

AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1B Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of comedy
Report on the Examination

7716/1B
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Introductory comments

It is pleasing to say that, despite the disruptive effects 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 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 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 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.

Specific comments about 1B

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

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 should focus 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. 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 loose link to the wider play and wrote about that 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 4 scene 2: at this point in the play, the plans for Lucentio and Bianca's wedding are well under way now that Hortensio has decided not to pursue Bianca any longer. The extract begins with the entrance of the Pedant: a character that Tranio (in disguise as Lucentio) is going to use to play the part of Vincentio, so that Baptista Minola will agree to the marriage between Lucentio and Bianca. To convince the Pedant that he should disguise himself as

Vincentio, Tranio invents a story to frighten the Pedant: his life is seriously at risk and therefore if he disguises himself as Vincentio, he will be safe until he's ready to leave. Tranio claims that the Pedant 'doth resemble 'Vincentio, which further convinces the Pedant that this plan is plausible. Of course, the Pedant agrees to the disguise and Tranio briefly mentions the role he will play in the marriage before whisking him away to change his clothes and disguise him as Vincentio.

After this extract, the disguised Pedant fools Baptista Minola and he gives his consent to the marriage between Lucentio and Bianca. This comic plot line reaches a climax when the real Vincentio meets the disguised Pedant, both claiming to be Lucentio's father.

Many students wrote confidently about Tranio's deception of the Pedant and understood that deception and disguise are typical features of comedy. This often led to relevant discussions about power dynamics and how clothing is used in the play to suggest that a person's status is only temporary and can be altered by a simple change of clothes. Some students were able to make meaningful links to the wider play at this point, connecting the extract to other moments in the play where disguise and clothing are used to transform a character's status. A careful reading and understanding of the extract meant that many students commented on Biondello's sarcastic aside, which in turn led to some purposeful discussions about methods used to create comedy. There was some exceptionally good work seen where students explored Tranio's language and the way that he manipulates and persuades the Pedant to take on the disguise. Stronger responses commented on the structural aspects of Tranio's speech: he starts with small talk, then invents a story about the Pedant's life being at risk because he is from Mantua, leading up to the suggestion that the old man disguise himself as Vincentio. Again, this led to some interesting points being made about power and class status, and the way that Tranio - a servant - subverts expectations.

When students did not perform so well, it was largely because they did not really understand the extract and did not fully grasp what Tranio's plan was and how he was using the Pedant. This led to unfocused responses whereby the students instead focused on other parts of the play and wrote very little about the printed extract. In some instances, there was also confusion about the fact that Tranio is still in disguise as Lucentio at this point.

Question 2: *Twelfth Night*

In this task, students were asked to focus on an extract from Act 2 scene 5: Malvolio's gulling scene. The scene is set with the comic characters hiding in the garden, but positioned so that they can see Malvolio pick up the forged letter that has been deliberately placed there for him to find. The extract begins with Malvolio finding the letter and, over the course of the extract, he gradually convinces himself that the letter has been written by Olivia and is meant for him. Malvolio reads the contents of the letter aloud and attempts to make sense of what is written. With each part of the letter that he reads, he desperately tries to relate it to himself because he wants to believe that he is the object of Olivia's affections and that the 'M' stands for Malvolio. The 'hidden' comic characters provide a running commentary, building up the excitement and humour as they, and the audience, watch Malvolio fall for the trick.

Prior to this extract, the audience knows that Maria wrote the letter, imitating Olivia's handwriting in a bid to deceive Malvolio. The conflict between the comic characters and Malvolio is already well-established so the audience understands why this trick is being played on the unsuspecting Malvolio. This extract leads to the peak of the comedy whereby Malvolio presents himself to Olivia in yellow cross-gartered stockings.

Students seemed to enjoy responding to this extract and, on the whole, answered with confidence. It was clear that most students were able to engage with the narrative trajectory: they knew that Malvolio has upset and angered the comic characters and that this is why he is being tricked. They also knew that this gulling leads to other key moments in the play such as Malvolio wearing the yellow stockings and then his imprisonment.

There were plenty of insightful comments about the dramatic irony created through the staging: the comic characters (the subject of the second bullet point) are hiding from Malvolio but the audience can hear their comic observations and responses to Malvolio's arrogant interpretation of the letter, sharing in the humour and enjoyment of Malvolio's gulling. There was also some thoughtful discussion of the animal imagery used by the comic characters when referring to Malvolio, and this led to some useful comments on method and the negative presentation of Malvolio's character. This acted as a springboard to many students who went on to discuss Malvolio's role in the play as a comedic villain, connecting this extract to earlier moments in the play where he is seen acting above his station and obstructing the comic characters' revelry. This of course led to some interesting discussions about class roles and the view that Malvolio is being punished for attempting to climb the social ladder – and whether he deserves this treatment. Confident students engaged with the humour created through the crude language and sexual connotations.

Students who produced weaker answers were less secure in their understanding of the staging and the fact that Malvolio can't hear or see the comic characters. Some students thought that Maria was there too when in fact she exits the stage just before this extract.

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 the students seemed to engage well with 'posh society', choosing a number of characters from the play in order to support or challenge the view that Wilde is celebrating rather than criticising this society. Many students chose to focus on Algernon and Jack, often taking the view that Wilde presents them as deceptive because of their double lives and that this is in fact a criticism of posh society rather than a celebration as it demonstrates negative attitudes and values. On the other hand, some students took the view that because Algernon and Jack get married at the end, their behaviour is not entirely criticised but is in fact rewarded. These kinds of observations naturally led to some relevant comments on class status and the representation of Victorian values and whether they were presented positively by Wilde or not.

The best responses showed a real appreciation of Wilde's methods, particularly his use of language when presenting characters from high society. Several students also demonstrated a secure understanding of parody and satire, particularly when arguing that Wilde is in fact criticising 'posh society'. The students who struggled with this question found it difficult to pin down specific moments in the play where it can be argued that Wilde is either criticising or celebrating posh society and this led to some rather general, unsupported comments. In last year's exam report, it was noted that some students were focusing unnecessarily on Wilde's personal life and homosexuality, but that did not seem to be the case this year which is encouraging.

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 are best when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include certain 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
- 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 irrelevant 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.