



AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1A Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy
Report on the Examination

7716/1A
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Introduction

It is pleasing to say that, despite the disruptive effect that lockdown has had on education, in regard to the AS examination at least, we are almost back to where we were in 2019. The responses of students to all four question papers suggest that students have enjoyed their study of English Literature and reading texts through the lenses of tragedy and comedy. Teachers and students need to be congratulated for their hard work. Examiners who marked the papers have certainly enjoyed reading the students' work and they all say what a delightful exam AS English Literature B is.

Although the entry for the exam was relatively small, the entry figures are stable and are slightly higher than last year. Some excellent work was seen across all four papers. For those centres offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of texts in relation to genre. The specification allows students to study and write about four texts in discrete ways while still engaging broadly with generic conventions. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers on each paper. The best responses were seen 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 how they 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 questions and the texts. 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 did not perform as well, it was often because their textual knowledge was insecure and because they did not focus on the actual questions set in all their details. Sometimes this was because they wanted to answer a different question - perhaps one that had been set in class. It was also a factor that in Paper 2, some students did not make good use of their open book; possibly this was 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 is imperative that students are told that they should not include material that is not rooted in the text; this just distracts them and disrupts their arguments and it is not what the questions require. Answers padded with such material are predominant in the Shakespeare questions (especially Othello) and also Keats. It is really unhelpful for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives, to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods or 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 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 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 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 - and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and developed by using detailed knowledge of the text. There also needs to be integrated comment on how the writer shapes meanings. How students organise ideas and express themselves (AO1) is also important in assessment.

There was evidence of much good work on 7716/1A this year with students of all abilities engaging enthusiastically with the texts and the questions and producing interesting and thoughtful responses. Students were able to consider their chosen texts through the lens of tragedy and many could also write about them as drama texts with a clear sense of the action on stage and how this might contribute to the tragic effect.

It is worth pointing out that the assessment objective which appears first on the mark scheme, and which examiners look to first when placing a response in a mark band, is AO5: 'Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations'. In order to explore a text, students need to have a good knowledge of it, and this was sometimes a stumbling block, as outlined in the comments on individual questions below. 'Different interpretations' are those set up by the question: in other words, how well the student engages with the debate. There is no expectation that students will cite critics or critical views and where students did this it often disrupted the flow of their own argument.

Similarly, there is no need to refer to other texts and where students did this it was never helpful because it was not related to the question and comments tended to be superficial or just wrong. It added nothing to the argument to be told that Edmund was just like Lady Macbeth (both bad?) or that The Woman in Death of a Salesman was just like Curley's wife (both nameless).

Section A

The most popular choice here was *Othello*, although *King Lear* was also well-represented.

In this section the main focus of the response must be on the extract itself; students who simply used it as a springboard to write about the ideas in the play as a whole did themselves a disservice. It is a good idea to share mark schemes from previous examinations with students; one of the things that can be learnt from this is that the first bullet point of AO5 outlines the trajectory of the extract. If students are taught to begin their response with an overview like this it really helps them to pinpoint what is going on in the extract and where the aspects of tragedy and effective dramatic devices might lie, and it also helps them to maintain a focus on the extract in their answer rather than drifting into more general comments.

As has been mentioned in previous reports, it is often extremely unhelpful if students focus on Aristotelian terms such as 'anagnorisis' and 'hamartia'. At best, this is merely feature spotting and at worst it prevents engagement with the debate in the question and makes it harder to access the higher mark bands. AO1 mentions 'associated concepts and terminology'. This does not only mean Aristotle: it is just as valid, and much more useful, for students to mention things like 'villain', 'victim' 'unhappy ending' and so on, which they will do naturally if they address the issues in the question.

Question 1: Othello

The extract was taken from Act 3, Scene 3 and the specific aspects of tragedy students were asked to consider Iago's villainy and Othello's response to Iago's manipulation. Students always have a lot to say about Iago; however, the particular challenge was to write about his villainy in this extract, not to just mention his actions and words here briefly and then write about everything villainous he does from the start to the end of the play, as if he is a static character who does not develop dramatically.

Better responses were from students who were able to deal with the specifics of Iago's manipulation here: his duplicity in starting by claiming friendship with Cassio; the doubt he casts in his reply to Othello, 'Long live you to think so', the growth in his confidence when Othello expresses doubt himself; his exit and hasty reappearance to twist the knife further, and so on. Obviously the dramatic device of his exit and re-entrance are relevant here and the best responses were by those students who commented on what was actually happening on stage as well as the words the characters use.

Othello's reactions to Iago were less well done, mostly because many students seized on the word 'honest' to describe Iago and wrote about that in the play as a whole. Better responses were from students who wrote about Othello's doubts about Desdemona and himself, his growing trust in Iago and the change in his feelings when Desdemona enters at the end of the extract and Iago is no longer there to influence him.

It is essential that students know the whole play well. Some were not able to see where this scene came in the play as a whole and wrote about how Othello was suspicious of Desdemona at this point because of the handkerchief, or that Cassio and Roderigo had fought and Roderigo had been killed. Some did not understand what was being said by the characters, so the line 'I do not think but Desdemona's honest' caused confusion about whether Othello says he thinks she is honest or not; this meant that the effects of Iago's manipulation were not discussed as precisely as they might have been.

Question 2: King Lear

Although this was slightly the less popular of the two questions, it was good to see a sizeable minority of students having studied *King Lear*.

The extract was from Act 4, Scene 6 and the focus was on the presentation of Lear. Those students who knew the play well were aware that this is Lear's reunion with Gloucester after the storm, that Lear seems to mistake Gloucester for Gonerill, prompting him to reflect on his daughters' mistreatment of him and then railing against adultery while Gloucester takes on the role of a patient listener.

The best responses were from students who were able to comment on Lear's tragic fall – the pity of him enacting the role of a king by meting out a pardon for adultery whilst having no power left and the insight he shows in understanding that he has been deceived by flattery – and how an audience's sympathy might be undercut by the misogyny he displays in his speech about adultery.

Unfortunately, some students did not know the play well enough to understand exactly what is going on here and instead of trying to unpick Lear's speech about adultery, wrote about the parts of the play they knew better – generally the beginning or Gloucester's blindness. As previously stated, it is important that students know the whole play as the extract can be taken from any point.

There were some students who completely ignored the extract and wrote about the presentation of Lear in the whole play. This often took the form of a learnt character study and did not show them engaging with the details of the extract at all or seeing the play as a developing narrative taking place in the here and now.

Section B

By far the most popular text in this section was *Death of a Salesman*.

Question 3: Richard II

This is an extremely accessible play (not least of all because it has a linear narrative) for students of all abilities and those who do study it always produce interesting responses. This year was no exception and there were some well-written answers which engaged with the ending of the play and students were able to discuss whether any positives emerge. Students were able to weigh up the fact that Henry is now King and promises to restore order to England after the wastefulness of Richard's reign against the moral transgression of Richard's murder. There were lively and convincing arguments on both sides of this debate.

Question 4: Death of a Salesman

The vast majority of students answered this question and responses covered the whole of the mark range. Again, the best responses were from students who knew the play well – including not only knowing the plot and the characters but also being able to recognise the non-chronological timeline of the play and identify which events are happening in the play's present and what happens and in which order in Willy's memories.

The question asked students to consider whether female characters are ‘victims who deserved our sympathy’ and there was much good discussion. Most students were able to write about Linda in some detail and many addressed both parts of the question – whether she is a victim and whether she deserves our sympathy, often separating the two strands of the question to good effect. Good answers also considered *The Woman*, Miss Forsythe and the women *Happy Dates*. As ‘victim’ is a tragic term, it is worth noting that some students misunderstood this word and thought that ‘victim’ meant ‘weak’ and that Linda could not be a victim if she is seen as a strong woman who supports her husband and her family. Those who recognised that she can be both wrote nuanced, sensitive responses. Similarly, those students who had rigid views that *The Woman* is a villain found it hard to consider her as a potential victim. As always, the best answers came from students who approached the question with an open mind and did not try to impose learnt responses.

Context proved a little intrusive in this question with some students getting distracted by generalisations about what life was like for a housewife in the 1940s and talking about Linda as a victim of patriarchy without much evidence and quickly losing sight of the specifics of the play.

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.
- Focus on the extract in Section A. Write in detail about the narrative trajectory of what happens and what the characters say and do.
- Only write about the texts in the question – don’t compare to other texts.
- Do not make unhelpful generalisations about attitudes to race or women in the times when the texts were written or set.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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