

AS

English Literature B

7716/2B Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Comedy

Report on the Examination

7716
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Introductory Comments

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

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

Knowing texts and stories

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

Responding to Questions

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

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

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

Students producing the best answers were also able to integrate AO2 comments into their writing in a seamless way. Understanding how stories are constructed is an essential part of 'knowing' the text and those students who demonstrated an understanding of narrative structure did well, ranging around the text for details, engaging with key events and where they occur, thinking about beginnings and endings. In the best responses to the drama texts, students were able to imagine the stories as operating in real

time: in the here and now. These students could work with a story that appears to be developing in real time on stage rather than one that is fixed in a prose or poetry narrative.

When students did not perform as well as they might have hoped, it was often because their textual knowledge was insecure and because they did not focus on the actual questions set. Sometimes this was because they wanted to answer a different question - perhaps one that had been set in class or one that they wanted to write about. It was also a factor that in Paper 2, some students were unable to use their open book in a helpful way possibly because they did not know their texts well enough to know where to look for material. In many weaker answers there was also a reliance on generalised contextual material, single word analysis and ideas not relevant to this year's questions. It really is unhelpful for students to focus on contextual material from outside the text, especially when it replaces knowledge of the text and the story that is being told.

As has been pointed out before, it is unhelpful for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives, to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods and to include critical viewpoints that are at a tangent to the questions. Teachers should tell students not to write about Aristotle, or the 16th century or the Romantics. The 16th century, of course, spans a hundred years and one play can hardly be claimed to speak for an entire century - or even a bit of it, and for students to draw conclusions about 16th century society (or Elizabethan England) or people's attitudes from one play of Shakespeare is clearly unwise. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Gonerill and Viola and Bianca, so it makes little sense for students to claim that in the 16th century women were all passive or submissive or dependent on men. Students need to focus on the worlds of their texts - and not make assumptions about the world (or worlds) outside of their texts. While evidenced context could be valid, it is always better for students to write specifically about the texts and the stories themselves and the messages within them - to show their knowledge of that which is tangible.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked.

Marks are awarded for ideas about the texts (as required by the question) - and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and the ideas should be developed by students using detailed knowledge of the text and its story. There also needs to be integrated comment on how the writer shapes meanings and comments on structure, settings and voices generally work much better than single word analysis since this often stops the flow of an argument.

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

Specific comments about 2B

In Section A, responses were only seen to *The Poetry Anthology: Comedy*. It was a pity to see nothing this year on Chaucer or Betjeman. However, all three prose texts were answered, each by a good number of students, in Section B. In the responses to all texts, it was clear that many students seemed to have enjoyed reading their texts through the lens of comedy and some excellent work was seen by students who had good textual knowledge and who focused on the questions.

Most students were able to integrate comments on authorial method into their answers - easily done in the poetry question since they were asked to write about the endings of poems and were therefore engaging automatically with narrative structure, but it was also unproblematic in the prose texts since students were asked to focus on Mr and Mrs Elton in *Emma* (characters who only feature at specific times

and in key events), Hortense in *Small Island* (who is both character and narrator) and the events that take place in America in *Wise Children* (which is Chapter 3, the middle of the 5 chapter structured novel).

Other ways that students seamlessly integrated comments on authorial methods was when they wrote about narrators and authorial voices and the settings where key events take place. When students got caught up in analysis of single words, they often found it difficult to get back to their arguments as set up in the questions.

Section A Poetry

When answering questions on poetry, students have to focus on a printed extract as part of their answer. Here it was *Tam o'Shanter*. One reason why students have to know their texts well is that there are no short cuts. If students did not know *Tam* well they struggled. The question this summer asked students to explore the significance of the endings of poems to the comedy of *Poetry Anthology: Comedy*. Students had to write about the ending of *Tam*, relate it to the story that led up to the ending, and then choose an ending to a second poem and tease out its significance in relation to the comedy.

Extracts are chosen to help students to engage with the questions set and to give them an anchor for their arguments. Most students find the extracts helpful in this respect and they work well with them in terms of structuring their response. However, being able to work with the extract does depend on students having good knowledge of the whole poem. In this year's question on endings, students had to make links with the comedy in the wider story. This is why so much emphasis has been placed in the introductory comments on students knowing their texts really well. Although this is an open book exam, students need to know where to go for their wider references.

Most students responded well to the *Tam* extract and good comments were made about the climactic chase scene which crowns the tale of Tam's foolish behaviour, the heroic actions of Meg, the danger to Tam that is averted by his escape and the moral voice of the narrator which warns against drunkenness and lusting after women. Some students were unable to relate the ending to the comedy that precedes it, and this was clearly because they did not know the poem well enough. However, most students could relate the ending to earlier parts of the story and good comments were made about when Tam is steadily getting drunk at the start of the poem, 'housing at the nappy,/ And getting fou and unco happy' and when he encounters and is mesmerised by the young witch Nannie in Kirk-Alloway church yard. There were also many relevant comments about Tam's wife, whose warning he should have heeded, and much sympathy was shown for Meg who loses her tail.

Nearly all students were able to choose a second poem and focus relevantly on its ending. The choices for the second poem were varied and often led to some good discussion. Popular choices were the *A Satirical Elegy*, *My Rival's House*, *Sunny Prestatyn* and *Mrs Sisyphus*, but there was some good writing seen on *The Flea* and *Not My Best Side*.

One issue this year was that several students tried to deal with their two poems together and compare them. This was not a helpful approach as it often prevented students from engaging with the wider comedy of each poem's story in a meaningful way. Comparison is not needed and takes students in an altogether wrong direction. Some students also focused over much on rhyme and metrical patterns. Although this can lead to productive comment, it rarely does. Too often students write about it inaccurately and even when it is accurate, students are unable to write about it convincingly. Overlong focus on it also disrupts arguments.

Section B Prose

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

Question 4: *Emma*

This question asked students to explore the view that Mr and Mrs Elton are simply figures of fun. On the whole this question was answered very well. *Emma* is clearly a popular text and students seemed to have been well prepared for it. There was much good writing about both characters and students really engaged with the idea of the Eltons as figures of fun. Some good answers were seen on Mr Elton as a comedic villain who is cruel and misguided and on Mrs Elton as an example of vulgar snobbery. Many saw them as foils to Emma and Mr Knightley and some commented thoughtfully on the parallels between Emma and Mrs Elton. Generally, the writing was very secure, and the text was well used. When students did not perform well it was often because they didn't know enough about the characters or when they repositioned the answer to write about Emma.

Question 5: *Small Island*

In this question students were asked to explore the view that 'readers laugh at Hortense rather than sympathise with her'. There were some good answers to the question when students could draw on the text for details. Some interesting arguments were made by those students who focused on Hortense's relationship with Gilbert as a source of comedy but there was some sensitive work on how sympathy is created for her suffering in England. Many students were aware of the complexity of Levy's creation and students were able to show how a reader's feelings towards Hortense might change during the course of the novel and how they might change depending on who is narrating her story. On the whole students seem to have enjoyed this question and they selected well from the novel to support their ideas. When students didn't produce good answers, it was generally because they did not focus well or did not know the text well enough to look for support.

Question 6: *Wise Children*

There were a number of lively answers to this question and good engagement with the comedy of the events that take place in America. Most students used Chapter 3 well and made astute links between the novel and Shakespeare's plays which Carter foregrounds. The open book was used well and plenty of details were extracted of the carnivalesque account of Hollywood and the journey across America. Students seemed to enjoy the absurdity and the range of characters who appear in the America chapter and there was good discussion of Dora's entertaining narrative voice. Some students got muddled by the frenetic activities, but this was generally because their knowledge of the text was slight.

Looking forward

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material regardless of the question.

The best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read.

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same key messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2025.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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