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AS LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

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

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## Introductory Comments

After the experiences of the last two years with no examinations, it was good to return to something like normality this year and good to see students back and enjoying English Literature. Teachers and students need to be congratulated for their hard work in what have been very difficult circumstances.

Although the entry for AS was relatively small, examiners still reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers and students seemed to have enjoyed their AS experience of English Literature B. 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 and genre and it allows them to study and write about their four texts in discrete ways while still engaging 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, answered the questions set in a precise way and made good choices of textual detail in answering the questions. These students tended to integrate discussion of authorial method and, in the drama texts, really saw the plays as operating in the here and now.

When students didn't perform as well, it was often because they had insecure textual knowledge and because they did not focus on the questions set, sometimes because they had their own agendas. In Paper 2, it was often because they did not take the opportunity offered by the open book and use their texts wisely to select specific and appropriate sections of their texts for detailed analysis in support of their arguments. The students who struggled often tended to get caught up in contextual discussion, single word analysis (and there was more seen this year than before the pandemic) and debates not asked by this year's questions but often those of previous years. There was also a lot of comparison with other texts this year - often students' GCSE texts. This very rarely helped them and often took them off at a tangent.

In relation to contextual material that students attach to their answers, it is interesting that only some texts were heavily burdened by this. The Shakespeare answers were too often taken off course by the inclusion of assertions of what people would have thought and felt in Elizabethan and Jacobean England; in the *Importance of Being Earnest* answers there was much asserted about Victorian society and about Wilde's life; in the responses to *Death of a Salesman* and *The Great Gatsby* the American Dream often found its way into answers; the Keats question was beset by material about Romanticism and Keats' love life and the Hardy responses had a fair bit of material about Victorian England and Hardy's problems in his marriage - though on the whole this was less intrusive. Interestingly the responses to the other texts, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Wise Children*, *Emma*, *The Remains of the Day* and the two Poetry Anthologies were free of such material and students seemed to have benefited. There is surely a lesson here.

Marks were awarded for ideas directly related to the questions set, for development of those ideas and for the student's ability to structure their ideas and express themselves in a clear and appropriate way (AO1).

The key issues to focus on now are: the importance for students of knowing the texts and the essential business of answering the questions in all their details. Although some of the comments here have been said before, given that we have had a three year break, it is worth repeating them this year.

In past reports 'knowing the texts' has been flagged as being essential as has knowing the stories of their texts. It really does make a difference if students know the sequence of events in the tragic

and comedic stories as this gives students confidence and easily enables them to engage with the tragic and comedic trajectories. This is true of stories told in drama, prose or poetry. Facts in stories cannot be disputed (unless the writer invites this to happen or self consciously undermines what is presented as fact as is the case in some post modern texts). If students get the facts of the narratives right, they are in a good starting place and do not go off course in their thinking and writing because of a premise that has not been grasped.

Knowing the text, therefore, should be the first priority of students and the first priority of teaching. The stories that writers tell are fundamental to enjoyment and knowing what happens in those stories enables students to interpret them with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method. But the stories have to come first. There is little to be gained from selecting tragic or comedic aspects from the extracts in the drama and poetry texts if students have little idea of the story that is being told in those extract and how it relates to the story of the wider text. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers – which is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do. Students should be thinking about those stories and the messages within them while engaging with them as tragic or comedic texts.

The students who knew their texts well were, of course, in the best position to tackle the questions and it was easy to see the confidence they brought to the exams because they knew their texts. The very best answers were seen by those students who were thinking about which material would best support the arguments they were making, rather than those who tried to use whatever they could remember and then shape their argument around that.

### **The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details**

When students were equipped with secure textual knowledge they had the confidence to answer the questions that were set in all their details. For students to partially address questions or rewrite their own questions did not help them to achieve good marks. Answering the question is our mantra and it really is fundamental in examinations. Quite simply put: that is all students have to do.

### **Specific comments about 1A**

In Section A, slightly more responses were seen to *Othello* than to *King Lear*, although both Shakespeare plays in this section were well-represented. In Section B, the majority of students answered on *Death of a Salesman*. There were a very few responses to *Richard II* and nothing was seen on *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

### **Section A: Shakespeare**

The Shakespeare questions asked students to focus on a printed extract, something most students found helpful. Even though most of the answer is expected to be on the extract, it is important that students know the whole play well so that the extract can be precisely placed in terms of the plot. On a very basic level, it helped if students knew which characters are alive and which are dead at the point in the play from which the extract is taken and who knows what about Iago's or Edmund's plotting.

Many students included much extraneous contextual knowledge in their answers, which added little; a more productive use of their time when preparing for the exam would have been to ensure a detailed and precise knowledge of the plot of their chosen play.

The most successful answers were those that started with an overview of the extract, tracking the tragic trajectory of the passage and showing how this extract moves the tragedy of the play on.

The bullet points are designed to help students at the end of their first year of post-16 study by guiding them to the aspects of tragedy examiners feel are most significant in the given passage. Students who ignored the bullet points therefore, generally missed the most obvious opportunities to explore the extract.

This year saw an unwelcome reappearance of the over-use (and mis-use) of Aristotelian terms. In some responses words such as ‘catharsis’, ‘anagnorisis’, ‘hamartia’ and ‘peripeteia’ appeared in almost every sentence, often used with only a vague sense of their meaning. A genuine personal response to what is happening in the extract is much more important than trying to impress with technical terms, and students will show their understanding of the tragic genre by using terms such as ‘villain’, ‘victim’ and ‘tragic hero’ and by writing about events such as deaths and deceptions – something they will do automatically if they answer the set question.

### **Question 1: *Othello***

This was the more popular of the two questions and students who focused on both the bullet points and the extract, seeing the extract as a piece of drama with actions happening on stage, did well. There was plenty in the bullet points for students to write about: the pity of Desdemona’s pleas for mercy, Othello’s horrifying and cruel smothering of her, the timing of Emilia’s entrance bringing news of the failed attempt on Cassio’s life, the false hope of Desdemona’s revival and her final act of lying to protect Othello, to name but the most obvious. Students who explored some of these things in detail did well. Students who were less sensitive to the text as drama strove to make comments which fitted in to their pre-conceived ideas of tragedy or context; for example, several students said that Shakespeare had used dashes in Desdemona’s final lines because women in Jacobean times were ‘voiceless’ and she was fearful to speak, completely ignoring the fact that these lines are spoken with - literally - her dying breath. These students completely ignored the fact that the broken nature of her speech shows her physical inability to speak.

Those students who could see the role of Emilia here – in creating tension, in echoing the audience’s horror at the murder of Desdemona, in discovering Othello’s actions – wrote about her well; those who were determined to write about her as deviating from some mythical view of how a Jacobean woman was supposed to behave were less successful. In particular, those who compared her to Lady Macbeth or the witches because she was a ‘strong woman’ which was ‘unheard of’ did themselves no favours. There is no requirement to make reference to any texts other than the ones in the question on this paper and students who do so only detract from their argument.

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**Question 2: *King Lear***

This was slightly less popular than the *Othello* question, although many of the responses seen were excellent. The extract proved accessible, giving students plenty to write about in terms of Edmund's villainy and his manipulation of Edgar and Gloucester. Again, it was important that students considered the extract as drama, thinking about the actions as well as the words. For example, many students wrote effectively about the use of asides to show Edmund's duplicity when talking to Edgar and the stage business of him wounding himself in the arm. Those who ignored this action and wrote at length about the use of exclamation marks in Edmund's speech – something which an audience would not be aware of – without saying anything about what this suggests about his mood and how those lines might be delivered on stage, did not really see the drama of the extract. Some students said that Edmund's use of alliteration ('Here stood he in the dark, his sharp sword out') showed he was a villain because the 's' sounds sounded like a hissing snake. This is an extravagant and unlikely claim and students would have been much better to write about the very obvious signs of villainy Edmund displays – his joy in seeing an opportunity for malice; his confident lying to and manipulation of his brother and father.

Students generally knew the play well and had a great deal to say about Edmund and Gloucester. It is important to remember that their knowledge should be closely focused on the extract: students who wrote little (or sometimes nothing) about the extract but explained the whole of Edmund's plotting and downfall and Gloucester's fate in the rest of the play were seriously disadvantaging themselves. Many wrote about Gloucester's metaphorical blindness here and linked it to his literal blindness later in the play; this was a valid area for discussion, but where they went on to talk about Lear's metaphorical blindness too and more general parallels between the main plot and the sub-plot, they were moving too far from the extract.

**Section B****Question 3: *Richard II***

Relatively few students had studied *Richard II* but those who had generally answered the question well, engaging in interesting debates about Richard's mistakes and other possible reasons for his downfall.

**Question 4: *Death of a Salesman***

This was the most popular question on the paper with almost all students answering it. Once again, the best responses were those where students really thought about the statement in the question – in this case, to what extent the Loman family are trapped with no possibility of escape. There were some excellent answers where students thought about the family members as individuals, considering the different ways in which they could be said to be trapped and then thinking about the possibility of them escaping their situation. Many students made valid comments about the use of stage directions to show how the Loman's house is surrounded by oppressive buildings and how the lighting creates a claustrophobic atmosphere.

This text is the one most frequently plagued by extraneous contextual information and this year was no exception: while the American Dream may well have been relevant to this question, whole paragraphs of social and historical context detracted from the argument and added nothing. Many

students also sought to include critical views here, citing named critics. This rarely works well and there is no requirement to do it: if a student answers the question, all the assessment objectives will be met, including AO5, as the 'different interpretations' mentioned in this assessment objective will be covered by the student discussing their own ideas about the debate set up in the question.

**Question 5: *A Streetcar Named Desire***

No responses were seen to this question.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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