is certainly at times disturbing from a liberal political cultural position, but to make every extract and every question about race tends to get in the way of students engaging with other ideas with comments on race that are reductive rather than enlightening.

## Section A

Last year students had been told which act the extract would be taken from (which for both plays was Act 1) and it seems that some students thought that this year, the extract would have to be from a different part of the play and as a result they did not revise the beginning of their set play. There was some misunderstanding or misreading of the extracts, particularly of the *Othello* extract.

There were of course, many excellent answers and these were written by those students who located the extract precisely, could write about its dramatic significance to the tragic trajectory of the play and explore in detail what precisely is happening and being said in the extract itself - as if it is happening now as we watch and read the emerging drama. These students quoted well from the extract and used it in a way to advance their ideas. When students securely engaged with the story of the extract and saw it in relation to what happens next, they were in a good position to explore the significance of tragic aspects that are evident there - or are being formed. Although there is a difference between the extract question and the unseen question on Paper 2, in that students are required to make links with the wider play in the *Othello* and *King Lear* questions, the strategy that students develop in Paper 2 responses could profitably be employed by students answering the extract questions on Paper 1. On Paper 2, students really do work with the extract and see its internal shape and story. If students had the same approach here and made some relevant connections to the wider play, they would fare much better than just using the extract as a springboard for spotting aspects of tragedy or writing about characters in a general way because they appear or are mentioned in the extract.

When students merely picked out aspects of tragedy or homed in on a character who is in the extract and wrote about them in a fixed way, they got boxed in, often unable to see that characters and ideas develop and change through the course of the drama. The focus should be on the story of the extract and how the characters in it behave at that particular point in the play.

As always, where students wrote about the play as an imagined performance on stage rather than the page, responses were more engaging. For example, writing about the problematic relationship between Roderigo and Iago on stage or the visual impact of the confrontation between Lear and Kent (especially when students were thinking about 'how' these relationships develop) was more fruitful than writing about Shakespeare's use of the words 'serve' or 'follow' or 'wrath' and what these words might mean in isolation. Most students who focused on single word analysis found it very difficult to engage with the vibrant dramatic narratives of either the extract or the play. So, it is best to tell students not to focus on the discussion of single words.

## Question 1

The extract from *Othello* was from Act 1 scene 1 and follows on from the sequence of the opening of the play which was printed on the 2022 Question Paper. Although the play is by now 40 lines in, this extract is still part of the exposition. In the first few lines, Iago and Roderigo have been arguing about Iago's syphoning money from Roderigo. Iago has been justifying and explaining his hatred of

Othello and this extract starts with a still peevish Roderigo saying that if he hated Othello as much as Iago does he would not follow him. Iago has a problem and needs to placate Roderigo who is more intelligent here than he later becomes. Iago speaks at some length (not a soliloquy as some students claimed) about his theoretical views on masters and servants explaining how he wants to subvert the social hierarchy. He reveals that as a servant to Othello he is simply biding his time.

Although he might appear so, he is not a duteous knave who will be cast aside when his master chooses. Iago is looking out for himself, pretending for his own self-interest. Such duplicitous servants, Iago says, have some soul. He says that if he were Othello he would be on guard against such an Iago since Iago follows Othello just for himself. He might seem to wear his heart on his sleeve for jackdaws to peck at but he is not what he seems. Roderigo seems not to understand the words Iago speaks here and he changes the subject. Using racist and insulting language, he asks how Othello is so lucky (presumably to have married Desdemona). Having browbeaten Roderigo into compliance, Iago quickly moves on with his plan of action. In the darkness of the night, he tells Roderigo to call up Brabantio, to make Desdemona's family angry and abuse Othello in the streets. He needs Roderigo's help as to do it himself would expose him and he needs anonymity. He believes that igniting some ill feeling towards Othello will take the gloss off his happiness. Roderigo is happy to comply saying he will call aloud. There is then some frenetic activity with both characters shouting loudly for Brabantio to wake up as there are thieves who have invaded his house, taking his daughter and his bags. Brabantio then enters from an upstairs window above where the two men are shouting and causing chaos.

Reading closely is obviously crucial in extract questions. When students were reading closely here, they could also see that Roderigo, victim though he is, is not a simple pushover and, at this point in the play, not the 'fool' many students set him down as. He has to be won over and that is what Iago does in his long speech. He resolves the problem of Roderigo who is being a bit difficult. If students understand that drama texts happen in a continuous imaginary present and that characters are in a very specific situation at any given time and have problems to solve, they can engage much better with extract questions rather than just finding aspects in them, extracting them from their context and writing about them in a detached way.

The students who engaged with the drama that was before them as something that is happening now were well on the way to achieving a good mark. The best responses focused on the drawn-out manipulation of Roderigo by Iago, with students understanding that Roderigo needs to be persuaded. The focus of students writing needed to be on these two characters since they are who we watch on stage. There also needed to be discussion of what Iago says about the masters/servants paradox since this is what most of the extract is about.

Those students who did not focus on the extract's story and just stabbed at ideas tended to write in an unfocused way. Many saw that Iago was in the extract, ignored what he is saying (or often misunderstood it) and simply wrote about his villainy in the whole play as if his evil and his plan are fully formed from the start. When they did this they were not pausing to think about what is actually happening at this early part of the play. Iago's villainy is emerging as we watch.

Much was said by many students about Othello and Desdemona, characters who are discussed by Iago and Roderigo but who are not present on stage. While credit was given for the way the conspirators discuss the newly wedded couple, it was not relevant to simply write about Othello and Desdemona in the wider play. Several students jumped immediately to Act 5 claiming that the extract foreshadows their deaths at the end of the play. References to the wider play need to be closely connected to what happens in the extract, not what happens several acts hence. Several students also wrote much about Othello's race, some beginning with it and barely mentioning what actually happens between Iago and Roderigo. While credit was given for discussion of Iago's referring to Othello as the 'Moor' and Roderigo's insultingly saying: 'What a full fortune does the

thick-lips owe/ If he can carry it thus!' it was unhelpful to base answers on these words, to pick out references to race and colour in the rest of the play and then write about Venetian attitudes and Jacobean audiences who 'would have shared these views'.

There were similar issues when some students wrote about attitudes to women in the extract. Several students focused on the misogyny in Iago's suggestion that Desdemona is merely a possession of Brabantio's - along with his house and his bags. While the idea itself was relevant, some students then went on to write about the treatment of women in the rest of the play - and in Jacobean society - and any focus on the extract's story was lost. Some students got caught up on pronouns, claiming that the use of 'your' daughter, showed that Desdemona is part of Brabantio's property. This was not very productive.

However, those students who pinned down the story of the extract, engaged with its nuances carefully and thoughtfully did well.

## Question 2

The extract from *King Lear* was also from Act 1 scene 1, again following on from the extract on the 2022 paper which centred on the final part of Lear's love test where he loses his temper with Cordelia and violently denounces her. Kent, having witnessed Lear's irrational and rage-filled banishment of Cordelia, tries to intervene which is where this extract begins. Lear's anger continues as he tells Kent not to come between the dragon and his wrath. His attempt to return the court to some semblance of order is interrupted by Kent. In Lear's speech which follows, with his angry thoughts, hurt feelings and bizarre instructions to his attendants. He admits he loved Cordelia most.

In his temper he instructs his courtiers to call France and Burgundy (Cordelia's suitors) but no one on stage moves, so great is the shock at his behaviour. His fury leads him to split Cordelia's portion of the kingdom between Gonerill and Regan. He asserts that he will stay with each of them in turn for a month with his reservation of one hundred knights. Kent can no longer stay silent. He politely expresses his honour to Lear and even though Lear threatens him, he won't be silenced. In an explosion of anger himself, he tells Lear some home truths. He says he doesn't care about the consequences to himself. Kent says that Lear is mad and this gives him licence to speak out of turn. He is not afraid to speak the truth when Lear is bowing down to flattery. He tells Lear to retain his power since Cordelia does not love him least and neither do those who aren't echo chambers. The two men are now locked in an angry exchange. There are threats and regal instructions from Lear, defiance, harangues and exhortations from Kent. The scene ends with Lear's movement to physically 'strike' Kent. Immediately after the extract Albany and Cornwall move to prevent Lear's attack and Lear orders Kent on his allegiance to kneel. He then banishes him.

The scene is tense and explosive. Students who visualised the confrontation between king and courtier were able to engage with the extract as drama were able to score good marks. Those students focused on Lear's terrible error of judgement, his uncontrollable anger and the awfulness of his putting his trust in the hands of the wrong daughters whom he rewards. Some good answers focused on the spectacle of the whole court watching and being silent. There was also good discussion of Kent's bravery and his commitment to truth. Several students focused on the scene as having appalling consequences and relevant brief links were made to the wider play. Students who performed well did not leave the extract for long.

When students struggled it was usually because they did not know the play well enough and did not focus their discussions on the detail of the extract. Some moved away from the extract too soon and wrote about other parts of the play, sometimes with only a loose connection to the

extract. Some students jumped to Acts 4 and 5 and wrote about Lear's being reunited with Cordelia and then dying of a broken heart when she is hanged at the end of the play. It is not helpful for students to claim that events at the start of the play determine the final tragic outcomes as if there is no dramatic action in between.

In both Question 1 and 2, the best responses were by those students who focused tightly on the extract, saw its dramatic narrative and made brief and valid connections with the rest of the play. When apt connections to the wider play were made, they did not take the student away from the extract but enhanced points that were made about it. In the very best answers the extract was always central.

## Section B

The Section B tasks required different skills from students. Here students had to debate a given critical view about their Shakespeare play or, in the case of Question 4, explore the significance of reputation in *Othello*. Students performed well in this section when they took ownership of the debate and approached the question head on.

Students who organised their ideas into clear arguments did well. Their paragraphs were connected and their arguments moved forward. Some students did not think about the questions carefully though and just produced some writing about something mentioned in the question (female characters or reputation (or pride) or Gloucester or self-destruction).

## Question 3

Question 3 invited students to say to what extent they agreed with the view that in *Othello*, the female characters are innocent victims of male power. The key to success was focusing on Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca and discussing whether they are victims (the central tragic aspect) of male power and then discussing their innocence or otherwise. Given that two women are murdered by their husbands and all are abused by men, it would have been difficult to argue against their being victims and most students did agree with this part of the statement. The best answers tended to begin with a discussion of the terrible physical and emotional abuse inflicted on women by men. Several students wrote in detail about the two violent murders and the insulting behaviours of Iago, Othello and Cassio (in relation to Bianca) and there was much sensitive and thoughtful writing. There was also some focused discussion of 'innocence' with many students arguing that Desdemona is certainly guiltless and, although Emilia steals Desdemona's handkerchief, she is not guilty of ill-intent and that Bianca does nothing wrong at all.

When students were less successful, it was often because they subverted the question in a number of ways. Some thought that this was an opportunity to write about female power and that is what they did, describing how Desdemona is the 'captain's captain' and has a strong voice at the start of the play. Some students did not move on from Acts 1 and 2 and just praised Desdemona as a voice for female power. Emilia was similarly described as a proto-feminist with a focus on what she says in the Willow scene - that women have appetites just as men do. Bianca was also praised for being independent and surviving. In these answers there was no sense of the tragic fate that actually befalls the female characters so it was difficult for such answers to be awarded many marks.

Some students got themselves into a muddle because they did not understand the meaning of innocent. Some thought it meant weak or submissive and these students saw it as a pejorative term. Some also thought that being a 'victim' is a term of abuse, thereby not understanding what a victim is in terms of the tragic genre. It was surprising how many students expressed no sympathy

for these victims of domestic abuse, sometimes blaming them for what happens to them. Desdemona was certainly criticised heavily by some students. A number of students focused their attention on men and discussed male power rather than female victims.

Although credit was given for those students who argued that the female characters are not victims at all times in the play, and that they are complex creations with more to them, it was hard to see the argument that they are not victims at all. Some students seemed to think that because Emilia is defiant at the end and exposes the villainy of Iago and Othello, that she isn't a victim. Her being violently stabbed in the back was often overlooked.

The students who chose to write about Bianca often produced a clearer line of argument. Many said that Bianca is unfairly treated by Cassio and Iago, abused by them both (and also Emilia) and most students supported their ideas with good textual detail. There was much sympathy for her position as a prostitute.

#### **Question 4**

This question was generally well handled when students knew what reputation is and where it signifies in the play. Reputation is about widespread opinion and belief about an individual and is not the same as a single personal view that one individual has of another contrary to what some students seemed to think. Some students thought that reputation could be interchanged with pride or status and so wrote about those ideas instead.

But there were some very good answers. Many students who wrote well referred to the specific discussions of reputation in the play, one where Iago says to Cassio that it is 'an idle and false imposition; oft got without merit and lost without deserving' and the other contradictory claim that he makes to Othello: 'Good name in man or woman ... Is the immediate jewel of their souls'. Some very good discussion was focused on the significance of reputation in terms of Othello's tragic trajectory. The students who produced such answers wrote about Othello's reliance on his reputation at the start of the play when he is challenged by Brabantio. He knows that his 'services' which he has 'done the signory' will 'out-tongue' Brabantio's complaints and that his 'parts', his 'title' and his 'perfect soul' will 'manifest [him] rightly'.

There was then good focus on parts of the play where Othello fears his reputation is damaged by Desdemona's alleged infidelity. Several students wrote insightfully about Othello's fear of being laughed at by the general camp for being a cuckold. Some very good responses also focused on Othello's final speech where he attempts to restore his reputation and rewrite the history books. He doesn't want to be remembered as a murderer but as man who loved not wisely but too well, a champion of Venice who executed justice on himself for throwing away a pearl, 'richer than all his tribe'.

Apart from Othello's reputation, there was plenty of other material that students used in response to this question. Many good answers focused on Cassio's self-loathing when he loses his reputation, when he despairs that 'the immortal part' of himself is ruined. There was also good discussion of Iago and his reputation as 'honest' which enables him to destroy the reputations of Othello, Cassio and Desdemona.. Some interesting responses focused on how reputations are generally formed by men and that collectively men have the power to create and destroy the reputations of women.

When reputation was understood and was at the heart of the answers and when significances were teased out, students performed well.

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### Question 5

Question 5 invited students to say to what extent they agreed with the view that Gloucester is a man more sinned against than sinning. This question was generally unproblematic when students had good textual knowledge to draw upon. Most students focused on Gloucester's sins of adultery, his readiness to believe Edmund's claim that Edgar is disloyal, his violent response in proclaiming Edgar and his calling for Edgar's death. While students were not very forgiving of Gloucester's 'sins' most did not think that he deserved the treatment he receives. Many students wrote in detail about his disproportionate punishment of having his eyes gouged out and there were some sensitive responses with students arguing that what Cornwall and Regan do is a much worse sin.

When students did not produce good responses, it was generally because their textual knowledge was not secure enough to support their ideas or enable them to construct an argument.

### Question 6

Slightly fewer students answered Question 6 but there were a variety of approaches to it, many of which were interesting. The question asked to what extent Shakespeare presents humanity as relentlessly self-destructive. Some students made the link with Albany's prediction that if humanity's vile offences are not tamed then humanity will perforce prey on itself like monsters of the deep and there was some good discussion of the vile offences committed by Edmund, Gonerill and Regan which inevitably lead to self- destruction.

Many students focused on Lear's acts of self-destruction - his instigating the love test, his banishing Cordelia, his angry dismissal of Kent, his putting his blind trust in Gonerill and Regan and his later terrifying behaviour towards them - all of which contribute to his own demise. Some considered Lear's acts of self-destruction in a more global sense focusing on his division of the kingdom and appalling abuses of power as major contributions to civil and national wars which are also essentially acts of self-destruction.

The best responses focused on the word 'relentlessly' and many argued that while self- destruction is a significant factor in the tragedy, it is not relentless and that there is much that counters the negativity. Several students wrote about Cordelia as a selfless redemptive force and there was considerable discussion of Edgar and his being alive at the end of play and wise enough to make a new start for the kingdom.

### Section C

In this section students had to manage two texts in relation to their chosen question. Some excellent answers were seen to both questions when students were choosing wisely, thinking about what exactly was being asked and then using their texts to construct well supported ideas and arguments.

Students wrote best when they approached the questions in a direct way and did not try to over-complicate their approaches. Given that students have to manage their two texts in about 45 minutes they really do need to get to the point of the question quickly and make selections from the texts that enable them to drive their arguments forward. Here, as elsewhere, it was best when students saw the texts as narratives. It did not help when particular interpretations of the text as a whole got in the way of the specific question and prevented students from engaging with what is actually being asked.

It was pleasing to see some centres offering The Poetry Anthology: Tragedy this year. It is a pity that more centres do not see the rewards of studying it and while it is true that the Anthology can only be used if the other text is *Richard II*, the pairing of the two texts offers much in terms of tragedy, and it is certainly worth centres considering that combination.

When students used Keats as one of their texts, their choice of poem(s) was always crucial. Students need to have knowledge of all four poems so that they can select which poems are most appropriate to answer the question chosen. Some excellent writing was seen on Keats when the focus was on the stories of the poems, but unfortunately there was a lot of writing about Keats' life and his hopeless love affair with Fanny Brawne.

### Question 7

This question was the most popular of the two and it was done well by students who quickly established a view about tragic heroes starting with power and then losing it. To do this they needed to pin down the nature of power (what kind of power it is) and then think about whether the tragic heroes have power at the start and then lose it, whether they have power at all or whether they gain power. This year it was pleasing to see that not many students got into the futile and unrelated discussion of deciding who the tragic heroes are.

Most students understood what the question was asking though some, unfortunately, seemed not to want to write about power. These students exchanged the word for greatness and wrote about the fall of the tragic hero. Other students who struggled wrote about the 'word' power but did not unravel what it means in terms of the tragic heroes they chose to write about.

Students who performed well produced some excellent debate and looked at their two texts in discrete ways in relation to the particular narrative worlds that the writers construct. Students were at their best when at the start of their writing they identified the type of power held by tragic heroes and then discussed whether, when and how it is lost. Some excellent work was seen on all texts when students were thinking clearly. Some particularly good answers were seen on *Richard II*. Students could easily talk about Richard's political and kingly power which is lost - or given away - to Bolingbroke, how Richard starts with a crown on his head, surrounded by his subjects and ends his life powerless and alone in a prison in Pomfret castle. The linear chronology of the text made it easy for students to engage with in terms of 'begin with power and then lose it'. Students also seemed to enjoy writing about Lamia as a tragic hero who has supernatural power at the start of the poem, swapping her scales as a snake for the skin on a mortal woman, enjoying briefly the power of love and then losing her influence and power to the vanity of Lycius and losing her life to the rationality of Apollonius.

Many students wrote about *Death of a Salesman* and most students used the text to challenge the question. Most argued that Willy does not have power at the start and that he has nothing to lose - or indeed that his situation just gets worse. This argument worked well when students wrote about Willy's lack of economic power, his being a commodity and his lack of social power, and when they provided details from the text to support ideas. Some students argued that Willy has some power over his family in the memory sequences which he loses in the present dramatic time frame. There was also good discussion of Tess with some students saying that she is powerless from start to finish (powerless because she is a woman and powerless because she has no economic status) and some argued that she has the power of beauty and hope at the start of the novel but that this is lost as her tragic story unfolds. Some students argued convincingly that she gains power at the end when she murders Alec and takes charge of her destiny.

Sometimes students struggled with the non-chronological texts as they did not always know what is the start and end. This was sometimes the case when Willy, the Knight and Gatsby were

discussed. When non-chronological texts are taught, students need to learn that there is a difference between the time-line of the tragic hero's journey and the way the writer chooses to sequence that story. This is key to the students' knowledge as without it they sometimes get in a muddle with when things happen - or in this case when power is lost.

### **Question 8**

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of nature and the natural environment to the tragedies of their two texts. What students needed to do was quickly identify some key moments in the texts where nature is significant and then explore how it contributes to the tragic experiences that relate to it. A fair number of students chose this question and on the whole, it was done well when students knew details of their texts.

There was much in all texts that could have been selected but sometimes students chose the question and then couldn't pin down any moment when nature is mentioned or where it signifies. In the best responses there was good focus on natural settings (the Wessex countryside in *Tess*, the cold hillside in *La Belle Dame* and the gardens in *Gatsby* and *Richard II*), on the use of natural imagery (the seeds and jungle in *Salesman*, the sea in *Richard II*), on natural locations where there is danger (the forest in *Isabella*, Flintcomb-Ash in *Tess*) but there were many ways that nature or the natural environment could be discussed - and it was. Students did seem to enjoy the question when they could explore details.

Some students struggled when they did not know what nature and the natural environment meant. Some thought they could just write about the urban environment in *Salesman* and *Tess* and not much credit could be given for such responses.

### **Looking forward**

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.

The best responses seen were 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.

As teachers prepare of the 2024 examinations they might like to give the following quick tips to their students:

- Know your texts thoroughly
- Focus on all the words of the question set
- Base your arguments on details of the text itself
- Do not write about imagined 16th century audiences and their values
- Do not write about Keats' life and Fanny Brawne
- Do not write about worlds or society outside of the text

NB: Please look out for the Autumn Feedback course which will be available in the new term.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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