

AS

English Literature B

Paper 2A: Literary genres: prose and poetry: Aspects of tragedy
Report on the Examination

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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 seem 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. As might therefore 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 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 Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 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 signaled, 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 need to consider potential meanings there too.

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, 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 to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then 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), 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. 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, as they construct their argument.

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 within it. 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 to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the part of the narrative that has 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 will immediately enable 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, where, in relation to the question, students need to give 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 comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments.

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. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information or ideas about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of assertions and claims and often these took up space that would have been better given 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 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 level. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. Some unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward, sometimes making little sense. Invariably such writing was marred by technical errors and language and terminology that was misused. 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 write introductions and conclusions which are vague, general or empty and which do not gain students marks.

Unburdening students

Too often it seems, some students were burdened with what seemed like a ‘must include’ list. The needless incorporation of contextual material is one such burden, but others include 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. It is very rare that words like peripeteia, megalopsychia and epizeuxis, for example, 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 included ideas and terminology that were ill-understood and 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 fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. Some students seemed to be locked into previous questions they had done in class or questions from the specimen assessment materials.

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

Specific comments about 2A

The entry for this paper was almost 8,000 and responses were seen on all the set texts. This makes it possible to report comprehensively on student performance. The most popular texts were Keats and *The Great Gatsby*, though they were not the texts on which the best responses were

seen. On the whole students wrote better on 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 took them away 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 reveals 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 where Keats places 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 who 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 part 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 made good choices of other poems and there was some good work seen on *The Tramp Woman's Tragedy*, *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 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. Some, however, chose to write about bad luck in Hardy's life and ignored the poems altogether.

Comments on authorial method were often detached from arguments though 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, 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 well used 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 at 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 conflated isolation with tragic downfall or death and many just 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 this was not often 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.

The main issue with the weakest responses, however, 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 what various colours might mean. 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 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 on 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 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.

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.