



AS

# English Literature B

7716/1A Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy

Report on the Examination

7716  
June 2024

Version: 1.0

---

Further copies of this Report are available from [aqa.org.uk](http://aqa.org.uk)

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

## **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 are 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.

### **Question 1: *Othello***

This was the more popular question in Section A. The extract was taken from Act 2 scene 1 and the bullet points directed students to look at Iago's villainy and the interaction between Othello and Desdemona. In the extract Cassio, Desdemona and Iago await Othello's arrival in Cyprus after the storm which put an end to the Turkish attack. Iago acts as both a participant and an observer, switching between interacting with the other characters and commenting, in asides to the audience, on their actions and his plan to bring them down.

As has been advised in previous reports on the examination, it helps if students start by giving an overview of the tragic trajectory of the extract and then briefly set the extract in the context of the whole play; to do this they need a good knowledge of the text and they need to be able to understand the

details of the extract itself. Responses where students did this were much more likely to be placed in the higher mark bands, because this focus on the story was then often maintained throughout.

When students knew the play well there was much in the extract to discuss in response to the bullet point about Iago: the implied stage directions in Iago's first aside, showing what Cassio and Desdemona are doing; Iago's twisting of Cassio's courtly behaviour into something he can use to his own advantage; his vulgar language, contrasting with Cassio's courtesy; his switch from speaking aside to interacting with the other characters to announce Othello's arrival; his continuing to plan and to comment when Othello and Desdemona meet and the ominous ending of the extract with Iago and his co-conspirator Roderigo the only characters left on stage. The strongest responses were from students who focused on these things, commenting on dramatic methods and Iago's language. The responses of students who were less successful used the extract as a springboard to discuss Iago's villainy in the play as a whole, often picking up on Iago's words 'As honest as I am' and discussing his lack of honesty elsewhere in the play. Some students barely mentioned the extract at all, instead describing Iago's malevolence at other points in the play which they obviously felt more comfortable writing about.

The second bullet point asked about the interaction between Othello and Desdemona and students who wrote in some detail about their interaction here, in this extract, tended to produce better responses than those who mentioned Othello's and Desdemona's warm greetings very briefly and then focused mostly on the deterioration of the relationship later.

Some students considered the significance of the change of setting, as this extract moves the action of the play to Cyprus, and they made some sensible and often perceptive comments.

Some of the least successful responses were those where students picked an isolated word or phrase – typically 'my fair warrior' or 'the Moor' – and wrote at length about gender or race, based on very slim evidence from the extract and often making unhelpful generalisations about attitudes at the time the play was written and how audiences might have responded.

In their answers to this question and others, students sometimes made comparisons between the characters and events in the text and characters and events in other texts, sometimes writing more about the other text than about *Othello*. This manifested itself in statements such as 'Iago is just like Lady Macbeth' or 'Desdemona is like Juliet', where a whole paragraph on Lady Macbeth or Juliet followed. This was not helpful – comparisons with other texts are not needed and they take students away from question focus.

### **Question 2: *King Lear***

This question was attempted by fewer students than question 1. Students who knew the play well were aware of the trajectory of the extract and of how this extract from Act 3 scene 2 fits into the play as a whole, linking Kent's entrance at the end of the extract to his setting out to find Lear earlier, and knowing that after the extract Kent persuades Lear to take shelter from the storm. Students who were less secure in their knowledge of the play made looser and less helpful observations, pointing out that the extract comes after the 'love test' at the start of the play and before the death of Lear at the end.

Students who engaged with the extract in its entirety, rather than just selecting details to enable them to jump to other parts of the text and write about those instead, tended to produce the best responses. Most students were able to make sensible comments about the presentation of Lear in the extract, writing about his raging against the storm, his raging against his daughters, the way the turmoil of the

storm reflects the turmoil of his mind, his suffering and his fall from greatness. Sometimes students' ability to communicate their understanding was impeded by the use of Aristotelian terms such as catharsis and peripeteia which were often used incorrectly and, even when used correctly, added little or nothing to the argument.

The second bullet point, on the ways the Fool responds to Lear, presented more problems; some students who did not know the play very well obviously found it hard to work out what the Fool was saying, and quite often either missed him out completely, talked in general terms about the role of the Fool in Shakespeare's plays, or wrote about what happens to him later in the play. Those students who were able to identify his closeness to Lear, shown by his use of the affectionate term 'nuncle', his role in presenting himself as wise and Lear as foolish and his genuine concern for Lear's welfare, were able to access the higher mark bands.

It is important for students to make sure that they write about the whole of the extract – including the ending. During the process of setting the exam paper deliberate decisions are made about where to start and finish an extract, so in the case of this question a decision was taken to include the entrance of Kent. This means that students can be expected to write about it, perhaps saying how Kent's entrance shows that Lear's situation will now change – Lear is less isolated and has the support of a loyal friend, who will help him find shelter from the storm.

There were some students who wrote, often in an articulate and academic way, about theories of tragedy, context, and the play in general, without mentioning the extract, or mentioning it only in passing. The importance of answering the question by focusing on the extract cannot be stressed enough. The extract is printed on the paper so that students can engage with its details and write about it in an engaged way.

As in the *Othello* question, some students latched onto individual words and wrote an essay about these ideas in the play, ignoring the rest of the extract. This happened most often with the words 'nothing' and, unfortunately, the word 'cataracts', here meaning 'waterfalls' but interpreted as being a reference to blindness.

### **Question 3: *Richard II***

There were very few responses to this question. The focus of the question was on Richard and students were asked to consider whether he is a 'proud and shallow tragic protagonist'. All students knew the play in enough detail to offer a response, and many were able to discuss the statement in some detail with some students convincingly arguing that Richard changes during the course of the play and so while he might start off as proud and shallow, he displays more noble qualities towards the end of his life. The best responses showed that students had understood that these two words are not synonymous and argued for Richard showing (or not showing) these qualities individually at various points in the play.

### **Question 4: *Death of a Salesman***

The vast majority of the responses in section B were on *Death of a Salesman*. The question asked students to focus on the significance of dreams and most were able to do this: there were some excellent responses. 'Dreams' were interpreted in many ways: Willy's aspirations for himself, his career, and his family; Biff's dream of working on a ranch; Happy's dream of keeping his father's legacy alive by becoming a successful salesman; Willy's 'dreams' of the real or imagined past and, most commonly, the American Dream. All of these approaches were valid. Students who knew the play well were able to

develop their ideas in more detail, often making perceptive comments about the minor characters such as Bernard, Howard and Charley and their role in, especially, the American Dream. Students who knew the play less well got characters confused, some even confusing Biff and Happy.

Most students were very comfortable writing about dramatic methods, especially the stage directions, the use of symbolism (such as the seeds) the use of flashbacks and the unreliable nature of Willy's memories. It was pleasing to see that this year there was much less microanalysis of individual words and phrases and much more consideration of the text as a drama which is performed on stage than in previous years.

### **Question 5: *A Streetcar Named Desire***

There were no responses to this question.

### **Summary**

The advice to students can be summed up as:

- know your texts well
- answer the question which is set
- focus on the text itself - not contexts, generalisations about tragedy or any other texts you may have read or studied
- concentrate on giving your own opinions, not the opinions of literary critics

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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