



A-level

# English Literature B

7717/1A Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy

Report on the Examination

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## Introductory Comments

It was pleasing to see a slight rise in the entry numbers this year and good to see so many students and teachers enjoying and valuing the study of English Literature and Specification B.

This report will focus specifically on this year's examination and how students performed in terms of the questions. It will also offer some guidance to help teachers who are teaching Specification B to maximise success in the future. This is a specification where texts are linked by genre, where a tight focus on the questions asked is paramount and where nothing else is required of students but a complete and thorough knowledge of the set texts.

Examiners who mark the specification have reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers. Students who know that they have to focus exclusively on the questions set, who are not distracted by including extraneous material in their answers, and who know their texts so well that they can make good choices of supportive references, produce work that is a joy to mark. When students are engaging with the stories of their texts in terms of the specific genre, when they know their texts 'inside out' and know what they have to do in terms of question focus they clearly enter the exam confidently and produce good work at all levels of ability. It seems that many students have enjoyed their study of English Literature and teachers are to be congratulated for fostering enthusiasm. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the three required answers on each paper and they understood the different skill sets required for answering each type of question.

When students didn't perform so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely or 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) failed to focus on the grammatical subject of the sentence which forms the question. Some got caught up in loose contextual discussion, and several subverted the question choosing to write about something other than what was being asked.

## Knowing the text

The text and its story is the body of knowledge that English Literature students need to have. It is the foundation for assessment. All knowledge-based examination subjects have a body of knowledge that is prescribed, and the text is what is prescribed for A level English Literature students. There is nothing outside the text that Specification B 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.

The key to 'knowing the text' is for students to be clear about the facts that happen in the stories they are studying and to be confident about the sequence of events in those stories. Although sequence is often troublesome in non-linear narratives, it still has to be known. 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 from beginning to the end of the text. In stories the facts are the events that are shown, the actions of the characters, what the

characters say, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to, where things happen and who lives and who dies. 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. If students only have a hazy knowledge or only know bits of texts and a bank of quotations that they think will work for any question, then they invariably struggle. So time must be spent on helping students to know their texts in their entirety.

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 to 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 narrative perspective if students haven't got inside the story that the narrator is telling. There is also little point in writing about 'aspects' or 'elements' of genre if students haven't grasped the actual story that is being told. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers, and this is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do.

### **What is getting in the way of the text**

Some students seem to think that it is more important to know things outside the text rather than the text itself. Those 'other' things might be external contextual material or critical and theoretical material and sometimes these take the place of writing about the text and get in the way of the answers.

Even though it has been flagged up in all reports since the inception of the specification, many students are still writing loosely about contextual factors instead of writing about the text. This continues to be a particular problem when the students are writing about *Othello*, Keats, Blake, Coleridge and Wilde though wherever it occurs it is 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 or literary movements. Neither should students write about critical theory in a tangential way. In the exams, there were many students who made up comments about the 16th century (and particularly women in the 16th century) and invariably such comments took students away from the text and the questions. The 16th century, of course, spans a hundred years and one play or novel 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 unwise too. 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 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 and they need to think about what they are writing. For example, even within the world of *Othello*, it is surely reductive and not accurate to write about Emilia as a proto-feminist. The character who speaks out against the treatment of women is the same character who earlier is desperate to please the fantasy of her husband and the same character who later rails viciously against Bianca and her trade. Characters are often created with some complexity, some nuances; they develop and change. 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 and to think carefully about what they are writing.

## Answering the precise question set in all its detail

When students are in the exam, they need to focus entirely on the questions set. They need to identify precisely what is the subject of each question (the subject of the question sentence) and determine exactly what it is they need to write about: the intensity of Othello’s love (Q3 Tragedy), happiness (in Q7 Tragedy), the setting of Illyria (Q5 Comedy), love (Q2 Crime), the criminal (Q11 Crime), endings (Q8 Political), punishments (Q10 Political). They then need to think about parts of the text where happiness, for example, is focused on by the writer(s), give details of it in its narrative context and then debate it in terms of what the rest of the question asks. Although many teachers will be doing this, if they are not, it would be really profitable if teachers could construct lessons around the question subject, to ask their students: what is it that you have to focus on in this question and which parts of the text would be best to use to exemplify it.

The first sentence that students write should hit the question head on. The focus should then remain sharp with every comment relevant to the question and the last sentence should also be on task.

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. 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.

In this year’s exam it was noticed across all papers that some students denied the existence of a topic that is set up in the question, for example, happiness in Paper 1. To write about the absence of a topic is a most unhelpful approach for students to take. Lead Assessment Writers and all who are involved in the question paper production process have ensured that there is always material in the texts that can be used for the questions asked. Questions are not set around things that do not exist in texts. In Section C questions, given the number of texts that are available, it is naturally challenging for Assessment Writers to ensure that each text can be used for every question set, but that is what they do. What students have to do is to know their texts well and then think and respond positively. Careful thinking will help them to locate appropriate material to use for every question.

In answering the question, students also have to incorporate comments on authorial methods - how writers shape meanings. The students who produced the best responses were 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 where they occur and 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 where a range of different outcomes are seemingly still possible.

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.

## **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 all 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 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 superb responses to all 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. Those students who had the most secure and thorough textual knowledge were able to make excellent choices on which to base their arguments to the questions.

As always, there is no substitute for knowing the text - and knowing texts as stories and given that two of the three texts on this paper have to be drama texts, then students have to know their texts as dramatic narratives which playwrights have constructed.

All three question types demand sound textual knowledge which students need to draw upon in different ways. 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 and 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 don't have much time to write about each text.

When students did not perform well it was often because they did not see the three questions as requiring different skills and there were some whose textual knowledge was so insecure, that 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; they needed to have acquired 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.

It is important that when texts are read and studied in the classroom that even the most challenging parts of the text are read and understood. To spend time on the whole text will be rewarding, open up its

story and open it up to meanings. If students only have a sketchy outline of the easiest parts of a text, a single way of looking at it, some character studies that they think can be used for any question and a bank of quotations, they are not well served. The students who are equipped in this way have a rather reductive way of looking at texts and they seldom fare well.

As was the case last year, there were problems for students when they incorporated into their answers generalised (and largely made up) contextual material, often writing at length about it and often writing about it with little historical understanding. The Introductory Comments foreground the problem of students incorporating - or making up - contextual material. 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 apply the same conclusions to their own time period, they will see that such views have been challenged. In their lifetime, the last eighteen years have hardly been fixed scientifically, culturally or politically (and events that are happening now are judged in diverse ways and result in various behaviours) and so to make assumptions about what Elizabethans or Jacobean would have thought and felt, with many students asserting they were all racist, all misogynists and all conservative, 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. So there was a fair amount of megalomania, hamartia, hubris, anagnorisis and peripeteia on display and rarely was the writing productive. It would help if students understood that Aristotle used the terms to apply to *the structure of the play as a whole* and not just to a few lines. It would help more if students were told not to write about Aristotle at all.

Another issue that was noted this year was the imposition on answers of partially understood feminist and Marxist theory. This was particularly noted in the response to Q1 where many students wanted to write about Emilia as a feminist and Desdemona as a stereotype of a weak submissive woman. This was a problem on many levels. In the first instance it stopped the student reading what is actually happening in the story of the extract. It was also problematic though in that it proved to be a very reductive way of exploring the characters who are engaging at this point in the story in the particular problem of Othello's abuse of Desdemona and her being distraught. Some students did not even name the two women but discussed them only as representations of a type. Emilia was argued to be standing up for women against a controlling patriarchal world and Desdemona was just a victim of that male world. When this approach was taken it made the story remote and prevented students from engaging with the painful story that is actually taking place in the extract. Clearly if critical theory is to be incorporated it has to be done with care and not in a heavy-handed way.

## Sections A and B (Shakespeare)

*Othello* was by far the most popular choice, but several centres offered *King Lear*. Excellent answers were seen in the responses to both plays.

A point has been made earlier about the problems that arise when students have learned a bank of quotations as a substitute for knowing the text. Several examiners have commented on the way that some students seem to work their arguments around quotations that they know and want to use rather than writing an answer that is driven by fresh thinking and interesting ideas supported with appropriate close references. This year quotation-driven answers were seen in the response to all three questions on *Othello*. The quotation about the ‘old black ram tugging’ Brabantio’s ‘white ewe’ was the culprit and while the quotation might be memorable it should not have found its way into the answers for any of the *Othello* questions - and yet it often did. Clearly some work can be done in centres to help students to think about why they are using the quotations they use and how best to use them or avoid them. There should be a warning against the use of some quotations.

## Section A

On the whole examiners felt that the extract questions were answered better than last year. Many have reported that there was a greater sense of the story being evident in the answers and a tighter focus on the extract itself in terms of the dramatic narrative.

It is important that students read the extracts as both a mini story and part of a wider story and that they engage with an imagined present which is happening in real time - in the here and now. They also need to engage with the fact that in dramas characters are involved in highly charged situations where they are represented as human beings relating to other human beings, reacting to things that happen, solving - or trying to solve problems that have arisen or arise. They need to see and write about how those characters behave at the point in the drama where the extract occurs. Too many students try to impose on the extract some general thoughts about characters without looking at what actually happens in the extract, without seeing the complexity of characters who are operating and negotiating in highly charged situations. Students need to see that characters are not fixed but are nuanced; they are representations of human beings that change, respond like this at one time and like that at another. This is why character studies can be unhelpful. Students have to be alert to nuances, uncertainties, unpredictabilities and change within characters’ behaviours.

Students also have to read the extract carefully and not gloss over difficult bits. Although they have studied the play and should recognise where the extract is from, it is essential that they read it carefully again to be absolutely clear about what is actually happening and not try to impose on it something that happens elsewhere. Students have to see too that at the point of the drama which they are given, any number of other things could potentially happen.

The students who produced the best responses wrote an overview tracking the extract carefully and listening to it. They engaged with the story in its entirety, noting its progression. They focused tightly and explored the story in detail always thinking about the situation of what is actually taking place on stage at this time and bearing in mind what characters know at this point and don’t know. The students who were most able recognised that at the end of the extract the story has moved on - if only ever so slightly; the audience is in a different place from the place they were at the beginning. The same is true of the characters.

When students struggled, they often just dived in and picked out bits of things to say in a disconnected way. Sometimes it was single words or images, sometimes a ‘theme’ or an aspect. The students who just picked out aspects of tragedy or honed in on a character who is in the extract (or sometimes characters who are not 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.

As always, where students wrote about the play as an imagined performance on stage rather than the page, responses were engaging, for example, focusing the dynamics between Desdemona, Emilia and Iago on stage or the visual impact of Gonerill’s frustrated rant against Lear which she delivers to her steward.

### Question 1

The extract from *Othello* is from Act 4 scene 2 and comes after Othello’s angry attack on Desdemona when he called her ‘that cunning whore of Venice’. Just before the extract Emilia has entered and after Othello’s exit, Desdemona asks her to lay her wedding sheets on her bed and go and fetch Iago. When the extract opens Desdemona is alone on stage delivering a short soliloquy. She is confused and distressed but she quite forcefully pushes back against Othello’s treatment of her. She is surely sarcastic when she says ‘’Tis meet I should be used so, very meet.’ She doesn’t know what she has done wrong. When Iago and Emilia enter, Iago feigns concern and asks what is wrong. Desdemona struggles to answer. She compares herself to a child unused to being reprimanded. She says if she has done wrong Othello might have told her in a gentler way. When Iago asks for something more specific, Desdemona is more discomforted; she is clearly weeping and in bits. Throughout the extract she is floundering, trying and failing to match her past behaviour with Othello’s wild anger towards her. She doesn’t know anything; she is visibly distressed about being at the centre of a madness she doesn’t understand. She can only ask if she is the name that Othello called her.

Interestingly when Iago asks Desdemona what name Othello has called her, it is Emilia who answers. All Emilia’s comments - even though she is fiercely defending Desdemona - are directed at Iago and while Emilia is openly incensed, Iago play-acts concern while trying to gauge the mood, to find out who knows what. Emilia’s anger spills over when she says that even a drunken beggar abusing a prostitute would not have used the terms Othello used in slandering Desdemona. When Desdemona weeps at hearing the word ‘whore’ uttered by Emilia, Iago asks her perhaps cruelly why she weeps. Although it is obvious, Iago clearly gets sadistic pleasure from seeing her suffering. Desdemona can barely answer. Emilia can though. She argues that Desdemona has given up so much to be with Othello and for what. It is obvious that Desdemona will weep. Emilia is outraged at Othello’s behaviour. Iago simply asks questions - he wants to know what has led to Othello’s behaviour, ironically calling it a ‘trick.’ Emilia then has a moment of revelation when she posits with ironic accuracy the scenario that Othello has been acted upon by some third party, some rogue looking for promotion. She is unsuspecting that it is Iago, but Iago sensing that she might be getting too close to the truth becomes rattled and tells her to be quiet. If there is such a man, says Emilia, then hell gnaw his bones. Desdemona is more forgiving. Iago needs Emilia to be silent and tells her so but Emilia reminds him - a point that is interesting for the audience given Iago’s professed motivations - that it was some such squire who apparently made him suspect Emilia of having an affair with Othello. After a final reprimand, Emilia is silent - perhaps acknowledging that she shouldn’t be airing details of their marriage in public. After the extract, Desdemona recovers her composure and asks Iago to help her to win the love of her husband again.

Most students engaged well with the extract and nearly all had something valid to say about all three characters present. Only a few commented on Desdemona's short soliloquy but those who did worked well with the dramatic situation and Desdemona's isolation, some noticing that when she is alone she has a slightly different tone from when she has an audience. When students scored high marks, they were often noticing the power shifts in the scene and the contrasts between Emilia and Desdemona and Emilia and Iago. Emilia's compassionate anger was set against Iago's feigned confusion and innocence. Most students were able to see the dramatic irony in Iago's behaviour and his claim that 'there is no such man' when Emilia says there must be a slanderer at work. The most able students wrote interestingly about Desdemona's onstage weeping, how it dominates the space, demands audience attention and how it also triggers the outrage of Emilia who speaks when Desdemona cannot.

When students did not read the extract closely or went for general comments based on other parts of the play, there was often much less insightful analysis. Several students wrote more about Othello who is not in the extract than the three characters who are. Desdemona was often described simply as weak and passive and while there is certainly some truth in this, her behaviour is much more nuanced. Clearly Desdemona cannot just denounce her husband in front of her maid servant and Othello's trusted ancient. Her soliloquy also suggests that she is not simply accepting what is thrown at her. She is not yet blaming herself, though many students claimed that she is. Unsurprisingly when students claimed that she blames herself it was not evidenced as there is no evidence here that she is. Some students imported the words she utters in her dying speech into this extract, but that does not prove that she blames herself here. There was also much assertion about Emilia and sisterhood and her being the voice for women. Although some credit could be given for some ideas, when students started their discussion with theories about women and feminism it did not show a very close reading of the story itself. Emilia is angry at Othello and not 'men' in general; she is not defending 'women', she is defending the woman who is crying in front of her. To shift the discussion to some vague idea about Shakespeare using Emilia as his voice against the Venetian and Elizabethan patriarchy was missing the point and not showing the emotional power of the tragic story at this point in the play.

Close reading of the extract, sentence by sentence, would help students see the subtleties in the drama. It would also help them to avoid the pitfalls and misreadings. For example, several students said that Othello calls Desdemona a 'whore: a beggar in his drink', and even more said that Desdemona pardons Othello while Emilia calls for his bones to be gnawed in hell, not realising that both are talking about the cozening slave that is working behind the scenes. A number of students ignored the second half of the extract perhaps because they did not understand it.

Overall though there were some focused responses to the extract and it was good to see that fewer students were moving away from it too soon and writing about other parts of the play.

## Question 2

Unfortunately, there was an error in Paper 1 in relation to this question and apologies must be made for that. There was a misspelling of the name of Oswald in the extract (printed as Osward). However, on a positive note, there was no evidence that any student was adversely affected by the error.

The extract from *King Lear* is the short scene of Act 1 scene 3 with the first part of Act 1 scene 4. The two scenes are parallel scenes strongly focused on masters and servants and attitudes towards Lear. Immediately before the extract Edmund, in the subplot, begins his gulling of his father and brother, and before this, and more relevantly to the narrative here, Gonerill speaks with her sister about Lear's

behaviour in the love test predicting that the last surrender of his authority will offend them both. In this extract, it is clear that Gonerill is offended. At this point in the story Lear has come to stay with her along with his one hundred knights and Gonerill is finding her father's behaviour more than difficult. She tells her steward Oswald that Lear wrongs her day and night. This is a daughter angry at the behaviour of her aging father, a father who still, it seems, wants to manage his authorities. She is rebelling and is ready for a fight. She tells Oswald to snub him if it pleases him and to tell Lear that Gonerill won't speak to him as she is sick. Oswald is all too willing to oblige. In his short replies, he is careful to ingratiate himself to his mistress and refers to her as 'madam' in each utterance, something which is potentially rather comic. Gonerill's choosing not to speak is of course ironic given that her glib and oily speech in the love test won her the very power she is now wielding. She says that she will write to her sister to get her on side and if Lear is angry with Gonerill's new regime then he can go to Regan.

In the section from Act 1 scene 4, Kent appears in disguise setting out his intentions of standing by his master Lear, hoping to serve him. Kent's humility and loyalty immediately contrast with the behaviours of both Gonerill and Oswald who seek to abuse Lear. Lear's entry is bold accompanied by the sound of horns. The sound of the horn is a signal for Kent to conclude his soliloquy; it seems to be a sign to the household to prepare for dinner (which both Oswald and Lear's knights are told to do in the parallel stories). The introductory exchanges between Kent and Lear are good natured and easy. Kent carefully dances the line between criticism and flattery of the king and Lear seems to appreciate Kent's honest-heartedness.

Most students were able to write well on the extract though some neglected some parts of it. Those who did well focused on the growing tensions between Gonerill and Lear which are set up here. Some really good answers were focused on the obvious difficulties that must arise from two generations living in the same households with their own power bases. Students who produced the best answers were able to write in a nuanced way. They did not just opt for a character study of Gonerill as the evil wicked witch without any sense that she might legitimately have a point at this stage of the story. Some good answers focused on the emergent villainy of Gonerill, her cruel intentions towards her father, her conspiracy with her sister. Some students focused on her potentially having a just case and just cause; they picked up on the fact that after she exits her father enters noisily with his retinue and throws his weight around in a less than gracious manner. They argued that Gonerill might have every reason to be fed up.

In some weaker responses, the extract was looked at in black and white terms and sometimes just skimmed over. Gonerill was already fully damned in the answers of some students and all sorts of negative language was used to describe her: villainous, evil, cruel, Machiavellian, treacherous. On the other hand there were some students who overlooked the unpleasantness in Gonerill's character and focused on her victimhood. This also did not show an engagement with what is actually happening in the extract. Students must be able to read carefully and engage with what is happening and what is said, they must be able to see that there is complexity in the play's construction and that characters are developing and reacting at every point in time.

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. Extracts have been chosen because there is so much going on in them. They are printed on the page so that students can work with the details and tease out the nuances. In the very best answers the extract is 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 6, explore the significance of nothing in *King Lear*. Students performed well in this section when they took ownership of the debate, hit the question head on and stayed on task throughout.

When students wrote clearly and responded to all the terms of the question, they were quickly moving through Band 3.

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.

There was again rather a lot of students' citing critics in Section B answers this year - often at length. This was generally unhelpful especially when for many it replaced focus on the text and question. Students should be told not to do this. It is very rare that a critical opinion will support or refute the ideas set up in questions and often the citing of critics shifts the students thinking and takes away question focus.

## Question 3

Question 3 invited students to write about Othello as a 'tragic lover' who is 'undone more by the intensity of his love than by the plotting of Iago'. Students needed to say to what extent they agreed with the given view. The key to success was to focus on Othello as a lover, not as a General or a tragic hero or an outsider or a character in general terms. They also needed to focus on Othello's intense love and the part it plays in his downfall. Clearly there are many parts of the love story which could be drawn from if students knew the play well and were open to seeing it as a love story (for example, Othello's arrival in Cyprus when he is unable to speak because his love is so strong 'it stops me here'; his agony, as he points towards his heart, after Iago has infected his mind with the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, when he says that Desdemona is 'the fountain from which his current runs'; the vow he makes after Iago describes in vivid detail his pornographic dream where Othello says he will yield up the crown of love to 'tyrannous hate'; Othello's angry pain in his confrontation with Desdemona when he says 'O thou weed/ Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet/ That the sense aches at thee'; his unbearable love in the murder scene, when, as he kisses her, he says that her balmy breath almost persuades justice to break her sword, the tragic love cutting across the demands of the justicer and soldier that he purports to be). Unfortunately, several students did not focus well on Othello's intense love but wrote about love in general terms or wrote about Desdemona's love for him. Often the evidence only came from the first Act of the play which was not ever so helpful.

Although students could legitimately argue that Othello is more undone by Iago's plotting, they still needed to deal with the intensity of his love as they were weighing up 'to what extent' they agreed with the given view. But it wasn't an option to just sidestep it. Many students, of course, engaged well with intense love and many also wrote well about Iago's plotting.

When students were less successful, it was often because they over complicated the question and tried to argue that Othello's love isn't real or because they chose to answer a different question about Othello's being an outsider. While some credit could be given for a counter argument, the ideas in the question had to be addressed if good marks were to be awarded.

**Question 4**

This question was generally well handled when students focused specifically on Iago's skills and when they didn't just write about Iago as a character or villain. The best answers were seen by students who were really thinking about how Iago ensnares his victims and how he adapts his skills to match each victim and how he interacts with each of them. Essentially students needed to think about Iago as a shapeshifter, one who is at once a spider, an inciter of riot, a poisoner, a comforter, a money-scammer, an advisor, an empathetic friend, a bluff soldier, a fellow good time drinker, a constructor of stories, a stage manager. He is indeed not what he is and is everywhere and nowhere all at once. When students engaged with how Iago acts and how he uses his words and silences they could easily access the second part of the question about impressive and terrifying.

When students didn't perform well it was generally because they did not focus on the details of Iago's various skills or when they just wrote about his character or his soliloquies or bits of the text that were known. Some did not write about 'various' victims; some did not address impressive and terrifying.

**Question 5**

Question 5 invited students to say to what extent they agreed with the view that Britain is itself a victim in *King Lear*, 'a divided country that is damaged beyond repair'. The question was done very well by those students who were really thinking about what happens to a country when the ruling power decides to break it up to satisfy a vanity project. Some excellent answers were seen by students who focused on the civil war that is set loose and the invasion by a foreign power. There was also good discussion of the royal family as both a representative of the country that is broken and divided and the cause of its destruction. Some interesting answers were seen in relation to the damage done to the country by Lear who effectively condemns his own bloodline by banishing Cordelia and then cursing Gonerill as a child bearer. In the best answers there was good treatment of 'beyond repair' and many students challenged this and saw that there might be hope in a future Britain governed by Albany and Edgar.

When students did not produce good responses, it was generally because their textual knowledge was not secure enough to support their ideas. Some students were only able to write about divisions in relationships without any reference to the country.

**Question 6**

Slightly fewer students answered Question 6 but there were a variety of approaches to it, many of which were interesting and some which were very good. The question asked students to explore the significance of nothing to the tragedy of *King Lear*. Given that the word nothing is used over thirty times in the play there was much that students could have written about if they knew the play well. Some were able to range around the play for a variety of points about the significance of nothing and there was good focus on significance in terms of characters, mood, dramatic action, and philosophical ideas about nihilism. There was some excellent discussion of Cordelia's use of 'Nothing' which sets the tragedy in motion and of the significance of nothing when Lear is in the hovel with Poor Tom. Many students wrote well about the empty feeling of nothingness at the end of the play.

Some students, having chosen the question, didn't know what to say about it, however. While most knew about the significance of nothing in the love test, many did not seem to know that it has significance

elsewhere. As a result, the focus on the question was not sustained and students just wrote about anything in the play.

### 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. The choice that students made here was crucial and telling. Many weak responses were by students who, having chosen to write about happiness or friends, began their answers by saying that there is no happiness in their texts or that there are no friends. The obvious question to be asked in these cases is why choose the question then. Before making their choice, students really should spend time thinking about what precisely they need to write about. It will not be the non existence of something.

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. This was a particular problem with *La Belle Dame* when students chose to imagine the story from the point of view of the faery child and then claimed that there is no happiness.

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 poem(s) can most appropriately be used to answer the question chosen. Some excellent writing was seen on Keats when the focus was sharp.

### Question 7

This question was the most popular of the two and it was done well by students who quickly pinned down where happiness occurs in their texts and then wrote about it in a specific way. Moments of happiness which worked well for students were the remembered scene of Willy's past when he is with his sons, happy washing his car and optimistic about Biff's future; Richard's happiness when he returns from Ireland and weeps for joy to stand on his kingdom once again; Tess' happiness at Talbothays when she begins her pastoral romance with Angel; Lamia's happiness when Lycius falls in love with her; the knight's blissful romance with la belle dame where he sees nothing but her all day long; and Gatsby's love affair with Daisy Fay in the back story when he is enchanted by her. When examples of happiness were well chosen students could easily engage with the reasons why that happiness does not last and then discuss whether its joy has enduring value. Enduring value could have been discussed in terms of characters within the stories or readers or audiences.

When students did not do well, it was either because the choice of the happy moment didn't work, sometimes because it was just a vague reference to it, or because students said that there is no happiness at all in the story and so just wrote about sadness or something else. If the student did not pin happiness down then it was impossible to access the rest of the question which was about its (happiness') intensity and joy having enduring value. There were some students who misread 'enduring

value.’ Some thought it was ‘endearing’ and some thought it was value that had to be endured. If there was misreading, clearly the answer didn’t make a great deal of sense. Some students chose to write about happiness at the end of *Death of a Salesman*. This worked for some students who focused on Willy’s perverse joy as he rushes off to kill himself in the hope of providing a legacy for his family. Those students then successfully debated its enduring value in terms of the audience. Some, however, struggled with happiness at the end of the play because they couldn’t prove its enduring value for the characters simply because this is the end of the play.

### Question 8

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of friends and friendship to the tragedies of their two texts. What students needed to do was quickly identify who the friends are in their chosen texts and then explore how they contribute to the wider tragedies.

When students knew their texts well, they could make good choices and use details to inform their arguments. Some excellent work was seen when Charley was chosen in *Salesman*, or Bushy, Bagot and Greene in *Richard II*. Students clearly had to think carefully before making their choice to ensure that they had something relevant to say and there was clear evidence that this was happening. Some really good work was seen in *Tess* when the focus was on Izzy and Marian at different points in the story and how Tess’ friends reflect her tragic journey. There was also good discussion of Nick in *The Great Gatsby* when the focus was on Nick as a participant friend in the story or as the friend who narrates the story. When students thought about friends in Keats they chose well. There was some excellent work on Lycius’ friends in *Lamia* who shape his decisions and behaviours, and also on Apollonius whose interventions lead to the deaths of the tragic lovers. Some students wrote incisively about the narrator in *La Belle Dame* who shows the best of friendship to the knight by listening sympathetically to his tale of woe and then recounts the story for posterity.

Students struggled when they said that friendship does not exist in their texts, and while some students did manage to get some credit for writing about the loneliness of characters who were friendless, most found that they had little to say. It was clearly not a good decision to choose this question if it was believed that friends do not exist. Other problems occurred when students didn’t know enough of the story where friends or friendships are significant or where their desire to write about a particular poem came before their thinking about friends and friendship.

### Conclusion

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.

## Looking forward

While this report focuses specifically on what happened in this year's examination, there is much in it that can help teachers as they prepare for the future. For teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, there is also much support available on 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). On the website you can look at all training materials and previous reports to help you to understand how best to support your students.

As teachers prepare for the 2025 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, and base your argument on the subject of the question
- Root your arguments in details of the story itself
- Do not write about critical theory or critical views in a detached way
- Do not write about Aristotle
- 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
- Think before you write anything
- Make sure that your first sentence is relevant to the question - and that you never veer from it.

NB: Please look out for the Autumn courses 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.