



A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2A Texts and Genres: Elements of crime writing
Report on the Examination

7717/2A
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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.

General Remarks on this Year's Paper

Overall, many students engaged with the questions on this year's paper in a lively and interesting way. Examiners enjoyed reading those scripts which featured strong personal responses to both texts and questions and they looked to reward those answers which showed evidence of independent thinking and a genuine enthusiasm for literature.

As always good time management was one of the keys to success in the examination. It is a long examination and those students who built reading, thinking and planning into their time management were the most successful; students were not expected to write solidly for three hours. Careful planning resulting in focused answers produced the best work. Some students wrote far too much and included material which was not helpful in answering the question. Quality comes from knowing the texts and knowing what to leave out as well as what to include. Length and quality were not necessarily synonymous. Some of the best answers were relatively short and pithy.

As already indicated, clear question focus was essential to success. Precise focus on the question terms produced the best answers. Students who ensured the examiner knew how their material helped to answer the question and shaped it accordingly achieved higher marks than those who left the examiner to try to work it out for themselves, searching for implied relevance.

It is important here to draw attention to AO1. Fluency and clarity of expression were hallmarks of good answers. Students who structured their responses coherently and whose writing engaged the reader's attention were rewarded. Those answers where the quality of writing meant that the meaning was unclear were self-penalising. Poor control of syntax was often a hallmark of answers in the lower bands.

Unfortunately, there were still some rubric infringements this year. It is important to remember that three texts must be addressed across Sections A and B. The same text must not appear in both sections.

Although the following comments have been specifically divided according to the three sections, it is worth mentioning that many of the points made under one section can similarly be applied to the other two.

Section A

Students, on the whole, responded well to this year's extract and were able to explore many of the different elements of crime that occurred within it. The best answers began with an overview of the crime trajectory within the extract and engaged instantly with what was happening in relation to the genre. The least successful answers were too vague, trying to pin down a sub-genre. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that it is impossible to classify a whole novel from a brief extract! There was no credit to be given for attempts to fit the extract into categories such as 'police procedural', 'hard-boiled' or even 'scandi noir'. Equally the term 'post-modern' did not gain any critical credit. Many students noted the date of publication as 2020 and thereafter kept dropping 'post-modern' into their writing which was not helpful.

Good answers often approached the extract in a non-chronological way after giving the overview, as they focused on the key crime elements they had found there. It was important to look at what was actually in the extract and not point out what was not there. Students who relied on negative comments such as saying there was no detective, no resolution etc could not really be given credit for their negative observations. It suggested they were coming to the extract with a crime checklist which was not a helpful approach.

The most successful answers in this section focused closely on the details of the crime elements in the extract and avoided speculation. Answers in the lower bands frequently contained speculation about what had happened before the events in the extract and, even more frequently, what might happen afterwards. Such speculative writing did not answer the question and addressed something which could not be known. Contextual assumptions could also prove unrewarding.

In some weaker answers interpretation swamped the wider issues and students became tangled up in arguments about Niall's potential guilt and emotional responses. Whilst not irrelevant these did need to be securely pinned down to the elements of crime writing and not treated as real life. It is important to remember that this is an English Literature examination and the extract should be treated as a subject for literary analysis and not as a report on psychology or criminology.

The best answers also kept the overview of the crime elements firmly insight and did not get weighed down by micro-analysis of the potential implications of certain words and phrases. For example, Niall's eyes are described as 'warm and wet', a phrase which some students seemed to be keen to analyse extensively, making assumptions that this definitely demonstrated Niall's guilt.

Section B

In this section the best answers focused precisely on the question terms. For example, in response to question 2 which asked about the 'feelings of guilt' many less successful answers assumed that guilt and remorse were synonymous and used them as interchangeable terms. There is a subtle distinction which students who wrote better answers were aware of. Equally in question 9, which was about Rose, those students who wrote extensively about Ida being a heroine could not be given credit for it.

It was interesting to note that the same term in different questions seemed to produce different results. Question 6 which focused on Nancy as a victim produced some excellent answers whereas in question 5, which focused on Cecilia as an innocent victim, often did not! The best answers to question 5 unpicked the phrase 'innocent victim' and challenged the two terms separately. The weakest answers failed to focus on Cecilia as a victim at all and just considered her generally or, even worse, went off onto Briony's crime. Students who studied *Atonement* seemed to be particularly inclined to want to write about Briony's crime and nothing else, frequently not answering the question.

It is also important to stress the need to read the questions carefully in order to ensure precise focus. An example of failure to do so occurred in relation to question 9. The question read, 'Of all the crimes in the play, it is Claudius' killing of the king which is the most shocking.' The question focus was clearly on shocking crimes so writing about things which shocked but which weren't crimes was irrelevant.

Students are advised to come to this section with an open mind about which of their three texts they will write on. There is only one question on each text in this section and it is far better to remain flexible and choose the text and question the student is most comfortable with on the day of the examination. Clearly some students had already decided or had been told which text to write about in Section B and this was not always to their advantage. It is sound practice to look at the questions in Section C as well before starting to write, as it may be a good idea to juggle the texts across the two sections to use them to the greatest benefit.

Answers in the lower bands also sometimes drifted off focus to talk about historical or literary contexts. Determination to quote irrelevant critical opinions or to give contextual summaries about historical events or authors' beliefs rarely added much to the answers. Contextual inaccuracies sometimes actually detracted from answers. Particularly noticeable were theological inaccuracies, such as sweeping generalisations about everybody being 'catholic' in a clearly protestant Britain. It was also surprising how many students described Peter Grimes as a 'Victorian poem'.

A specific point in this section related to question 2 where students were dealing with a small range of poems. The topic of the question was 'feelings of guilt' and students who wrote the best answers made a careful choice of which poems to write about. The poems by Browning and Peter Grimes were much easier choices to write about in relation to the topic than *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* so the choice of poems tended to affect the level of success.

Finally, for this section, examiners would like to stress the importance of using the texts in an open book examination. Those answers in the higher bands always used close textual reference and quotations from the texts in front of them to support their views. As the texts are actually allowed into the examination there is the expectation that students will use them and that textual references will be accurate.

Section C

Both question in this section were equally appealing this year and many students dealt confidently with 'significance.'

Thoughtful choice of question in relation to the texts to be used in this section was often the key to success. Students whose answers tended to fall within the lower bands often chose a question and then struggled to apply the topic to the texts they were writing about. Whilst confident answers were able to address cruelty in *Atonement* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, some more modest answers showed difficulty in identifying relevant examples and just ended up saying there wasn't any! It was not productive to take a negative approach and simply say what was not there as this did not enable development in the writing.

The best answers in this section began by highlighting the element in the task in relation to the texts studied. Those answers in which students chose appropriate pieces of text to discuss in relation to the topic scored well. Those answers in which students failed to use the texts and resorted to writing generally in response to the topic or randomly chose quotations which did not really fit the topic did not score highly. Good knowledge of the texts resulting in knowing where to find appropriate material was a key to success in this open book examination.

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.

As teachers prepare for 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 try to classify the texts and make assumptions about them eg trying to fit the text into a specific sub-genre such as 'hard-boiled' or 'Golden Age'
- Do not write about imagined historical readers and their values
- 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.