



AS

English Literature B

7716/1B Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy

Report on the Examination

7716
June 2024

Version: 1.0

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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 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 students 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*, silliness 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.

Where 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, and 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 1B

This summer some really interesting responses were seen on this paper, and it was clear that students enjoyed writing about their set texts and engaging with the humour of the comedy genre and some of the wider issues raised. In Section A, *The Taming of the Shrew* continues to be the most popular choice, but there were also some very good responses to *Twelfth Night*. In Section B, all students responded to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Section A: Shakespeare

Both of the Shakespeare tasks require students to focus on a printed extract and to explore the significance of aspects of dramatic comedy presented within the extract itself and also in relation to the play as a whole. Bullet points were provided to assist students and most responded well to this support and guidance. In the Section A tasks, students' writing should be sharply focused on the extract and points should be supported with quotations and details. Students should engage with what is happening in the extract by tracking the development of the plot, the presentation of characters and aspects of comedy. It really helps if they see the events of the drama as a story happening in the here and now.

As previous advice and feedback from AQA has suggested, when students start with a clear overview of the extract, they can use this to structure their responses, giving them a sense of direction and purpose. Summaries of the whole play are not a helpful way to start and references to the wider play should be brief and relevant to the extract.

Students performed well when they were focused on the extract and were able to make meaningful, relevant connections to the wider play. Students who were less successful found it difficult to place the extract and instead made a link to the wider play and wrote about those moments instead. An approach that attempts to avoid or sidestep the printed extract inevitably leads to an unfocused response.

Question 1: *The Taming of the Shrew*

The extract this year was from Act 5 scene 2: it is Lucentio and Bianca's wedding banquet and Baptista, Vincentio, Gremio, the Merchant, Lucentio, Bianca, Petruchio and Katherina are all present, as well as Hortensio and the Widow he has hastily married. The servants Tranio, Grumio, and Biondello are there too, unifying the cast. Lucentio welcomes everyone to the banquet and refers to Petruchio and Katherina as his brother and sister, happy that the earlier chaos and confusion has been resolved. This moment towards the end of the comedy is typical of what we might expect of a comic resolution. At the banquet, matching the wit and dialogue seen earlier in the play, the characters trade jokes and jibes, with the Widow teasing Petruchio for being married to a shrew, and Petruchio accusing Hortensio of being afraid of his new wife. Interestingly, towards the end of the extract, Bianca also joins in with some witty remarks of her own and then the women leave.

After this extract, a quarrel breaks out between the husbands regarding whose wife is the most obedient. Petruchio proposes a bet whereby each one of the husbands will send a servant to call for their wives, and the wife who obeys their husband and returns first will win the wager for her husband; ironically, Katherina, who has been referred to as a shrew throughout the play, is the only wife to obey, winning the bet for Petruchio. Katherina then follows this win with a speech about the duty that wives owe their husbands.

Many students wrote confidently about this extract because it was taken from the end of the play and they were able to discuss how the play concludes, linking the structure of the narrative to the genre. In many instances, this led to some relevant observations about character development, particularly when looking at Katherina and Bianca: as we near the end of the play, it can be argued that we see a different side to their characters which led to some thoughtful comments about whether Katherina has in fact been 'tamed' and whether Bianca is more shrewish than we first thought. These observations enabled students to make relevant links to the wider play, often comparing Katherina and Bianca's characters in this extract to the way they were presented earlier in the play. There was some exceptionally good work

seen when students considered the humour created through the word play between the Widow and Katherina, and Bianca and the men. Stronger responses followed the meanings of ‘mean’ during the somewhat heated interaction between Katherina and the Widow, and also understood the references to cuckoldry in Bianca’s retorts to Gremio. Students who knew the play well were able to pick up on Petruchio’s certainty that Katherina would win any kind of fight or argument with the Widow, and then linked this to later on in the scene when Petruchio suggests the one hundred crown wager.

When students did not perform so well, it was largely because they made a link to the wider play and then went off on a tangent, losing sight of the extract and the focus of the task. It is also unhelpful when students commit to generalised, sweeping statements about gender and gender roles in Shakespeare’s era. It was noticeable that the word ‘shocking’ made a reappearance this year: some students claimed that Shakespeare’s audience would have been shocked by Bianca’s jokes, and more generally, shocked by the bawdy humour associated with the female characters in the play. As has been made clear in previous years, students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced; at no point is there a requirement to guess what audiences have thought about the play – past or present.

Question 2: *Twelfth Night*

In this task, students were asked to focus on an extract from Act 3 scene 1: Cesario’s first meeting and interaction with Feste, outside Olivia’s palace. This scene comes at a mid-point in play and follows on from Orsino instructing Cesario to go to Olivia’s palace and speak on his behalf, declaring his love for her. Cesario arrives at Olivia’s residence and meets Feste. Immediately, Cesario and Feste commence with some interesting jokes and punning which demonstrates that Cesario’s wit and intelligence is on a par with Feste’s. Feste humorously comments on how fools fall in love, mocking Olivia and Orsino; amused by this, Cesario gives him some coins. Feste also seems to notice Cesario’s feminine appearance and Cesario is a little worried as to whether the Fool has seen through the disguise, noting that nothing escapes his observant eye and that he is merely playing the role of a fool. There is a clear sense that the play is building up to a major moment in the *Green World* of comedic confusion in Illyria, where the foolish Olivia is about to declare her love for Cesario, who in turn is in love with Orsino.

Later in this scene, Cesario meets Olivia again and does Orsino’s bidding, but Olivia is not going to be persuaded. In fact, Olivia is clearly far more interested in Cesario than Orsino. It is at this point that the love triangle between Olivia, Orsino and Cesario is confirmed to both the audience and to Cesario.

Students seemed to enjoy responding to this extract and, on the whole, answered well. They were confident when it came to discussing Feste’s character in the play (the subject of the second bullet point) and many students explored ideas regarding his intelligence and wit, and his ability to move between both Orsino and Olivia’s households, as seen in the wider play. A lot was made of the initial word play between Cesario and Feste, when Feste says, ‘I live by the church,’ taking Cesario’s question literally. Students also took the opportunity to comment on methods, such as dramatic irony, when Feste makes comments about Cesario’s feminine appearance, and were then able to link this to disguise and aspects of the wider play. It was encouraging to see students commenting on the use of the aside where Cesario states ‘I would not have it grow on my chin’ and the way that Cesario’s character is sharing this moment with the audience who also know that Viola is disguised as a man. In some cases, there was confusion with the next line ‘Is thy lady within?’ because some students thought this was still part of the aside rather than a direct question to Feste. Towards the end of the extract, Cesario’s observations about Feste being ‘like a haggard’ were discussed. Students understood the meaning of the simile and what it suggests about Feste’s intelligence and powers of observation.

Students who produced weaker answers were less secure in their understanding of the humour and wit demonstrated in the extract, struggling to fully understand the suggestions and humour coming through the fast-paced interactions.

Section B

Question 4: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

As was the case last year, all students responded to the task on *The Importance of Being Earnest* and we saw the full range of marks here. There were some really good responses and most students engaged well with the silliness in the play, often choosing to write about Jack and Algy's bunburying, the tea scene with Cecily and Gwendolen's, Jack being found in a handbag and of course Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack. Many students discussed the satire and comedy being used by Wilde and were able to explain that these silly moments are deliberately 'too silly' because Wilde is criticising the attitudes of the higher classes. These kinds of observations naturally led to some relevant comments on class status and the representation of Victorian values and how they are being presented and explored by Wilde. For the same reasons, some students argued that the play is not 'too silly' in their opinion because we understand the kind of serious undertones Wilde is making about class.

The best responses showed a real appreciation of Wilde's methods, particularly his use of language and staging in creating moments that could be interpreted as silly, and then they went on to discuss how this affected the enjoyment of the play. The students who found this task challenging often avoided discussions about the enjoyment of the play and whether the silliness goes too far, and perhaps instead asserted that the play is or isn't enjoyable, without fully explaining why they had this view. Some students agreed with the view that the play is too silly, arguing that it is unrealistic and too flippant on serious topics and other students disagreed and argued that the silliness and satire is in fact the very thing that makes the play enjoyable.

Questions 3 and 5

There were no responses to these questions.

Looking forward:

Students are at their best when they know their texts, take ownership of their writing, have the confidence to think and respond independently; they should not feel constrained by thinking they have to include certain material regardless of the question. This was seen in some responses this year where students were distracted by trying to include forced references to Commedia dell'arte or Horatian and Juvenalian theory.

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

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2025. Teachers 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
- When writing about the Shakespeare extract, focus most of your writing on the extract. You only need to make brief, relevant links to the wider play
- Do not write about unnecessary literary or biographical contexts

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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