



AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2B Literary genres: Prose and poetry: Aspects of Comedy
Report on the Examination

77/16/2B
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Introductory Comments

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 is 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.

Specific comments about 2B

Some really interesting work was seen on this paper and the questions were clearly accessible across the ability range. It was good to see answers on all texts this year. Most students seemed to have managed their time well and they completed answers on both texts showing an understanding of and engagement with the comedy genre. While most students used their open books well, some students did not and it might be worthwhile for centres to develop strategies to help students to use their open books more effectively.

Good answers were seen across all texts when there was tight focus on the question set and when students had good textual knowledge. Although students generally wrote better about authorial method when they were writing about poetry, largely because all poetry questions focused on settings anyway, it was pleasing to see many students making sensible integrated comments about narrative methods in their answers to the prose texts. It was particularly good to see the engagement with voices and aspects of structure. The questions remind students of the requirement to include analysis of authorial method. However, the comments on method must be made relevant to the questions being asked. Credit cannot be given for detached discussion of method which has no relation to the questions. Neither can credit be given for the labelling (or mislabelling) of nouns and verbs.

Section A Poetry

When answering the questions on poetry, students have to focus on a printed extract. This is one reason why they have to know their texts well as there are no short cuts; they have to write about what is printed for part of their answer. The questions this summer for all poetry tasks asked students to explore the significance of settings to the comedy of the wider text. Students had to refer to the chosen poem and the chosen extract - which always detailed a setting - and then either choose a second poem where the settings signify or in the case of Chaucer, refer to the wider poem.

The extracts are chosen to help students to engage with the questions set and the extract gives students an anchor for their arguments. Most students find the extracts helpful in this respect and 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 poetry text itself. This is why so much emphasis has been placed in the introductory comments on students knowing their texts really well. Given that this is an open book exam, students can also look again at the poem from which the extract comes and briefly contextualise it. However, if students do not know their texts well they tend to struggle. Some students by-passed the extract altogether and this clearly affected the marks they were awarded.

Apart from working with the extract, other than Question 1, students then had to choose a setting from a second poem. This was where choice became crucial. If students knew the text in its entirety they could choose judiciously and find settings about which they could really explore significance in relation to comedy. Those who only knew one or two poems - or bits of poems - tended to use them and shoehorn them into the question regardless of whether they were about settings or not.

The questions also asked students to 'analyse closely' authorial method. If they focused well on settings in the question they were hitting the AO2 requirement automatically.

Question 1: The Nun's Priest's Tale

It was pleasing to see a number of students answering on Chaucer this year and from the evidence seen, students seem to have enjoyed studying the poem and engaging with its comedy. Some excellent answers were seen when students focused on the printed extract which is the opening lines of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* where the setting of the poor widow's 'narwe cotage' is described. Students who performed well wrote about the simple comedic setting of the widow's cottage and yard which is the backdrop for the fantastical tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. There was much good discussion of the contrast between the widow's simple home and the elevated and extraordinary world of the farmyard animals. Several students also wrote about the incongruity and irony of the setting of the yard, the kingly domain of Chauntecleer and his harem of seven hens, and the academic debate that takes place there between Chauntecleer and Pertelote. Some students also focused on the grove, the place of danger, where the fox resides and to where he runs with the cockerel after he tricks him. Those students who knew the text well were able to engage with the comedy of the crisis and also Chauntecleer's clever escape. Unfortunately, several students did not focus on the question - or the extract - for much, if any, of their answer, choosing instead to write at length about Chaucer's aims in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole and also about the source material that he used. Some just wrote about some bits of historical background. This was clearly unhelpful and such material could not be credited however well the students could express themselves.

Question 2: Poetry Anthology: Comedy

The Anthology is a very popular text and students seemed to enjoy writing about it. The extract printed for discussion of setting was from *My Rival's House*. Most students wrote well on the house as a setting and interesting connections were made between the setting and the comedic aspects of rivalry and competition, the traditional jokes associated with mother-in-laws and the sarcasm of the narrator towards her mother-in-law. Some students focused on the connections between the house and narrator's feelings of being trapped and powerless. Students on the whole had plenty of ideas and were able to integrate comments about method into their writing. When students did not perform well it was sometimes because they did not pin down the setting of the house and simply wrote generally about the poem.

There were a number of different poems chosen for the second poem and on the whole, these were well chosen to support students' ideas about settings. Good choices were *Sunny Prestatyn* and *Tam o Shanter* since both have specific settings which students could interrogate and link to aspects of comedy in the wider story. Those who chose *Tam o Shanter* often performed very well because they worked with the different settings of the pub, Kirk-Alloway and Tam's home where his 'sulky sullen dame' was waiting to tell him off. When students just chose poems they liked, they sometimes struggled as they couldn't identify the settings and so just wrote some general points

about the poems. This was often the case when *Mrs Sisyphus* and *Not My Best Side* were chosen. A few could pick out the hill and mythical world of Mrs Sisyphus and the setting of the painting in *Not My Best Side*, but several lost sight of the question on settings and just wrote some things about the poems.

Question 3: Betjeman selection

Several students answered on Betjeman and some good answers were seen. The selected poem for the settings question was *In Westminster Abbey* and the first four stanzas were printed for discussion. Students who performed well focused on the setting of Westminster Abbey and the ironic humour arising from the contrast of the religious Christian setting and the selfish and bigoted views of the narrator. Some students also commented on England and London as settings and made links to the speaker's comic self interest in naming her own address and institutions that she values (which she prays for God to protect) in contrast to her pretence at having concern for those fighting in the Empire. Some students struggled with this question sometimes because they didn't know where Westminster Abbey is or what it is and wrote about a country church. Although some credit could be given, the point and comedy was somewhat lost.

A number of poems were chosen for the second choice and most students chose well when they were thinking about settings. Some choices which worked well were *Slough*, *A Subaltern's Love-song* and *Hunter Trials* although there were several poems that have settings at their centre and were successfully used.

Section B: Prose

When students are writing responses to their prose texts they need to look carefully at the questions, decide on a line of direction and then choose which parts of their open book novel will best help them to construct their arguments. In this exam, it clearly depended on students knowing their texts well enough to find relevant parts of the stories to work with. Many students had good textual knowledge but there were some who did not know what happens in the stories and therefore could not easily construct an argument.

Question 4: Emma

Emma was the most popular choice of prose text and there were some very good answers written by those students who knew the novel well and could range around it for details about Mr Knightley as the perfect romantic hero. It seems as if centres had prepared their students for a possible question on Mr Knightley and there was some good work when the focus was on him as a perfect romantic hero. The students who understand the comedic aspect of the romantic hero were able to write confidently and meaningfully with many referring to key episodes in the text to support their ideas, the favourite being Box Hill where he reprimands Emma and brings about a change in her. Those who just did a character sketch of Mr Knightley fared less well. Some students would clearly have preferred a question on Emma and these students made their writing about Mr Knightley rather Emma-centric. A number of students engaged in a thoughtful discussion about Mr Knightley as the marriage partner of Emma and of his contribution to the happy ending of the story. Some challenged the view of Mr Knightley's perfection and focused on his lack of passion and the age gap between him and Emma. Some also argued that his confessed interest in her from a young age is rather disturbing. A few students did not have enough to say about Mr Knightley and chose

to write about Frank Churchill and Mr Elton as alternate romantic heroes, ideas not invited by the question.

Question 5: Small Island

There were several students offering *Small Island* and most seemed to welcome the opportunity to write about Queenie as an optimistic comedic heroine. There was plenty of good comment on her good cheer and her 'glass-half-full attitude'. Some good discussion focused on her optimistic narrative voice and her belief that things will turn out all right. The text was generally well used for supportive evidence and there was some insightful comment on her decision to marry Bernard, her willingness to be seen in public with Gilbert and the way she cares for Arthur Bligh. Her decision to give up baby Michael was also seen, by some, as a heroic decision - a pragmatic act to give him a better life. There were also a number of students who challenged the question. Many saw Queenie, not as an optimistic heroine, but a very sad one, enduring an unhappy marriage, being abandoned by Michael and then having to give up her baby. Many responses were sensitively argued. When students did not respond well it was usually because they had little detailed knowledge of the text and could only produce some general writing and opinion.

Question 6: Wise Children

Fewer students answered on *Wise Children* than the other prose texts, but there were still several responses seen. Those who answered the question engaged readily with Dora's account of her experiences and most felt that the account really did make readers laugh. There was some good discussion of her account of her sexual encounters and her telling the stories of other characters who are made delightful because of her presentation of them. There was good focus on the dramatic nature of her narrative which was seen as appropriate given the family's interest in performing, singing, dancing and theatre. Generally, students used their texts well to support ideas. When they didn't know their texts well they struggled with specific details.

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 messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2024.

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
- Do not write about Chaucer's' life and times or his source material

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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