A-LEVEL
ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/1B Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of comedy
Report on the Examination

7717/1B
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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 (Centre Services, then 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. Evidence from the students' work suggests that they 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 seem 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 did not 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 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 21st century - and not to write about the lives of writers. There was much this year on Keats' life and Wilde's homosexuality. Students should also not include critical opinions which are at a tangent to the question and they should not write about Freytag's pyramid. There were many students who made up comments about the 16th century and invariably it 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 on or abused by 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.

So, to be clear - and apologies now for repeating what has been said in previous reports - 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 happens in the stories they are studying and the sequence of events (and sequence is often troublesome 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. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers and is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do. 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' something 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. Answering 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 was 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 an unreliable 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 lively 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 pseudo-impressive words which are often misapplied. Clarity and communication can also be aided when students have good control of their sentences. For most students it is best not to write sentences which have multiple clauses. It is also worth stressing that the very best responses are carefully sequenced. Therefore, it is essential 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 comment on 7717 1B

Once again, examiners have reported seeing many impressive responses to the 1B Comedy paper. As in previous years, there were numerous scripts which contained detailed and perceptive answers: the consistent pattern in this component is one of clear and purposeful responses to the questions set. It is clear that centres prepare their students well for this paper, and students enjoy the opportunity to demonstrate their text knowledge and writing skills.

Section A

The extract-based tasks in this paper invite students to explore how comedic aspects operate in a small portion of the play and then relate them to relevant events elsewhere in the text. The most important part of this task is the extract itself. While there is no suggested balance between how much time students place on the extract versus the rest of the play, it is true to say that successful answers always have a close focus on the extract. It is important therefore that students realise that the extract is where their energy needs to be. In short, the best answers identify the story of the extract, select some comedic aspects and issues that can be seen and then offer thoughtful comment upon them. As they write, they make links with relevant events in the rest of the text, but they always have the extract at the heart of their response.

Previous reports and CPD sessions have stated the usefulness of pinning down the story of the extract. Examiners are instructed to check that students have identified the narrative in the given text: doing so is not viewed as ‘just retelling the story’ - it is seen as showing a close understanding of events and how the comedic story is shaped. Students are therefore advised to commence their responses by clearly and economically identifying what happens in the extract. This encourages them to think about possible aspects of comedy they might explore, and also immediately demonstrates that they have a grip on the text – they reveal text knowledge. It also has a practical effect in an exam situation in that it acts as a ‘settling’ activity at the beginning of the paper. Students should also contextualise the extract by stating briefly what happens before and after the extract. Examples of the types of things that might be included are contained in the first two bullet points of the mark scheme under AO5.

In terms of *what* to write about, it is self-defeating for students to try to cover scores of comedic aspects in their answer. Instead, selecting the most fruitful areas to comment on is key. For instance, in response to this year’s *The Taming of the Shrew* extract, one successful answer chose to focus on the blunt comedic optimism and dominance of Petruchio, the upbeat inventiveness of the dialogue of given to him, the darkly comic powerlessness of Katherina and the amusing nature of Petruchio’s seeming obliviousness to Katherina’s shrewishness. These areas led the student to

naturally explore the significance of comedic ideas about relationships and what is being shown about the apparent madcap manner of Petruchio's attitudes towards marriage. Exploration of his role-playing, the positioning of other on-stage characters in relation to the central double-act, and the differing levels of knowledge between the audience (who know about Petruchio's taming strategy) and the characters (who don't) were effective ways in which dramatic method were dealt with. Understanding how Shakespeare allows the audience in on the joke, how the Induction gives the audience a lens through which to interpret this extract (and the whole play) as Sly's fantasy, and how the marriage between the central couple develops all show a subtle grasp of comedic structure and its significance.

It is worth restating that this is a specification which prioritises generic and cultural contexts. It discourages historical context as a mode of exploration, as too often, any attempt to set a text in its historical context in an exam is reduced to general comments such as 'in Elizabethan times, women had no power'.

Although there may be a very general comparative truth in such statements, they usually offer little insight into the text at hand. Students are therefore advised to keep comments about power and gender rooted in the world represented in (rather than outside of) the text. For example, in answers to *The Taming of the Shrew* extract, it would be perfectly valid to explore issues of patriarchy, control and masculinity as they are shown in the events of the extract but trying to relate it to 'what happened back then' is fraught with problems and best avoided.

There were also some students who arrived with a reading of the text and applied it wholesale to the extract. This usually took the form of arguing that the play is an egregious display of male power and applying that framework to the extract rather than dealing with the events before them. While it is certainly valid to view the play in that way, some answers that took that line often read more like a treatise on gender than an exploration of comedy in an extract. Although such contextual readings can be supported and do score highly when done well, it is worth students remembering that *The Taming of the Shrew* also contains quickfire dialogue, bizarre behaviour, amusing characters, foolish actions, comic frustration and many other elements that are found in comedic texts. In a paper about comedy, it is usually best to keep such things at the forefront of a response.

Most students who answered on the *Twelfth Night* extract fastened on to the part it plays in the resolution of the play and the clearing up of confusion. Once again, students with a keen eye on structure and dramatic irony could comment on how the audience knows of Sebastian's survival whereas most of the characters don't, therefore the audience are in the privileged position of seeing how the entrance of Sebastian leads to temporary confusion but also leads to the process of comedic resolution. As noted above, making sensible choices of what to focus on is key for a student's success.

One *Twelfth Night* response helpfully chose to focus on the amazement and happiness of the twins' reunion, the beginning of the love triangle's resolution and Viola's unmasking. In doing so, this allowed an exploration of key comedic ideas such as confusion, restoration, harmony and happy endings. As with *The Taming of the Shrew*, a handful of responses chose to impose a pre-learned reading on the extract rather than react to the comedic elements in evidence. Invariably, this took the form of offering a reading of Antonio and Sebastian's relationship as a homosexual one.

While this reading is one that has been and can be explored, it was at the expense of the main comedic ideas on show in the extract and was often accompanied by basic and general historical assertions about sexuality in the Elizabethan England. A further area which seems have been a slight pattern this year was the re-emergence of tagging word classes (usually wrongly), eg, 'Viola

uses the noun 'happy' to show she is…'. There is little point in doing this as it adds nothing to the ideas of a response and is at best a basic attempt to show some grasp of dramatic method. On a related note, it is possible to make points about language that are incisive, but in a paper where drama features heavily, students fare better when they deal with method at a structural level by focusing on eg, dialogue, entrances, exits, dramatic irony, voices and other features mentioned in the first few bullets under AO2 in the mark scheme.

Section B

In Section B students either respond to a given literary view or explore the significance of an aspect of their studied play. Choices are also important in this section – choosing which parts of the play to explore to best answer the question and choosing a suitable line of argument are vital. Students do best when they clearly present a view and use the detail of the text to support it. In doing so, the skills of thinking, choosing, argument and writing are demonstrated. Yet underlying these skills is text knowledge. When a student knows the details of a text, it allows them to confidently select and refer to any part they choose – they become confident that they can respond to any task that comes their way. Students who only half-know texts will forever be hoping that a favourable question is offered. Therefore, knowing the comedic story, the key events, the way characters are presented and how things resolve is essential for any student. This year, examiners were once again impressed by the number of students who had secure, detailed text knowledge and could refer to or directly cite the detail of the play. For some students who underachieved, it was often because their arguments were lacking the scope that comes with secure text knowledge.

Question 3 on *The Taming of the Shrew* asked students to consider the view that the play was 'an entertaining comic romp that shouldn't be taken seriously'. It is worth restating that this specification is genuinely interested in students' views and therefore they are at liberty to advance an argument that offers a single point of view – there is no requirement to do a 'for and against' argument (although they could) and there is no requirement to imagine what other readers might think (especially ones in the distant past). Often, the best responses are ones where students present their own thoughts in clear prose using the text in support of their ideas. Such responses often have a clear line of argument and are free of the baggage of trying to offer other imagined reading positions. In Question 3, some students chose successfully to argue that the play is indeed best read as an 'entertaining comic romp'. When they knew the text well, they were able to select examples from around the text to support this view referring to eg, the knockabout dialogue of Petruchio and Katherina, the comic foolishness of Gremio, the amusing master-servant relationship of Petruchio and Grumio, the entertaining confusion wrought by disguise, the humiliation of Lucentio in the wager scene and many more. In assembling an argument based on text detail, it becomes much easier for students to enter Band 4 (16-20 marks) where 'coherence' and 'thoroughness' are key criteria terms for markers. Other students who answered Question 3 chose equally successfully to argue that darker elements were at play and displayed the range of their text knowledge by exploring issues of female subjugation, male cruelty, patriarchal power, mockery of the lower classes in the Induction and other troubling aspects. Whichever angle was adopted, the key decision for a marker is about quality of argument. Better responses not only provided a convincingly detailed argument, but also saw the comedic debate at the heart of the task, ie, whether comedy is just amusement or whether it invites exploration of more problematic ideas. It has long been said in CPD sessions that this specification enjoys the personal voices of students. It values both the student who writes in a conventional academic manner and also those lively voices that truly engaged students occasionally display. One brilliant response to Question 3 concluded in a knowingly flippant way that 'anyone who takes offence at the events of the play needs to get over themselves – comedy is intended to be amusing.'

Question 4 focused on the significance of the Induction. Tasks which invite students to engage with 'significance' are an opportunity to consider ideas and meanings arising from a comedic aspect or

minor character. In this task, the best responses saw how the Induction was a way of establishing comedic ideas and how it also offered audiences a way to interpret the whole play. For instance, one very good response carefully argued how the main events of play are prefigured in the Induction and the comedic aspects of disguise, play-acting, marriage, and male fantasies about their own power are instigated. The response also offered the line that the Induction colours the way the audience sees the whole play. This view posited that the main story can all be read as a satire of Sly's drunken fantasies and that much of the supposed dark elements of the play can be read not as an endorsement of male power but a critique of its ridiculousness. As with all of the best answers, it was firmly rooted in the events of the Induction. Less successful answers tended to offer sketchy details about the Induction and instead looked elsewhere to offer detail, eg, briefly noting how Sly is dressed up in the Induction but then writing extensively about disguise in the main play. While this obviously has relevance, it suggests that 'thorough' (Band 4) or 'assured' (Band 5) text knowledge is wanting. There are still a small number of students who misinterpret 'significance' (thinking it means 'importance' rather than meanings/ideas being signified) and mistakenly thinking that this was a debate-style question, ie, 'is the Induction more important than the main play?'. Fortunately, this sort of error was very much in the minority and examiners reported seeing some first-rate responses to this task.

Question 5 focused upon Feste and provided students with the view that this character was 'simply a playful truth-teller who makes audiences laugh'. Previous reports have emphasised that students need to tackle the details of the task and in this case, there are clear comedic triggers to work with – 'playful' and 'audiences laugh' – so students who engaged with these terms and the nature of Feste's truthfulness were likely to do well. Often, tasks contain words such as 'simply' to sharpen up the debate and encourage students to consider whether, in this task, Feste is actually more than the description offered. In many responses, students did take issue with the statement, pointing to Feste's cruel treatment of Malvolio, his anti-comedic refusal to make amends in the final scene and his melancholic songs as evidence that he is a more complex character than might appear. One particularly strong response argued that he is also a liar who tricks and tortures Malvolio, and far from provoking laughter in the audience, he ultimately causes discomfort. Some of the more accomplished answers did some good work around the term 'playful', exploring his wordplay and his engagement in revelry. When answers didn't achieve so well, it was often the result of sidestepping the task a little and writing something akin to a character study of Feste, rather than engaging with the debate set up in the task.

Question 6 invited students to consider whether 'desire turns the characters into self-indulgent fools'. Here, key comedic concepts such as desire and foolishness allowed students to show their engagement with the genre, and the more astute students also saw that the task centred on the transformative emotional effect of feelings for others. The vast majority of students understood what was meant by 'self-indulgent' and could point to several examples of excessive behaviour, such as Orsino's melancholic posturing, Olivia's crazed pursuit of Viola and Malvolio's outrageous attempt to impress Olivia. The best answers were ones which displayed an assuredness of thought and engagement with the implications of the task. For instance, one particularly good response made a distinction between those characters whose desire had a sincerity about it, arguing convincingly that Viola's desire for Orsino was self-sacrificial rather than self-indulgent and had a nobility about it. The argument was extended by turning to Antonio's feelings for Sebastian and the sense that he is willing to risk his safety for Sebastian rather than simply indulge his own whims. In this response, dramatic method was dealt with at a structural level: the student was able to show how Shakespeare sets up a contrast between those would-be lovers who appear self-indulgent and foolish and those for whom desire ennobles. Furthermore, the response also saw how desire was used structurally, pinpointing the moment where Malvolio is transformed from po-faced steward to a ridiculous peacock, and seeing how this turning point in the narrative is part of the comedy. Dealing with dramatic method in this way is usually more telling and natural than attempting to analyse words: too often, microanalysis of language can be a dead end, as it

becomes 'saying some things about the connotations of words' rather than showing how a dramatist presents the big ideas of the text.

Section C

The final section of the paper gives a chance for students to write about their non-Shakespeare texts. Although it has been said before, this response is not intended to be a comparative one; there is no need for students to *compare* how different writers treat a comedic aspect. It is better to think of this response as one where a *connection* is made by the question, and all students need to do is explore how one writer presents a comedic aspect and then explore how a second writer presents that same aspect. The connection is therefore with the genre, rather than the texts. Thankfully, most students have approached their Section C response in this way and felt the liberation that this essay structure brings, rather than tying themselves in knots using comparative discourse markers and trying desperately to find ways to compare two very different texts. Given that students will spend roughly 25 minutes writing about each text, the choice of which areas are best to write about becomes even more important.

Both Section C tasks were significance questions. Question 7 invited consideration of journeys and to help students get to grips with this comedic aspect, an opening statement cued them in to the fact that literal and/or metaphorical journeys take place in comedy. There were some very thoughtful responses to this task. In regard to the drama texts, some students chose to focus on the amusing supposed journey of Mrs Hardcastle across Crackskull Common, and also the journey of Marlow and Hastings (and how it is hampered by Tony's comic trickery). The literal journeying between city and country was also a feature of responses to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, thereby allowing exploration of escapism and role-playing. Both drama texts also featured the metaphorical journey of central characters who develop by the end of the texts and end their journeys happily. A similar approach was taken when students wrote about *Emma* and *Small Island* which feature protagonists who undertake both literal and metaphorical journeys, learning something about themselves and others along the way. A key feature of the comedic journey is transformation, and various students wrote convincingly about Emma's gradual self-discovery, the development of Gilbert and Hortense's marriage and Jack Worthing's discovery of his birth. One excellent response explored Chaucer's presentation of the comic chase sequence, ending in the wood where Chauntecleer learns a valuable life lesson. Some choices in regard to the poetry Anthology were less successful – students often struggled to make *My Rival's House* and *Sunny Prestatyn* work for a question about journeys. It may well be that these choices were made because they were the poems students were most confident familiar with, but they resulted in some forced argument. A more yielding choice was *Tam o Shanter*, with its supernatural journey and comic chase. Burns' poem is a central part of the Anthology and it is often a very helpful option in a Section C answer given its range of comedic elements.

Question 8 asked students to explore the significance of happiness. There were numerous valid approaches to this task. For example, some students chose to focus on the happiness discovered at the end of texts, often allied to success, marriage or overcoming obstacles. Some students explored the desire for happiness and the process by which it is achieved. Some students explored the absence of happiness, remarking on how in some poems the withholding of a happy ending provides an unconventional end to the comedic narrative, eg, how the muted endings of *Not My Best Side* and *My Rival's House* suggest a downbeat comedic world. As has been said in CPD sessions, the notable absence of a conventional genre element can be significant, so this approach was valid. Less successful were the handful of students who attempted to argue that happiness wasn't significant but some other feature such as trickery was: question focus is important, so it's not valid to shift the focus of the task in this way. One of the best responses to Section C explored how in order to secure happiness, Kate Hardcastle has to stoop. This opened

up issues of disguise, love and gender expectations. The student perceptively argued that happiness appeared to depend on a character's willingness to enter into the comedic bargain of compromise and transformation. In the second segment of their response, they explored how some characters' happiness is often at the expense of others, carefully constructing a reading which showed how Queenie's giving up of her baby brings joy to Gilbert and Hortense and that ultimately, comedy features both winners and losers.

This year, there were many impressive and successful scripts. Students really do engage well with the comedy genre and write well about their chosen texts. This is testament to the students' own efforts and the dedication, support and input of their teachers.

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 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.

The messaging here is consistent with messaging in all reports and courses since the inception of the course. This should be reassuring for teachers as they prepare for 2024.

Teachers 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 writers' lives or their source material
- Do not write about worlds or society outside of the text

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.