



AS

English Literature B

7716/2A Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Tragedy

Report on the Examination

7716
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Introductory Comments

Some interesting responses were seen to the questions on all the AS papers this year. Although the entry is small it remains stable and it is clear that those centres who choose to offer AS English Literature B see that it has value. Examiners who mark the AS papers certainly enjoy the experience; they enjoy seeing students really engaging with texts which are read through the genres of tragedy and comedy.

Most students seem to like the format of the papers where they write discretely about two texts in 1 hour and 30 minutes. Most seem to manage their time well too.

Knowing texts and stories

The best responses were seen by students who knew their texts and the stories of those texts very well. When students engage with stories, plots, events and characters they naturally connect with genre and tragic and comedic narratives. When they engage with the stories of their texts, they also find it easy to respond to the set questions and authorial methods. The text and its story is the body of knowledge that English Literature student need to have; it is the foundation for assessment. There is nothing outside the text that students have to know. So, they cannot sidestep the text and if they do not know it in a detailed way then they are seriously disadvantaged when it comes to answering questions. Students who only know bits of the text are unable to draw from it in the most productive way and those students inevitably find it difficult to access the higher mark bands where marks are awarded for ideas which are relevant, thorough and perceptive.

Responding to Questions

Once students are in the exam, they then have to deal with unknown questions. While this is a challenge, having sound textual knowledge gives students comfort and confidence. They can then make good selections from their texts and apply their textual knowledge to the questions being asked.

Much has been said in previous years about the need for students to answer the question set in all its detail. Marks can only be given for relevance to the question so students must focus exclusively on what is being asked. However interesting their ideas are about other things if what they write is unfocused then they will not be given marks. Teachers can help their students by telling them clearly during teaching and practice assessment that only question relevance will be rewarded.

When students are engaging with a question, they need to pin down exactly what the subject of the question is. They need to be laser focused on the very subject of the sentence that forms the question. For example, this year the subject might have been: dreams in *Salesman*, the play which is silly in *Earnest*, beginnings and endings in the poetry, Mr and Mrs Elton in *Emma*, children in *Tess*, the events in America in *Wise Children*, positives in the ending of *The Great Gatsby*. The best answers seen were from those students who went straight into the question and the subject of the question and straight into the specifics of the story. Preambles were not productive. Students should be making relevant points from their first sentence.

Students producing the best answers 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, ranging around the text for details, engaging with key events and where they occur, thinking about beginnings and endings. 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. These students could work with a story that appears to be developing in real time on stage rather than one that is fixed in a prose or poetry narrative.

When students did not perform as well as they might have hoped, it was often because their textual knowledge was insecure and because they did not focus on the actual questions set. Sometimes this was because they wanted to answer a different question - perhaps one that had been set in class or one that they wanted to write about. It was also a factor that in Paper 2, some students were unable to use their open book in a helpful way possibly 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 really is unhelpful for students to focus on contextual material from outside the text, especially when it replaces knowledge of the text and the story that is being told.

As has been pointed out before, it is unhelpful for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives, to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods and 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 Elizabethan England) 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 Gonerill and Viola and Bianca, 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 and the stories 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 (as required by the question) - and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and the ideas should be developed by students using detailed knowledge of the text and its story. There also needs to be integrated comment on how the writer shapes meanings and comments on structure, settings and voices generally work much better than single word analysis since this often stops the flow of an argument.

How students organise ideas and express themselves (AO1) is, of course, also important in assessment and teachers need to spend time with students structuring their arguments, writing in clear punctuated sentences, working on their technical accuracy and using expression appropriate to AS.

Specific comments about 2A

Responses were seen to all three poetry texts with about half the students then responding to *The Great Gatsby* and half to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Only one answer was seen to *The Remains of the Day*.

Good answers were seen on all texts when there was tight focus on the question set, when students engaged with the subject of the question sentence and when they had good textual knowledge to support their ideas. Most students were able to integrate comments on authorial method - easily done in the poetry texts since they were asked to write about beginnings and therefore engaging automatically with narrative structure, but it was also unproblematic in the prose texts since they were asked to focus on the ending of *The Great Gatsby* and in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* they were asked to write about children

and the young Tess which enabled them to focus on the beginning of the novel and other specific parts where children are a strategic part of the story.

Other ways that authorial methods were seamlessly integrated were when relevant comments were made about narrators and authorial voices and when comments were made about the settings where events take place. When students got caught up in the analysis of single words they tended to lose the thread of their arguments.

Section A Poetry

When answering questions on poetry, students have to focus on a printed extract as part of their answer. This is one reason why they have to know their texts well as there are no short cuts; students have to write about a given part of a poem. If students have chosen not to study or revise certain poems, then they will invariably struggle. The questions this summer for all poetry questions asked students to explore the significance of beginnings to the tragic experiences in the wider text. They had to write about the opening of a selected poem where the extract was given - and then choose an opening to second poem and tease out its significance in relation to the tragic experiences that follow. Given that this is an open book exam, this enabled students to really work with detail. However, clearly students needed to know their text well in order to know where to go for references to the tragic experiences that come after the opening.

The choice of the second poem and its opening clearly gave students some freedom to choose a poem they liked best. It was noticed this year though that several students tried to deal with their two poems together and compare them. This was not a helpful approach as it often prevented students from engaging with the wider tragic experiences and the story of each poem in a meaningful way. Comparison is not needed and takes students in an altogether wrong direction.

Question 1: Keats

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of the opening of *Isabella*; or, *The Pot of Basil* to the tragic experiences that follow. Most students worked well with the extract and its details and made links to the tragic love affair of Isabella and Lorenzo, Lorenzo's murder by the brothers and Isabella's grief and death later. Key to success, of course, was having good knowledge of what happens to the tragic lovers and the story - which Keats tells us has legendary status. Good comments were also made on all choices for a second poem. When students struggled it was because their knowledge of the poems was insecure, when they did not engage with the story being told - or its opening - and when they did not relate their ideas to the tragic experiences that follow.

As in previous years, there was still material on Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne. Students should be told not to include this material as they will not be credited for it.

Question 2: Hardy

The Hardy question was popular and there were some very good answers.

The question on openings focused on *The Mock Wife*. This was done well by those who knew the story, could engage with its non-chronological structure and could relate the opening well to the tragic experiences that are told later. Some students had clearly not revised this poem and they found it difficult to engage with what Hardy tells us in the opening lines. The best answers were by those students who dealt with the nuances of the story and the double tragedy of both John Channing who dies of poisoning and of his wife who was perhaps wrongly hanged for his murder. There were some really good comments on Hardy's authorial voice and the use of other voices in the poem to tell the story. Several students made insightful comments on how Hardy criticises rumour mongers.

Students chose widely for their second poem and the writing about it was generally good when students knew their poem and its story well.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

There were several responses to this text, too, and students seemed to enjoy engaging with the opening of "*Out, out—*". Excellent comments were made about the setting and the ominous buzz saw which is responsible for the loss of the boy's hand and his later death. Many students wrote astutely about the voice which tells the story and which sets up the tragedy. When students struggled it was usually because they did not seem to know or understand the sequence of events that Frost sets up.

As with the other poetry texts, different choices were made for the second poem and they all worked well. Some good answers were seen when students wrote about *Miss Gee* and the opening to the *Paradise Lost* extract.

Section B: Prose

When writing their responses to the prose texts students needed to look carefully at the questions, decide on a line of direction and then decide which parts of their novel would best help them to construct their argument. Given that students had their texts in front of them, they needed to quickly find key parts of the text that would enable them to produce a detailed evidenced argument. As with poetry, the choices that students made in selecting appropriate parts of the text on which to base their arguments were fundamental.

Question 4: *The Great Gatsby*

The choice of material should not have been difficult in the question on *The Great Gatsby* as students were asked to explore the view that 'positives do not emerge at the end of the novel'. Clearly students had to make a choice about where exactly they would pitch the end, but the end certainly needed to be in the last couple of chapters. Most students who agreed with the proposition focused on the deaths of

Gatsby, Wilson and Myrtle, Gatsby's despair, the behaviour of Tom and Daisy and Nick's sadness, but there were several students who challenged the question and argued that Nick's realisation of the shallowness of the East is a positive. A few students interestingly focused on Jordan saying that her outcome is positive given that she gets away from Nick.

Some students did not seem to know what happens at the end of the novel and just wrote about bits they knew, like the parties or the Valley of the Ashes. Such responses, of course, could not receive much credit.

Question 5: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

This was a popular text and on the whole students seemed to have good knowledge of it though some students did not focus on children and just wrote anything about the text. For those students who were thinking and knew the story well, they were about able to make some really insightful comments about Tess as a child when she is abused by her family and Alec. There was also some good discussion of: the baby Sorrow who suffers and is ostracised by the Church, Tess' siblings which become part of Alec's bargaining chips when he tries to win back Tess and there was some really interesting discussion of Liza-Lu at the end of the novel and how she is symbol of positivity or perhaps just another child that is set up to be abused.

Some students struggled because they could only write about Tess and they did not confine their comments to discussion of the young Tess but wrote about her as a woman.

Most students could integrate sensible comments on authorial method when they were dealing with voice and structure.

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.

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 2025.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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