



AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2A Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Tragedy
Report on the Examination

7716/2A
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Introductory Comments

It is pleasing to say that, despite the disruptive effects that lockdown has had on education, in regard to the AS examination at least, we are almost back to where we were in 2019. The responses of students to all four question papers suggest that students have enjoyed their study of English Literature and reading texts through the lenses of tragedy and comedy. Teachers and students need to be congratulated for their hard work. Examiners who marked the papers have certainly enjoyed reading the students' work and they all say what a delightful exam AS English Literature B is.

Although the entry for the exam was relatively small, the entry figures are stable and are slightly higher than last year. Some excellent work was seen across all four papers. For those centres offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of texts in relation to genre. The specification allows students to study and write about four texts in discrete ways while still engaging broadly with generic conventions. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers on each paper. The best responses were seen 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 how they 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 questions and the texts. 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 did not perform as well, it was often because their textual knowledge was insecure and because they did not focus on the actual questions set in all their details. Sometimes this was because they wanted to answer a different question - perhaps one that had been set in class. It was also a factor that in Paper 2, some students did not make good use of their open book; possibly this was because they did not know their texts well enough to know where to look for material. In many weaker answers there was also a reliance on generalised contextual material, single word analysis and ideas not relevant to this year's questions.

It is imperative that students are told that they should not include material that is not rooted in the text; this just distracts them and disrupts their arguments and it is not what the questions require. Answers padded with such material are predominant in the Shakespeare questions (especially *Othello*) and also Keats. It is really unhelpful for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives, to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods or to include critical viewpoints that are at a tangent to the questions. Teachers should tell students not to write about Aristotle, or the 16th century or the Romantics. 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 on men. Students need to

focus on the worlds of their texts - and not make assumptions about the world (or worlds) outside of their texts. While evidenced context could be valid, it is always better for students to write specifically about the texts themselves and the messages within them - to show their knowledge of that which is tangible.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked. Marks are awarded for ideas about the texts - and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and developed by using detailed knowledge of the text. There also needs to be integrated comment on how the writer shapes meanings. How students organise ideas and express themselves (AO1) is also important in assessment.

Specific comments about 2A

Responses were seen to all the texts. Keats and Hardy were the most popular poetry texts and *The Great Gatsby* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were the most popular prose texts. Even though there were fewer students answering on the Poetry Anthology and *The Remains of the Day*, there were still several answers on these texts and generally the questions were answered well. Good answers were seen across all texts when there was tight focus on the question set and when students had good textual knowledge. Although students generally wrote better about authorial method when they were writing about poetry, largely because all poetry questions focused on settings anyway, it was pleasing to see many students making sensible integrated comments about narrative method in their answers to the prose texts. It was particularly good to see the engagement with narrative voices and aspects of structure. The questions remind students of the requirement to include analysis of authorial method. However, the comments on method must be made relevant to the questions being asked. Credit cannot be given for detached discussion of method which has no relation to the questions. Neither can credit be given for the labelling (or mislabelling) of nouns and verbs.

Section A Poetry

When answering the questions on poetry, students have to focus on a printed extract. This is one reason why they have to know their texts well as there are no short cuts; they have to write about what is printed for part of their answer. The questions this summer for all poetry tasks asked students to explore the significance of settings to the tragic experiences in the wider text. Students had to refer to the chosen poem and the chosen extract - which always detailed a setting - and then choose a second poem where the settings signify.

The extracts are chosen to help students to engage with the questions set and the extract gives students an anchor for their arguments. Most students find the extracts helpful in this respect and work well with them in terms of structuring their response. However, being able to work with the extract does depend on students' having good knowledge of the poetry text itself. Students need to know their texts really well. Given that this is an open book exam, students 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. Some students by-passed the extract altogether and this clearly affected the marks they were awarded.

Apart from working with the extract, students then had to choose a setting from a second poem. This was where choice became crucial. If students knew the text in its entirety they could choose judiciously and find settings about which they could really explore significance in relation to tragic experiences. Those who only knew one or two poems - or bits of poems - tended to use them and shoehorn them into the question regardless of whether they were about settings or not.

The questions also asked students to ‘analyse closely’ authorial method. If they focused well on settings in the question they were hitting the AO2 requirement automatically.

Question 1: Keats

In this question on settings, students were asked to respond to the opening three stanzas of *The Eve of St Agnes*. Students could have written about the time setting of January 20th and its religious and legendary significance in relation to Madeline’s dream, the cold frosty winter evening suggesting death and misery and the setting of the party in the castle where the rich and powerful play while the poverty-stricken Beadsman, in the freezing chapel, is too cold to even pray.

Most students wrote meaningfully about the extract with most focusing on the cold setting and the tragic plight of the Beadsman who is dead at the end of the poem. There was some really interesting work here on social class in relation to tragic experiences. Several students did not connect the opening stanzas to the experiences of Madeline and Porphyro and this limited their answers since Madeline and Porphyro are clearly the tragic protagonists. However, many did find significances between the opening setting and Madeline’s bedchamber where her tragic encounter with Porphyro takes place. Some students also made good links to the settings at the end of the poem to where, the narrator tells us, the lovers fled long ago into the storm. On the whole good choices were made in relation to the second poem and all poems worked well, the most obvious for most being the cold hillside of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* where the unknown narrator encounters the dying knight-at-arms.

As in previous years, and against all advice, there was a still lot of material on Keats’ life and his unhappy relationship with Fanny Brawne. For most students knowing biographical material is a hindrance and they should be told clearly not to include it in their writing.

Question 2: Hardy

The Hardy question was popular and there were some very good answers. As was the case last year, many students had studied Hardy’s poetry alongside *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and they seemed to have enjoyed the experience of looking at an author’s work in two different ways. This worked well when students focused on the texts themselves and the stories being told rather than writing about Hardy’s life.

The question on settings included an extract from the middle of *Under the Waterfall*, where an unnamed character who, by the end of the poem we know is female, responds to a question asked by a second character who asks her why she reminisces with such poetic fondness about an experience by a waterfall. The waterfall setting is described in vivid detail and the speaker tells of a memory when she and her lover were picnicking in the August heat, shaded by some oaks, when a wine glass they were drinking from was accidentally dropped into the ‘fall’, where it remains still. Students who understood the poem were able to write confidently about the sadness of the first speaker who reflects on the passing of time and also the possible passing of romance which will never come again. These students often connected the underplayed event of the dropping of the glass with the deathly associations of the ‘fugitive day’ and the ‘thickening shroud of grey’ at the start of the poem. When students did not perform as well as they might, it was because they distorted the poem to make it about Hardy’s grief at Emma’s death. Although the poem might well be about Emma, it is not one of the poems Hardy specifically wrote about his late wife’s death. Some good choices for the second poem included *At Castle Boterel*, *At an Inn* and *Your Last Drive*. Although good answers were seen on the poems, some students struggled to write about settings in *The Flower’s Tragedy* and *Lament* because they could not find enough to say.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

There were several responses to this text and it was pleasing to see students engaging with *The Poetry Anthology: Tragedy* and making good choices in building up their ideas about the significance of settings. The extract chosen was from *Death in Leamington* and students were able to focus on the settings of Leamington Spa, the grand house where the woman dies, her upstairs bedroom and the evening time setting. Most students worked well with the settings and what is signified by them. Good links were made between the settings and the lonely woman's death. Some excellent responses focused on the woman's bedroom with its plate glass windows which both let in the light of the evening star as the woman died and which were then bolted by the unnoticing and perhaps uncaring nurse who 'let the blinds unroll' over them. Good comments were also made about a later part of the poem where the decaying house is described with its peeling stucco and the dropping plaster, which students said reflected the dead woman and created sadness which is at odds with the 'chintzy chintzy cheeriness of the nurse' in the extract.

When students struggled, it was generally because the poem was not understood. A significant number of students said that the woman was in a care home and this prevented them from seeing the link between the woman's house and her death.

Generally good choices of the second poem were made when students were placing settings at the heart of their thinking rather than writing about poems they simply liked or had revised. Some good work was seen on the beach setting of *Jessie Cameron* or the bottom of the Atlantic in *The Convergence of the Twain*.

Section B: Prose

When students are writing responses to their prose texts they need to look carefully at the questions, decide on a line of direction and then choose which parts of their open book novel will best help them to construct their arguments. In this exam, it clearly depended on students knowing their texts well enough to find relevant parts of the stories to work with. Some students had very little knowledge - sometimes not even knowing what happens, but most were able to construct some kind of argument.

Question 4: *The Great Gatsby*

In this question students were asked to explore the view that 'Tom Buchanan is a heartless and unlikeable villain'. *The Great Gatsby* is a very popular choice on this paper and most students could say something about Tom and they had a view about whether or not he is unlikeable and heartless. Many students focused on his abuse of his wife and his mistress and some students discussed his villainy in relation to Gatsby, though only a few wrote about his manipulation of Wilson and Tom's possible inciting him to kill Gatsby -perhaps because this event happens at the end of the novel and students were not really sure of the ending. Some students were not very critical of Tom and some were sympathetic arguing that when Gatsby tries to steal his wife it is understandable that Tom should be angry. Credit was given for a number of different views but it was hard to credit those students who argued that Tom's violence towards Daisy and Myrtle is justified because the women are annoying. There was good discussion in some answers of the biased narration of Nick Carraway who shapes readers' responses against Tom. In less successful answers, some students mistakenly thought they could subvert the question and write about Gatsby or Daisy as alternative villains; this usually happened when students had run out of things to say about Tom.

Question 5: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

This was a popular text and on the whole students seemed to have good knowledge of it and could write about Tess as an innocent victim. The best answers were by those students who could range around the text focusing on Tess' being the victim of her parents, Alec, Angel, society and fate. When specific parts of the text were explored in detail, students were able to give weight to their ideas. Some very interesting responses focused on Hardy's bias towards Tess and his unconscious victimising of her himself though sexualising her and perhaps lusting after her. Most students also engaged with 'innocent' and some referred relevantly to Hardy's subtitle of 'A Pure Woman'. There was good discussion too of Tess' deliberate murder of Alec and her unconscious murder of Prince. Some very sensitive answers were seen. Many students seem to really care about Tess.

When students did not perform well it was usually because they did not engage with the question properly or when they did not know enough of the text to find examples of where Tess is a tragic victim.

Question 6: *The Remains of the Day*

Although there were fewer students writing about this text than those writing about *Gatsby* and *Tess*, a number of answers were seen and these were generally very good. The responses were often interesting and showed real engagement. Students seemed to enjoy writing about this novel. The question asked students to explore the view that Ishiguro presents Stevens' life as utterly bleak and there was plenty of lively debate with some saying that it is utterly bleak and some saying that there are positives. The mark scheme sets out a variety of approaches to the question and several ideas mentioned there were discussed by students in a confident and detailed way. Most students were able to comment on how Ishiguro's authorial methods influence reader response in terms of whether or not Stevens' life is utterly bleak. Some really good discussion of Ishiguro's use of Stevens as a narrator was woven into the arguments.

Looking forward

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

The best responses were seen from 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 2024.

Teachers might like to give the following quick tips to their students:

1. Know your texts thoroughly
2. Focus on all the words of the question set
3. Base your arguments on details of the text itself
4. Do not write about Keats' life and Fanny Brawne
5. Do not write about Hardy's life and beliefs unless specifically mentioned in the poems

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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