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A-LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2B Texts and Genres: Elements of political and social protest writing  
Report on the Examination

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7717/2B  
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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.

## **Specific comments about 2B: Texts and genres: Elements of political and social protest writing**

Overall examiners were impressed by the quality of responses to the paper this year, many of which showed perceptive understanding and a real enthusiasm for the texts that had been studied. Students often engaged insightfully with the debate set up by the questions, offering fruitful interpretations of the texts related to the key terms of the task and reaching considered, personal conclusions. The questions set often sparked lively debate and it was pleasing to see so many students writing with confidence about the narratives.

On the whole, students managed their time well with very few rubric infringements or examples of students who struggled to complete the final section of the paper. However, it is still worth reminding students about the importance of taking their time before they put pen to paper to make considered choices. This should apply both to the questions they are opting to answer as well as the poems they select to write about or the moments they choose to explore in the novels and plays. Particularly in the case of Blake, some students were hamstrung by choosing to write about poems that did not relate well to the question set on authority figures and, in choosing poems where there were no clear ‘figures’, these students struggled to engage fully with the task.

Students achieved less well where they subverted the questions set or did not fully engage with the terms of the task. In terms of the tasks set in Section C, this also means engaging with the idea of significance. Students who were awarded lower band marks often went no further than identifying moments of resistance or bullying without fully engaging with the meanings arising from them or their wider significance to the narrative.

Likewise, it is worth reminding students that whilst lexical level analysis can be useful, over reliance on singular learned quotations and comments only related to lexis can be limiting. Those students who were able to comment on other aspects of authorial methods such as setting, structural features, dramatic methods and voices often achieved more highly if they were then exploring the meanings generated from these choices.

There is no expectation on students to use critical quotations or refer to other texts written in a similar genre. Whilst this can occasionally be illuminating, these connections are often forced and lead to students losing the central thread of their argument in attempting to shoe-horn them into a response. Likewise, whilst the use of relevant contextual factors can be enlightening, students who wrote long paragraphs about, for example, the representation of the political situation in Afghanistan often lost the primary thread of their argument and focus on the task. Similarly, sweeping, and generalised statements about contextual factors such as attitudes towards women in the Victorian era were often unhelpful. Students generally achieved more highly when they retained a sharp focus on the primary question and the texts ensuring all they wrote was grounded in the narratives they were exploring.

In short, the best responses from students remain those that are carefully planned and thought out with a sense of purpose from the outset. Students who retained a sharp focus on all the terms set up by the question, referred consistently to the set texts and engaged with authorial methods and how they created meaning achieved well. This did not always mean writing at copious length. In fact, some of the best responses from students demonstrated impressive precision and concision rather than being lengthy and repetitious. Those students who rushed often lost the accuracy of their writing.

### **Section A the Unseen Extract**

Examiners were genuinely impressed by many of the responses to Section A of the paper.. This year the passage was taken from a novel, *Lagoon*, by Nnedi Okorafor. Although some students were initially thrown by the fact that the extract featured aliens, they were quickly able to recognise and explore elements of the protest genre.

This was a rich passage that enabled students to explore several different social and political protest elements including ideas associated with power, oppression, sexism, Marxism, and post-colonialism. There is no set way to approach the unseen passage and so students were free to explore any number of these elements and often did so in insightful and refreshing ways. Some students also employed critical concepts from the AQA Critical Anthology to excellent effect using these ideas to enrich their responses (although this is not an expectation). Nor is there a set number of points that need to be made. Rather, those who examined three or four key ideas in considered depth often scored more highly than those who tried to comment on a multitude without getting much beyond a single quote and comment.

Those students who achieved most highly did so by reading the passage through carefully first and establishing a clear sense of the narrative arc and shifting power dynamics between the President and Adaora. They opened their responses with an overview of the passage. They then focused on the most salient elements of the genre and explained these thoroughly using well-selected

evidence from the passage. They were able to comment on authorial choices such as the use of dialogue and the setting (both in terms of country – Nigeria, and the choice of timing – dawn and a dystopian future). They used literary terms with precision rather than to simply label words often commenting on the author's possible use of allegory and metaphor. They were able to recognise the subtleties and ambiguities within the writing such as the shifting power dynamics rather than simply claiming one character had more power than another. Most importantly, these students came to the passage with fresh eyes rather than a tick list of features or genre elements to spot.

Where students achieved less well, they tended to approach it with a set list of generic features in mind. Lower achieving students also often generalised about genre elements or made assertions based on the study of other texts rather than grounding all they said in the passage and consistently employing evidence. In a minority of cases, students failed to turn the page and see the second half of the extract, which was obviously crucial to their understanding. Some students also chose to begin their response either with a repetition of the blurb at the start or by listing features of the genre that was not entirely helpful in demonstrating clear, personal understanding. Occasionally, there was also some confusion as to which character was speaking to whom. Students should therefore be reminded that time spent carefully reading the extract and establishing a clear understanding of the narrative and characters is never wasted, as tempting as it may be to put pen to page immediately.

## **Section B**

Section B produced some superb answers across the texts. The best essays were produced by students who responded to the question in a fresh way rather than regurgitating previous answers. These students often established a concise, clear argument at the start of their essays that was then purposefully explored and supported by well-chosen key moments from the texts. Students appear increasingly adept at integrating discussion of authorial methods in their responses including comments on elements of voice and structure.

However, students struggled when they did not know the texts well enough or were reliant on their knowledge of only one or two moments so there was little sense of the overarching narrative. In some cases, they were hampered by excessive use of context that was either not relevant or impeded their line of argument. Likewise, some students included lengthy critical quotations. Whilst reference to critical ideas such as those from the AQA Critical Anthology can be informative to an argument and were sometimes used perceptively, it is rare that a singular learned quotation about a text that is used regardless of the question will really improve a student's argument. It was often those students who planned their responses briefly first, including careful thought about the poems or moments they would explore and then fully engaged with all the terms set up by the question who achieved most highly.

Question 2 on Blake continued to be the most popular choice for students on Section B. The question elicited some excellent responses with students ranging widely across the collection to explore different kinds of authority figures from God and parents to village elders such as 'Old John'. Although students do not have to provide a debate, some of the best responses considered different sides of the argument often contrasting the presentation of figures such as the nurse in the partner poems 'Nurse's Song'. Likewise, there was interesting debate around individual figures such as the mother in 'The Little Black Boy' where she was frequently seen as compassionate in

her treatment of the child but unkind in her perpetuation of racist ideologies that oppressed the child. Higher band responses from students showed an ability to integrate their analysis of methods including voice and form into their answers effectively.

By contrast, weaker responses from students often included bolted on comments about rhyme and rhythm at the ends of paragraphs that were not connected to their argument. In some cases, there was also a lot of extraneous and unnecessary context with several students still claiming that Blake was writing in the Victorian era. The primary issue was that some students struggled to pin down authority figures. Several wished to talk about institutions such as the church or political bodies and, as such, side-stepped the question. The most impressive responses by students showed an ability to range around the poems making apt choices and considering different forms of unkindness including neglect, indoctrination, silencing and more direct abuse as in 'A Little Boy Lost'. Where students struggled, it seemed they were relying on a small number of poems such as 'London' and repeating learned analysis of key lines that was then difficult to relate to the task.

Question 3 on Harrison being optimistic about an end to class conflict was well-managed by students who often ranged across the collection adeptly, confidently exploring the poems in some depth. There was impressive analysis of Harrison in terms of his manipulation of forms and perspectives in many cases particularly when writing on 'Them & [Uz]'. Some students struggled a little to engage with the whole question with several identifying examples of class conflict but not necessarily pinning down whether Harrison was optimistic about it coming to an end. A few also got a little caught up in biographical details and Harrison's guilt about abandoning his class origins in a manner that took them away from the task. Those that addressed all parts of the question in a focused way, often commenting on the ambiguity of Harrison's work, achieved well.

Question 4 on America as a place of refuge and healing in *The Kite Runner* was a popular choice for students. There were some engaging responses here that ranged around the novel and considered the different ways in which America could be perceived as a place of refuge and healing or its opposite often commenting on the structure and bildungsroman form of the novel insightfully. The very best responses were by students who frequently interrogated the terms of the task exploring the way in which America does become a place of refuge for the immigrant population but is not a place of healing given Amir's guilt and Baba's physical and psychological difficulties. Students achieved less well when they wrote at length about Afghanistan and subverted the question through a desire to talk about the sections with which they were perhaps more familiar such as Chapter 7.

Question 5 on *Harvest* was about outsiders bringing unwelcome disruption and change. This generated many insightful answers with students considering a range of characters from the Beldams to Quill and Thirsk. The best responses demonstrated an ability to look at key moments and explore the ways in which the presence of outsiders brought about different kinds of change not all of which were regarded in a negative light given the isolationism of the community. Many students confidently integrated comments related to the novel's structure such as the opening and ending in fire and the unreliable nature of the narrative voice in a manner that informed their argument exceptionally well. Where students achieved less well, it was either because of poor text knowledge that limited their responses to the opening sections of the novel or because they subverted the question and wrote about the villagers being to blame for their own downfall.

Question 8 on *A Doll's House* asked students to consider whether Nora was a resilient heroine who resisted those who tried to control her. This produced some excellent responses with the

highest achieving students often interrogating the terms of the question perceptively. For example, several argued that Nora failed to resist Torvald's oppression for much of the play but was still regarded as a heroine in her endurance and resourcefulness. Those students who were able to recognise the dynamic and shifting relationships over the course of the drama rather than creating a purely binary argument often achieved well. There was also much impressive work on dramatic methods with students commenting effectively on key moments such as the Tarantella scene and her flirtation with Doctor Rank. Where students achieved less well, they addressed only part of the task such as Nora's heroism and tended to limit their discussion to the opening and closing of the drama alone rather than ranging around the narrative.

Question 9 on *The Handmaid's Tale* was a popular choice and elicited many impressive and varied responses. Again, the best responses engaged with all parts of the question connecting the ways in which Offred could be regarded as admirable (or not) with the way her character responds to the control and power exerted by Gilead. Many students made perceptive connections to Offred's narrative perspective and internal rebellions as well as the construction of the narrative itself with structural links to the 'Historical Notes'. Less strong responses were produced by students who tended to only focus on whether Offred was an admirable character. Some students became distracted by other characters such as Moira or Ofglen in trying to argue that they were more admirable and thereby lost sight of the task.

## SECTION C

In this section, as with the literary genre papers, students had to manage two texts and it was pleasing to see very few rubric infringements where students were not able to manage two texts. Students are not expected to cover both texts equally, but both should be written about in reasonable depth. The most able students addressed significance effectively considering the different meanings arising from the aspects of protest writing set up by the questions. Some students struggled by trying to make connections between the two texts or the same points about both. There is no expectation that students make comparative remarks although the best responses were often elicited by students who drew their ideas together in a purposeful or evaluative conclusion.

Question 10 on resistance was the slightly more popular choice for students and generated a wide range of thoughtful responses across the texts. Students were able to consider different kinds of resistance: the physical resistance of the villagers in *Harvest*; the narrator's psychological resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*; the narrative voice in Blake's poetry as a call to arms resisting oppression; Nora's subtle and burgeoning resistance against patriarchal expectations in *A Doll's House*. The best responses were written by students who considered the different ways in which these forms of resistance created meaning whether in reflecting a particular message from the author in Harrison or in revealing an aspect of the world or society created by the author. They were able to recognise subtle shifts in the ways in which resistance was presented across the narratives, often perceptively commenting on the significance to plot and character development. However, a minority of students still chose to write about 'lack of resistance' or failure to resist which subverted the question. Students are reminded that they must engage with the key term in the question rather than its absence. Where students achieved less well, they became caught up in the idea of the success or failure of resistance. Whilst this was relevant, it sometimes resulted in an unhelpful debate that did not explicitly address the significance of resistance in terms of meanings or the narrative.

Question 11 on bullying was also well managed by students with the best student responses looking at central moments in their chosen texts and exploring their significance. As with question

10, students were able to comment on different forms of bullying very effectively: Torvald's psychological bullying of Nora in *A Doll's House*; the teacher's bullying of the poet-speaker in Harrison's 'Them & [Uz]'; the bullying between female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a means of ensuring indoctrination and division. Students achieved most highly when they made considered choices about the moments and poems that they selected to explore. Students achieved less well when they simply identified moments of bullying and relayed what occurred without fully engaging with either how these were presented or their significance.

In the case of both questions, students who made careful choices in terms of the moments or poems they explored and commented on their significance using aptly chosen evidence did well.

### **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. Such responses were a joy to read.

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
- Take time to plan and select the most useful poems and moments to explore in the texts
- Do not include unnecessary critical quotations unrelated to the task
- Do not include contextual information unrelated to the task

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.