
AS

English Literature B

Condensed report on the exam

7716
June 2016



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It is appropriate to start by celebrating the success of the new AS LITB papers: Aspects of Tragedy and Aspects of Comedy. Students seem to have enjoyed reading and exploring their texts through the lens of literary genres and there was much interesting work seen. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers.

It is also appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report, since they are so closely connected and to an extent are interdependent. They share the same philosophy, the same mark scheme, the same structure; they have the same marks available for each question; all the AOs are tested in all questions and in the same ways; all answers are marked holistically and, because the texts are grouped together, when students write about an aspect of tragedy or Comedy, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre and so do not need to compare texts as such. Therefore, as might be expected, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were very similar.

The importance of students understanding genre and knowing their texts

Clearly it is imperative that students have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how it might follow a traditional pattern or in terms of how writers subvert it. Students need to know too that they will be required to write about ‘aspects’ of the genre (the specific aspects that emerge from passages or from the questions) and not churn out everything they know about tragedy or comedy; including what Aristotle and other theorists have said which, in this examination, often had a vice-like grip on student responses.

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts through the lens of genre and not at the lens of genre itself. The text and its story must have priority before other work can begin and students need to know their texts really well. Although Paper 1 exams are closed book and Paper 2 exams are open book, there is an expectation, on both papers, that students have secure textual knowledge and can write relevantly about specific parts of the text. Although this might seem obvious, it is important that students know what happens in the stories of the texts and have ideas about what happens in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations. Those students who did know their texts well could write about particular events, use appropriate details, write in an informed way and make good choices. Secure textual knowledge gives students confidence. Some students struggled in all papers because their textual knowledge was insecure. This meant that they often wrote in a general or vague and, sometimes, inaccurate way.

The importance of students answering the questions in all their details

As has been said in all training sessions for this specification and in all LITB resource materials, the mantra is that students must answer the questions in all their details. The students who performed well were able to interrogate the questions, focus on the key terms and construct a relevant argument around them. When students ignored the question or tried to subvert it, they got themselves into a muddle.

The papers are called ‘Aspects of Tragedy’ and ‘Aspects of Comedy’. All questions require students to focus on particular aspects; they do not invite students to write anything known about tragedy or comedy. If students write generally about the genre and do not write about the particular requirements of the question, much of their writing will be irrelevant. So, in 1A and 1B Section A, there was an imperative to write about the tragic and comedic aspects set up in the bullets or those that were evident in the passage itself and which connect to the wider play. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students should have centred their debates were clearly signalled; for example, tragic greatness in *Death of a Salesman*, comedic disguise and false identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, tragic isolation in *The Great Gatsby* and comedic misunderstandings in *Emma*.

The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate

All four papers have the same kind of question format in Section B, in that a debate is set up around a key aspect of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view. This is also the case with the poetry questions and the word ‘significance’ in the Shakespeare passage based question shows students that they also need to consider potential meanings.

All questions are framed around AO5 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature — considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions and understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions and while this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly, for some it did not. Too much that

was written was ill-understood and tacked on to arguments. Unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

The passage-based questions

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or their poetry text. The passage is provided in order to enable students to demonstrate their skills in responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then to relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play or poetry text. The main difference between the passages selected for Papers 1 and 2 is that the Shakespeare passage is longer, with the expectation that students will spend most of their time writing about the passage (with guided bullets) and linking appropriately to the wider play, whereas the extract from the poetry text is shorter and has been selected to lead students into the debate set up in the question. The questions for the poetry texts have the same format as the Section B questions. As they construct their argument, students are expected to use the passage for part of their answer and then range more widely around the text, as instructed by the question.

In the Shakespeare passage-based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic development therein. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall tragedy or comedy. Schools and colleges could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills of constructing overviews in brief and identifying telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play in order to be able to see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall, as we want students to engage with the passages and bullets and have a sense of ownership over what they write. As long as the bullets are addressed, there is no directive as to how much time is spent on each. When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, they should be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. Comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly.

In the Section A questions of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and since students have their texts with them in the exam

they can easily contextualise the extracts in terms of the wider text. This immediately enables them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

Authorial and dramatic methods

In all questions, students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. In Papers 1A and 1B, it is specifically dramatic method, whereby, in relation to the question, students need to communicate a sense of how the play has been shaped by the dramatists. In Papers 2A and 2B the focus is on the shaping of stories in poetry and novels.

Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material — usually about rhyme schemes, poetic tropes, the possible meanings of colours or detached analysis of single words. The best responses included focused and integrated comments on structure, voices and settings.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions in an unhampered way. Unfortunately, some students, thought they had to force in all sorts of information or ideas about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and poorly understood. In the weakest answers, there were a variety of assertions and claims and often these took up space that would have been better allocated to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

AO1

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is, of course, essential in the context of a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to

shape their ideas and write about them impressively, using language and terminology appropriate to AS standard. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. Unfortunately, some wrote in a style that was awkward and sometimes made little sense. Invariably, such writing was marred by technical errors and misused language and terminology. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills, since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Far too many students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty and which did not gain students marks.

Unburdening students

Too often it seemed, some students were burdened with what seemed like a 'must include' list. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but others included the gratuitous inclusion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology. This often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if they were shoehorned into their writing. For example, it is very rare that words like peripeteia, megalopsychia and epizeuxis, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence.

Similarly some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification, as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic and comedic aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt-on references to other texts and very rarely did it add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students references to other texts got in the way.

It is also important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Too many students included ideas and terminology that were ill-understood and this led to very confused writing.

The importance of clear and independent thinking

While it is understood that content and skills have to be taught, students also need to be given the confidence to think and to respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with a fresh pair of eyes and students need to know how to do this. Some students seemed to be locked into previous questions they had completed in class or questions from the specimen assessment materials.

Those who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded. As such, this should be key to examination preparation in future years.

Specific comments about 1A: Literary genres: drama: Aspects of Tragedy

The entry total for this paper was almost 8000. The most popular texts were Othello and Death of a Salesman, although responses to all the texts were submitted. Overall, candidates seemed to tackle Section B on whole texts more successfully than the passage-based extracts where candidates became somewhat hampered by their knowledge of tragedy. This was largely because they were determined to include as much of it as they could rather than as much as was relevant. Fewer schools and colleges than expected had equipped their candidates to specifically address dramatic methods; where this was done students wrote confident and relevant responses. There was more focus on methods in the passage-based question than in the whole text questions, where plot details, or responses to character tended, to dominate the shaping of the argument. Some candidates provided impressive support across both questions, with a range of aptly selected quotations, precisely located and were clearly well-prepared for a closed book examination with secure textual knowledge; there were also many answers that offered very general references to the text and which, therefore, received less credit.

Question 1: Othello

Question 1 focused on an extract from Act 1, Scene 1 with bullets inviting students to consider the interaction of Brabantio, Roderigo and Iago and the nighttime setting. This question was more frequently selected than Question 2. The first bullet was, on the whole, dealt with in a relevant way and it elicited plenty of discussion about social status, style of speech, Iago's villainy, Brabantio's

reaction to being informed of Desdemona's absence, and Roderigo's involvement. Students generally integrated comments on dramatic methods, such as Roderigo's less vocal role compared to Iago's and Brabantio's speeches. However, many students did not specifically consider the second bullet on night time setting and so did not provide as relevant an answer as they could have done; frequently, the settings of Cyprus and Venice were identified but comments made were not always relevant. Where students employed a sharp focus, there were detailed connections made to villainy and to the use of night time settings elsewhere in the play, exploring their significance to the tragedy.

It was a commonplace in some weaker answers, that students only briefly engaged with the extract and then began to roam about the play widely and in a generalised way, often making links to a preferred part of the play; for example, Othello's murder of Desdemona. While this could be a valid link, frequently the connection was more hazy, with students seeking to explain that the play is a tragedy because Iago is a villain and a victim dies at the end. Effective links to the wider play will be made when the connection arises directly from the extract and centres will need to encourage students to create these links as they explore the possible meanings of the whole play. In particular for this question, students appeared to use the extract as a springboard into their knowledge of the play, rather than finding meanings in the extract and exploring how those meanings connected to the rest of the play. Particularly unhelpful links to context were seen in the extract questions, where rehearsed generalities were included in the answer; for example, in Othello, Iago's referring to Desdemona as 'your white ewe' resulted in lengthy discussion of the status of Elizabethan women in general. Many students struggled to tackle race successfully, often sounding vague and uncertain when trying to explain Elizabethan attitudes to race. Responses were more confident in their exploration of Iago's villainy, although many answers became generalised responses to Iago, whereby they focused solely on him, rather than the way in which he interacts with others in the given extract.

Question 2: King Lear

Question 2 focused on the introduction of Lear with four bullets inviting students to consider: the presentation of Lear; the contrasts between the three daughters; and the stage directions and; any other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy.

Students handled the presentation of Lear well, with plenty of interpretations about what kind of king he appears to be; weaker candidates struggled to see differences between Gonerill and Regan and frequently Cordelia's asides were the only comment on stage directions. Clearly at the start of the scene, there is some stage business with the coronet and the sennet to create the spectacle of Lear's entrance and students who discussed the possible significances of this produced answers that were credited highly. Many students focused well on the way in which the speeches of the sisters present later dynamics in the play and discussed, with some depth, problems of how meanings and love are quantified. Less was said about the possible significance of the contrasts between the daughters, with many students writing about characters as opposed to the significance of the daughters' treatment of Lear or the way Gonerill and Regan highlight Cordelia's speech and actions. On the whole, there was more sustained focus on dramatic method in the responses to King Lear, than the responses to Othello and relevant tragic ideas of villainy, pride, flawed greatness and tragic victims were explored thoughtfully.

A small number of students approached Section A by writing line-by-line commentaries, or by focusing on a prepared list of tragic features or themes; some debated whether the selected passage was significant to the play as a whole, or in terms of its tragic aspects; some explored comic elements in tragedy; still others attempted to read the entire passage itself as a tragedy. None of these approaches helped students produce relevant responses. Where students were able to select an element of tragedy, such as Iago's villainous nature or Lear's pride and develop its significance in the extract and in the wider play, answers were relevant, focused and informed; the very best responses did this with impressive sophistication and perceptiveness.

Question 3: Richard II

Students seemed to enjoy debating this task and offered a range of views on Richard's status as a tragic hero. The answers at the higher end of the mark range showed that students were adept at ranging around the play, selecting specific support and referencing it precisely; these responses dealt with Richard's transformation confidently. Counter-arguments were mounted effectively and this question did not seem beset by the compulsion to apply exhaustively a classical model of tragedy to the text. There was much productive debate about how 'noble' Richard's behaviour is and whether it is possible to see his greatness or heroism. Many students wrote with a genuine appreciation of dramatic method and the literariness of some of Shakespeare's language, with the

best students arguing coherently in terms of Richard's tragic heroism. Weaker candidates did not engage with 'impossible' as part of the debate.

Question 4: Death of a Salesman

This question on *Death of a Salesman* was by far the most popular. Students were able to engage securely with Willy Loman as tragic hero. Where weaker students tended to debate whether he is or not according to Aristotle, more confident students challenged the classical model and sought alternative models of greatness, with a range of interpretations about Willy. Students wrote engagingly and often with conviction in response to the task. There were some very assured responses that dealt with Miller's dramatic methods, ranging around sets, music, props, stage directions and the use of the stage; thus showing secure understanding of how method connects to meaning. At the lower end of the ability range, students were able to talk in very general terms about one or two props and offer some rather imprecise discussion on the 'flashbacks'; although they often discussed more general authorial methods, such as lexical features or imagery, or the symbolism of the seeds or of a man not being 'a piece of fruit'. Many responses omitted to discuss dramatic methods, despite the explicit prompt provided on the question paper. A significant minority of answers framed the debate by making reference to other tragic heroes in the play: Biff, Linda, Happy, or Charley and this inevitably led students away from relevant discussion. There was plenty of focused consideration on why Willy lacks greatness, with more strident arguments probing towards his possible villainy or victim status; here, relevant links to the social context of the play's historical setting were often made. Where candidates were linking unhelpfully to other 'American Tragedies' (*Of Mice and Men*, *The Great Gatsby*), there was little to credit.

Question 5: A Streetcar Named Desire

This question was answered by a small number of schools — students debated the victim status of Blanche du Bois with focus and engagement. Many students did not treat the text with as much awareness of dramatic method as they might (given that Williams provides so many detailed stage directions and includes a range of props and symbols) and many responded to the story of the play rather than its construction. Most debates considered Blanche's victim status through some key plot events. There were significantly fewer answers, made only by the most able students, which included a link between 'victim', 'impossible' and 'sympathise with'. Students with less secure

textual knowledge asserted a disturbing line of argument; that Blanche cannot be seen as a victim or be sympathised with, because she is only getting what she deserves when Stanley rapes her. Better, more thoughtful responses, explored a range of ways in which an audience might respond to Blanche in a sympathetic or unsympathetic way. Some of the best answers focused on specific scenes in some detail, comparing how Blanche is presented at different points in the play and showing a structural understanding of the play, making apt use of Blanche's past in order to support their points. Irrelevant contexts were less foregrounded in this text than others in Section B and the focus was on the possible gender context set up in the task.

Schools and colleges must be mindful that this text is only available for the AS exam and must not be used for A-level next year.

Specific comments about 1B: Literary genres: drama: Aspects of comedy

The entry total for this paper was almost 1,100 and all texts were studied. This makes it possible to report comprehensively on student performance. The most popular texts were Twelfth Night and The Importance of Being Earnest. Some centres chose The Taming of the Shrew, with fewer centres looking at She Stoops to Conquer and Educating Rita. There was some very good work seen on all questions but some students did not always see the texts through the lens of dramatic comedy. Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded. In the best responses in questions 1 and 2, students were able to use specific parts of the extract to illuminate aspects of comedy and were able to link these to other relevant aspects of dramatic comedy in the wider text. In questions 3, 4 and 5, successful students were able to debate the targeted aspect and explore literary texts informed by different interpretations. They were also able to explore the authors' dramatic methods.

Often students wasted time in their responses by writing unnecessary introductions or conclusions. Some students made overt comparisons to the other comedy text which has been chosen and this was not required. Oftentimes, such comparisons were unhelpful and obstructed the argument.

Question 1: The Taming of the Shrew – William Shakespeare

The selected extract allowed students to explore Petruchio's taming methods and Kate's response to him. Successful answers had a strong sense of the staging of this sequence and knew how this section links and connects to other core sequences in the drama. Where candidates considered the absurdity of the taming strategy, they were well rewarded.

However, many students approached this task without considering the extract in terms of dramatic comedy; these students tended to write rather generally about the characters in the play. Several students also offered unnecessary and detached feminist interpretations of the text and this approach did not work well. Primarily, the comedy created in this extract is verbal and so relies on wit and repartee and the best answers explored this as Shakespeare's dramatic method. In this sense, the extract's structure, details of language, the use of puns and imagery are very important in generating comedy. When students were focusing on the drama, they were able to write effectively about how comedy operates both here and in the wider play.

Question 2: Twelfth Night – William Shakespeare

The extract involved the sequence where Toby Belch, Andrew Aguecheek and Feste are celebrating into the small hours, when they are interrupted by the steward Malvolio. Answers which only gave accounts of characterisation, as opposed to the specifics of the dramatic effect of Malvolio's entrance, were less well rewarded than those who saw the extract in terms of the comedic genre.

Good answers also looked at the economic context of servant and master relations and the resultant subversion caused by Malvolio's criticism of the knights. Stronger work explored the impact of the songs and singing.

Many students successfully applied concepts of comedic theory to the extract, including critical terms such as 'Inversion Theory', 'allowed fools', 'natural fools', 'festival', 'Lord of Misrule' and 'Old Word/ Green World / New World concepts'. Such answers thoroughly examined the extract through a comedic lens. These answers were supported by specific textual examples and demonstrative of good awareness of links to other moments of dramatic comedy in the play. In the

best answers, students were able to conduct a debate fully aware of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

However, a number of students were unable to examine how precisely comic disorder is created in the extract, preferring instead to solely write about Malvolio's influence in the play. Some students also wrote very generally about character, instead of concentrating on how comedy is achieved and some failed to notice the role and function of Maria in the extract.

Question 3: She Stoops to Conquer – Oliver Goldsmith

There were some excellent responses to this text, from students who had fully considered various interpretations of Tony Lumpkin. These students were able to show both his foolish and his intelligence, using specific textual examples to demonstrate that this is an essential part of Goldsmith's comedy and his dramatic method. In the best answers, students used appropriate details from the text and ranged around it widely. Oftentimes, comedic connections to other characters in the play were understood and analysed.

Question 4: The Importance of Being Earnest – Oscar Wilde

This question invited debate over how disguise and false identity are used in the play. Most students were able to pick out the more obvious aspects of disguise but more successful answers considered the intricacies of the ways in which false identity operates in the play — and, in particular, their comedic effect. Such answers went beyond the main characters and, for example, examined Miss Prism. Recounting the plot alone rarely resulted in high marks. Some students made unnecessary forays into Wilde's biography or his other works. The best answers were able to show how disguise and false identity contributes to the structure of the comedy, exploring the pattern of initial confusion and then resolution. Oftentimes, this debate was conducted with an eye on how the genre of comedy of manners operates. There was generally good relevant contextual awareness, here, of how Wilde's aim was to satirise the society which the play depicts. Many answers were also able to widen the debate and explain how disguise and false identity are central tenets of dramatic comedy.

Question 5: Educating Rita – Willy Russell

Fewer students responded to this text. Although the main setting for the play is Frank's office, some students were unable to see how Russell constructs other comedic settings for the drama via monologues, imaginative dialogues and projections of past experiences. However, some students were able to explore this, however, as part of Russell's economic dramatic method and they used this as an opportunity to show how, for example, the location of Liverpool, the university and other imagined locations in the drama, help to create comedy. Interpretations of setting could be quite open and imaginative, ranging from ideas about working-class and academic settings, to notions of places such as Australia and France. Students who focused on the other settings were generally confident in discussing the various constructions of settings that Russell has assembled in the drama and were able to explore them in considerable depth.

Specific comments about 2A: Literary genres: prose and poetry: Aspects of tragedy

The entry total for this paper was almost 8,000 and responses were seen to all of the set texts. This makes it possible to report comprehensively on student performance. The most popular texts were Keats and *The Great Gatsby*, although they were not the texts to which the best responses were seen. On the whole, students most effectively discussed authorial method when they were writing about poetry. For many, there was no sense at all of writers having written their tragic novels.

Several examiners commented that students did not always take account of the number of poems they were asked to write about in the poetry questions; so some care is needed here.

Question 1: John Keats selection

In this question, students needed to focus on the tragic aspect of 'villains' and then debate whether villains are presented as physically cruel. Unfortunately many students saw this as a chance to write about the SAM's question and spent far too long discussing whether the line between villains and victims is continually blurred and this diverted them from the task about villains being presented as 'physically cruel'. Some students did not know what physical cruelty is, despite the evidence in the extract and instead wrote about physical appearances.

The selected extract, here, was from an early section of *Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil* in which the brothers of Isabella are introduced and it focuses on their cruel behaviour, attitudes and actions in relation to their workers. Many students did not seem to know this section of the poem and seemed to think that the brothers' cruelty here is directed at Lorenzo. As a result of this misreading, some rather extraordinary comments were made. The hollow eyes of the workers were frequently discussed as the hollow eyes of the brothers and many claimed that the eyes are a window to the soul which reveal the brothers' villainy.

Those who performed well understood the extract, used it in support of their arguments and made incisive comments on Keats' methods in the process. Some good answers were seen by those students who said that, while the brothers are physically cruel, the villains in the other Keats poems are villainous in different ways, sometimes being psychologically cruel or else seductive and manipulative. In the work of these students, there was some thoughtful comment on structure and Keats' positioning of his villains in the narratives.

Some students wrote more about Keats' personal life, his Romanticism, his tuberculosis and his unhappy relationship with Fanny Brawne, than about villains and physical cruelty. Very rarely was this contextual material made relevant to the task and argument.

Question 2: Thomas Hardy selection

There were relatively few schools and colleges offering the Hardy poetry selection, but those which did were generally able to focus on the key aspects of tragedy: 'tragic outcomes' and 'misfortune and bad luck'; seeing the bad luck resulting from both the belatedness of the young man's expectation of marriage to a girl who was already dead after aborting her child and the mother's sorry role in the tragedy. However, there were several students who did not understand the extract and who did not really understand what is taking place in this part of *A Sunday Morning Tragedy's* story. Those students often struggled.

Most students made good choices of other poems and there was some good work seen on *The Tramp Woman's Tragedy* and *The Going and Your Last Drive*. Some students were clearly thinking about what bad luck and misfortune might mean and there was some interesting

discussion of how it was bad luck for the females of the tragedies to exist in the age in which they apparently lived; that age being the repressive and male-dominated Victorian England. Here, external context was made relevant because it was closely linked to the texts. In terms of biographical context, some students were able to integrate material about Hardy's marriage in a meaningful way because they grounded their comments in the poems themselves. However, some chose to write about bad luck in Hardy's life and ignored the poems altogether.

Comments on authorial method were often detached from arguments, although there was some useful discussion of the use of dialogue in the extract and the woeful voice of the speaker.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

Several centres offered the Poetry Anthology: Tragedy as their poetry text and, on the whole, this was very well done. Some of the best answers were seen here. Most students were able to comment on the 'human tragedy' of 'Out, out – ' writing in some detail about the boy's tragic story, his life of labour, the loss of his hand, his desperate pleas for help and his sudden death. There was also very good discussion of the constructed world which is uncaring and indifferent to his tragedy. In this answer, the extract was used very well and there was very good focus on Frost's methods: voices and the significance of the title and structure being amongst the most fruitful methods discussed. There was plenty of debate about whether the narrator himself is uncaring and indifferent and the text was used well to support ideas in the strongest responses.

Students tended to choose well in their second poem and some very good work was seen on Miss Gee, Death in Leamington, The Convergence of the Twain and Tithonus.

Question 4: The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby was easily the most popular text and this was expected, given its popularity in the previous specification. Some students worked hard on their arguments and discussed a number of possible causes of Gatsby's isolation. However, although there were some very good answers, many students did not seem to know the text well and many did not focus on the question. The key tragic aspect of 'tragic isolation' was ignored by many. Many students conflated

isolation with tragic downfall or death and many simply mentioned it in passing. ‘Tragic isolation’ should have been central to the argument but sometimes it was just an afterthought, if that.

There was better focus on Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy but, oftentimes, this was not discussed as a cause for his isolation. Several students ignored Gatsby’s obsession and thought the task was about Daisy’s culpability in Gatsby’s death.

However, the main issue with the weakest responses, was the desire of so many students to ignore the task and write about the American Dream, Fitzgerald’s life with Zelda, 1920s America, the unreliable narrator and the potential meanings of various colours. Students need to be told that very rarely is any of this material likely to be relevant to tasks about specific aspects of tragedy. Many students were clearly happier writing general comments about the American Dream and colour imagery than writing about the specific demands of the question; this was a pity.

Question 5: Tess of the D’Urbervilles

This text was offered by a number of schools and colleges and on the whole it was well done. There was evidence in this answer that students were thinking independently, rather than relying on pre-learned knowledge, as was the case with *The Great Gatsby*. The key aspect of tragedy here was Tess as a ‘victim’ and the question asked students to explore the view that Tess is primarily a victim of her poverty. Although some did not know what poverty means, most were able to discuss Tess’ working class background, how little money her family has and how this impacts on their choices.

Most of the focus was on her poverty at the start of the novel, how this leads to her seeking work at the home of Alec D’Urberville and subsequently becoming a victim of his predatory nature. A few also wrote about poverty elsewhere in the novel (for example, after her father’s death and her misery at Flintcomb-Ash) and those who did generally produced answers with depth and range. The very best answers were those where there was focused discussion of ‘primarily’ and these students were really thinking independently about alternative causes of her status. There was excellent discussion of Alec and Angel as primary causes and many good answers contained relevant discussion of Victorian social attitudes and Christian dogma as represented in the novel.

In the very strong answers there was also relevant comment on Hardy's authorial methods with good comments on his use of the sub-title, his structuring of the novel and his use of authorial voice. Several students, sadly, did not write about method at all.

Question 6: The Remains of the Day

Although there were not many responses to this question, there were a number of schools and colleges who took the opportunity to use this text which is only available for the AS examination. On the whole the students who answered it produced focused writing and the irrelevant contextual material that was so prevalent in the answers on *The Great Gatsby*, was not present here.

The key aspect for discussion was 'tragic figure' and here students were required to debate the view that Miss Kenton is not a tragic figure. There was plenty of good discussion in the answers seen. Many students argued that she is a tragic figure and many agreed with the given view that she is not. Those students who performed well were able to range around the text, exploring ideas from different parts of the story. In these answers, students invariably wrote about the story being filtered by Stevens and Ishiguro's making readers read between the lines.

The weakest answers were by those students who thought that they could subvert the question and write about Stevens and whether or not he is a tragic figure.

Specific comments about 2B: Literary genres: poetry and prose: Aspects of comedy

The entry for this component was smaller than its sister paper on Tragedy, but examiners reported reading some excellent responses by students on all six texts. The Poetry Anthology: Comedy proved by far the most popular text in Section A, with the three prose texts being equally represented in Section B responses. The philosophy of the specification as a whole and, more specifically, the understanding of the way in which comedy operates in prose and poetry texts in Paper 2B, has been grasped expertly by some schools and students. Schools and colleges are to be congratulated on preparing students well for this paper; yet there are areas where students can improve their approach to the paper.

Question 1: The Nun's Priest's Tale

Students tended to write well about Chaucer's comedic text. Perhaps the initially challenging nature of the language encouraged students to commit to learning the text well and this in turn led to some thoughtfully selected supporting details. The task itself revolved around two key aspects in comedy — the representation of the comic hero who succeeds in the end and the idea that weaknesses can be a source of amusement. The best responses grasped that protagonists in comedies can be both laughed at and/or cheered and offered a view as to whether or not Chauntecleer's weaknesses outweighed his heroic qualities. Less successful students tended to write a thinly veiled character study of the cockerel, or to write about his foolish behaviour, rather than to engage with the debate.

The extract itself was rich with possibility, focusing on the very moment in which Chauntecleer is captured. The best responses dealt with method at a structural level, seeing this moment as a climactic point in the narrative and looking at the way in which the narrator draws attention to the ridiculous spectacle of the cockerel proudly stretching his neck. Most students related this part to the comedic set up earlier in the text, noting the idea that the reader has been prepared for the cockerel's fall and they also looked ahead in the story to the (possibly) heroic manner in which Chauntecleer escapes the clutches of the fox. While it was possible to say some relevant things about the individual words used to describe Chauntecleer's physical appearance, more perceptive answers looked at the way the tale was structured; making the point that part of the joy of comedy is the obliviousness of the characters and how the arch voice of the narrator lets the audience in on the joke. The ways in which the reader is invited to laugh at the protagonist's folly was a profitable aspect of method to explore in relation to the debate.

Question 2: Poetry Anthology: Comedy

The Poetry Anthology task included an extract from Mrs Sisyphus and focused on the comedic representation of men as weak and foolish. Several links to genre are found here: one being the idea that in comedy, humour often comes from the representation of gender and the stereotypical way in which, in this case, men's actions can cause amusement. Answers which focused upon 'men', 'weak' and 'foolish' were, therefore, likely to succeed.

The debate was triggered by the word ‘always’, which invited students to take issue with, or support, the given view. The best answers, therefore engaged with this debate and offered a response to it. As ever, there is no preferred answer — some students argued that Sisyphus is not physically weak, but weak-willed and definitely foolish for ignoring his wife in favour of work. Others argued that he is, in fact, not weak, but strong because of how he appears to resist his seemingly demanding wife and how his resilience could be an indication of mental strength. It is possible to make the case that the speaker in *The Flea* is far from foolish given his witty argument, or that the protagonist in *Tam O’Shanter* is weak in terms of his succumbing to the lure of alcohol and young women and definitely foolish for putting himself in danger. One witty student ventured that perhaps Tam’s desire to stay out late was understandable given Kate’s character and perhaps Tam was a strong, yet foolish husband to risk the wrath of his wife’s stormy temper. Being able to think and say thoughtful things about the focus of the task is always valued — examiners enjoy reading answers which have a clear personal voice.

In terms of method, good points were made about the narrative voice of Mrs Sisyphus and the way in which the insults directed at her husband represent his foolishness. The reported words of Sisyphus (her recreation of his defence about the perks of his work) and the frustration engendered by his seeming obliviousness, were generally effective. Resisting the urge to say unconvincing things about line length and rhyme scheme is to be encouraged — the idea that dots above the letter ‘i’ represent the boulder, or that the irregular structure represents their irregular relationship never really work and, more importantly, have little to do with the focus of the task.

Most students made sensible choices of other poems to bring into their argument, yet there were some choices which seemed less obvious and often (but not always) less effective: the sparseness of the male role in *My Rival’s House* and *Sunny Prestatyn* made for less fruitful choices than *Not My Best Side*, *Tam O’Shanter* and *The Flea*. Students should resist the desire to write about their favourite poem and, instead, opt for the one(s) which help them to construct the best argument. Likewise, for some students, sticking to the focus of the task was problematic. Although it is reasonable to argue that seemingly powerful female narrators can make the male characters seem weak, answers which warped the task by arguing that women were weak and foolish were in danger of becoming irrelevant — the debate here was about men and whether they are always presented as weak and foolish. Encouraging students to read questions carefully, identify the heart of the debate and focus sharply upon it, is essential.

Question 3: Betjeman selection

The Betjeman task asked whether death and ageing were ‘always presented in a light-hearted way’, so the extract from *Late-Flowering Lust* offered plenty of comically grotesque moments from which to shape an answer. The poetry tasks clearly ask the students to refer to other poems or (in the case of Chaucer) other parts of the poem. It is here that choice is important, as there are clearly some choices which work better than others. *Senex* offered lots of scope to deal with death and ageing, whereas *Slough* (although it mentions death) was often less tractable.

Students did best when they focused on ‘death’ and ‘ageing’ (rather than just one of them) and also ‘light-hearted’. Understanding that comedic entertainment comes in many forms is useful knowledge for students exploring this genre and so being able to distinguish between darkly comic ideas and lighter forms of humour, provided a good route into this task. Weaker answers tended to treat ‘light-hearted’ as simply meaning ‘funny’ and, in so doing, closed down opportunities. A lot of students argued convincingly that while Betjeman’s treatment of death and ageing could be seen as humorous, ‘light-hearted’ wasn’t always an appropriate description. One thoughtful response posited that the macabre nature of events in the extract (and elsewhere in the collection) brought the subject matter closer to tragedy; offering the idea that comic events usually have tragic potential in them.

When writing about method, it was possible to say useful things about rhythm and rhyme — this was a task in which the light-hearted, often jaunty feel of Betjeman’s verse was relevant to a task about the light-hearted presentation of morbidity. Narrative voice was also well-handled, but only a few students picked up upon the poem’s title — an often overlooked structural device. The multiple significances of the words in the extract poem’s title and their connection to death, or the irony of the title *Senex* (given the actions and thoughts of the aged narrator), could have been good areas to explore.

Question 4: Emma

Emma was a popular choice and students frequently displayed excellent knowledge when writing about this text. The comedic focus — ‘misunderstandings arising from courtship’ — was handled

well in the main, with many students writing confidently about the misunderstandings between the heroine, Mr Elton and Harriet and also the incident at Box Hill, amongst others. When students faltered it tended to be because they overlooked the debate — whether these misunderstandings were ‘always comic’— and, instead, produced a response which just provided an overview of the misunderstandings. A further area of difficulty for some students, was not to draw too much upon pre-learned material. It was clear that some students were partly rewriting an essay based upon the Austen task in the sample materials on self-discovery, or an essay about marriage. As ever, responses which chose relevant parts of the text and provided an answer to the debate in the task succeeded.

There were some perceptive comments about narrative voice in Emma and especially about the way in which the reader was made aware of Emma’s shortcomings. This worked well when it was made relevant to ‘misunderstandings’ and particularly when students could show how comedy is generated by the gap between the reader’s awareness of Emma’s misunderstandings and the character’s own obliviousness. Focusing on these structural aspects of method worked better than writing about minutiae. Some less successful responses offered sentences such as, “Austen tells us that Mr Elton made ‘violent love’ to Emma. The word ‘violent’ shows that it was aggressive and therefore wasn’t funny.” While there is something to credit here, it hopefully demonstrates how writing about individual words can be limiting, rather than illuminating.

Question 5: Small Island

The very best answers on Small Island were by students who ranged widely around the text in order to construct their argument. The task itself was based on the idea that comedic texts can often depict marriage as both a satisfying and a dissatisfying institution and there was plenty of material to draw upon. A popular argument was that Queenie and Bernard’s union was dissatisfying; whereas Gilbert and Hortense’s relationship developed into a satisfactory marriage. In order to demonstrate this, students needed to select relevant examples from different parts of the text and this is where excellent textual knowledge and the ability to locate precise references in the novel came to the fore. Knowing how to use the text in an open book exam is a valuable skill. Precise references are expected, given the fact that the students have the texts with them; so knowing the sequence of the narrative and the physical place of events in the book is helpful and, in practical terms, saves students valuable time.

The task itself was generally answered well. Some students neglected to explore the final part of the tale, but the ones who did often made telling comments about the significance of the new house, the baby and the intimacy which emerges. More subtle answers explored the idea that some personal growth appeared to have occurred in Bernard which may suggest grounds for optimism in his marriage and, likewise, the apparent satisfaction in Gilbert and Hortense's union was questioned by some students.

In terms of method, much was made of Levy's decision to use multiple narrators, but this was only really relevant when it was mentioned in relation to marriage. There was much thoughtful exploration about the symbolism of the ending and some students pointed out that, unlike some comedic narratives which end with marriage, *Small Island* starts with two marriages of convenience and goes on to contrast the development of the marital relationships and their relative fortunes. References to key events in the plot and their effect upon marital satisfaction were generally well chosen. Some students got sidetracked by writing largely irrelevant paragraphs about the Windrush generation or race, rather than focusing squarely on the debate.

Question 6: Wise Children

Students writing about *Wise Children* were asked to focus on the ending of the story (where comedy normally resolves happily) and consider whether the ending was not only 'celebratory' (as comedic endings can be) but 'entirely celebratory'. While it is useful to show how some of the problems in the narrative are set up earlier in the text, making sensible choices from the ending of the text is what helped the better responses to succeed. Some students chose to write about anything from anywhere in the text which might be deemed 'celebratory' rather than choosing events from chapter 5. The sample materials task also made its way into the essay, with some students wanting to write about the celebration of old age, rather than the resolution of the narrative.

There were some very impressive answers which really got to grips with the complexities of the ending and the idea that Melchior's recognition of his daughters may be hollow, or Dora and Nora's acquisition of the twins may be a symbol of new life, but may also give cause for concern. Method was generally handed well and, given the fact that the task itself deals with a structural aspect

(resolution), then issues arising from the tying up (or otherwise) of loose ends made for some thoughtful work.

There was a tendency for students to get burdened with extraneous material, possibly given the complex nature of the story and the intertextual elements of the narrative. There were some essays which completely lost sight of the task and gave a rundown of the links between Shakespeare's plays and the novel, or wrote largely irrelevant paragraphs on Bakhtin, or Carter's battle with cancer. As is often the case, when this material appears, the task disappears. Nonetheless, there were some very impressive responses on this text which got to the heart of the question and the issue of comedic endings.

Looking ahead to A-level next year

Undoubtedly schools and colleges will be reading this report with an eye on how they can prepare for next year's A-level as well as for next year's AS exam. There are clear messages here that will help all students. Fundamentally, students should:

- focus exclusively on the questions set
- know their texts well, selecting wisely from them as they construct their arguments—this will be particularly important in the A-level Paper 2s where the generic conventions are not clear cut
- be able to think about interpretations that arise from aspects and elements of the genre they will be writing about
- understand that the ways that writers shape meanings is not just the use of single words and that writing about larger structural issues will be more beneficial
- make telling choices in the material they select
- work at constructing debates and interrogating key words
- be confident in thinking and writing independently and developing their own voices

A reminder on the rubric for A-level Paper 1

Given that schools will have studied four texts this year, they must ensure that the rubric is not contravened when students are only writing about three texts next year in Paper 1. Two drama texts must be written about in the A-level Tragedy and Comedy papers plus one other text. If students are writing on Comedy, then the choice of the third text is not a problem, but if students are offering Tragedy and one of the texts is *The Death of a Salesman*, then their third text must be *Richard II*, *Keats* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.

Contact us:

- T: 0161 953 7504
- E: English-gce@aca.org.uk
- @AQAEEnglish
- Aqa.org.uk/English