
AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

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

7716
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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 1B

Some delightful responses were seen on this paper this summer with many students really understanding and enjoying the Comedy genre. In Section A, responses were seen to both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*, with *The Taming of the Shrew* being the most popular Shakespeare play. In Section B, all students responded to the question on *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Section A: Shakespeare

The Shakespeare questions asked students to focus on a printed extract and explore the significance of aspects of dramatic comedy within it in relation to the play as a whole. Bullet points were provided to help students to shape their answers and most responded well to the help given. In Section A questions, it is expected that students tightly focus on the extract and base their writing on it, using details and quotations to support their ideas. Students should engage with the mini story that is being told in the extract and write about the precise details in terms of character and plot development at the point in the play from which the extract is taken. Students should closely read the extract and track carefully what is happening in it in terms of the comedic plot, the presentation of characters and the comedic aspects.

AQA training courses, previous examiner reports and mark schemes have provided good advice on how a secure overview of the extract can help students to anchor their ideas. When students see the comedic trajectory of the extract at the point of the play from where the extract is taken, they are able to use it as a springboard for their writing. Most who do so then go on to write confidently and purposefully. Although references should be made to the wider play, these should be brief and pertinent and should not take the student away from their exploration of the extract itself.

When students focused tightly on the extract and knew how to make meaningful connections to other parts of the play, they performed well. Those who were less successful often just spotted characters or aspects in the extract and then just wrote about them generally in relation to the whole play, often having little to say about the extract itself and often seeing characters as fixed entities with no potential for development. This summer students had been told in advance which Acts the extracts would be from and most - though not all - were well prepared and took advantage of this.

Question 1: *The Taming of the Shrew*

The extract from this play was from Act 3 scene 2, the day of Katherina's and Petruchio's wedding. It begins with the entrance of Baptista, Gremio, Katherina, Bianca, Tranio (disguised as Lucentio), and Lucentio (disguised as Cambio) who are awaiting the arrival of the groom, Petruchio. The stage is busy. Petruchio is late and there is some anxiety amongst the guests. Baptista feels embarrassed, worried that he might not appear at all. Katherina is angry, not only because she is being forced to marry a 'frantic fool' against her will, but now also facing humiliation because 'mad Petruchio' seems not to be turning up. Despite Tranio's reassurances that he will come, Katherina is mortified and exits in tears, followed by the other women. Her father is sympathetic. As she leaves, Biondello enters with the dramatic news that Petruchio 'is coming'. However, rather than bringing relief, even this is disturbing as Petruchio is reportedly dressed bizarrely in mismatching clothes and is riding an old, feeble horse.

Before this extract, Petruchio had made his way to Padua in order to 'wive it well' and had been matched with a very reluctant Katherina. After the scene, although no-one believes Biondello's shocking news, those awaiting the wedding are all horrified to see that Biondello is right: Petruchio arrives unashamedly with his equally strangely dressed servant and insists that he goes to church to marry Katherina. He has his will, insults the priest, drinks the communion wine and takes the mortified Katherina to his home.

There were many comedic aspects in the extract for students to focus on and many wrote confidently about the anticipation of Petruchio's entrance and how he upturns conventional expectations of weddings. Many excellent answers were seen on this text and it was pleasing to see so much engagement and thinking. There was good discussion of the different characters in the extract and how they all contribute to the tension and the comedy. The strongest answers were seen by students who worked through the bullets in a thoughtful way and there was some exceptionally good work seen on the differences between Katherina's misery and humiliation and Petruchio's comic intention to humiliate. Many students were sympathetic towards Katherina and there was some sensitive discussion of gender issues here. Several students wrote incisively about the roles of Baptista and Biondello and of the entrances and exits including the anticipated entrance of Petruchio. The students who knew the play well were able to connect the extract meaningfully to Petruchio's behaviour at the wedding and his later treatment of Katherina. These students understood the comedic narrative and they used relevant detail from the text.

It was good to see many students relevantly using quotations which they had clearly and accurately learned. The strongest responses were by students who not only knew the text well but also understood how Shakespeare's dramatic methods contribute to meanings. There was much excellent integrated comment on structure and on Biondello's witty wordplay. When students did not perform so well it was generally because their knowledge of the play was insecure and because they did not really understand the extract. These students tended not to use the text and often got muddled in terms of the plot. Some merged the extract with other parts of the play in a confused way. In the weaker responses the student's writing often lacked clarity

Question 2: *Twelfth Night*

In this question students were asked to focus on an extract from Act 3 scene 3. In this part of the play the focus is on Sebastian who, like Viola, has survived the shipwreck and who, the audience suspects, will inevitably cause comic confusion and surprise when he is reunited with his twin sister later in the play. Significantly neither sibling knows the other is safe. Sebastian is with his friend Antonio who clearly cares for him and wants to be with him. However when Sebastian says that he wants to look around the town at old memorials, Antonio says that that would be too dangerous for him as he has bad history in Illyria as he once fought at sea against Orsino and if he is now discovered, his life will be threatened. The friends agree to part for an hour, Antonio giving Sebastian his purse so that he can buy anything he desires. They plan to meet later at an Inn, The Elephant.

After the extract, there is confusion about the purse when Antonio comes across Viola, disguised as the male Cesario, whom he mistakes for Sebastian.

Students seem to have enjoyed this extract. Those who engaged with the extract's narrative were able to make some thoughtful comments on Sebastian whose first appearance in the play is at this point. There was plenty of insightful comment by those students who saw the potential for confusion because of the twins who are each unaware of the other's survival. There was also some really good commenting on the similarities and differences between Viola and Sebastian, Viola who has been seen since the play's exposition and Sebastian who only appears now. Some students commented on their both being optimistic characters, both not weighed down by their misfortunes but ready to 'move on'. Some commented on the difference between them with Viola's resourcefulness being contrasted with Sebastian's dependence on Antonio.

Some good comments were also made about Antonio (the subject of the second bullet) and students tended to sympathise with him because of his generosity of spirit and the love he clearly has for Sebastian. There was some thoughtful discussion by some very able students of Antonio's troubled backstory and his fear for his safety in the dramatic present. This fear was argued to be evidence of a darker side to Illyria, and students who took this view challenged the notion that Illyria is just a representation of the green world. Some students also saw the danger of the dark streets for Antonio as a contrast to the twelfth night festivities that are taking place indoors. Many students commented on the possible homosexual subtext of Antonio's words and behaviour and there was some sensitive and sensible discussion of this.

Students who produced weaker answers generally had insecure textual knowledge or had not read the extract closely.

Section B

Question 4: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

All students responded to the question on this text and the full range of marks was seen in the responses. There was some really good work seen and many students wrote incisively and interestingly about the question and the play. Students were asked to explore the significance of secrets and their discovery to the comedy of the play. The students who performed well were able to identify a number of secrets and develop ideas about their discovery in terms of the comedy of the play. Many students wrote confidently about Wilde's structuring the play around the secret of Jack's identity and many saw the discovery of this secret as being significant in terms of the play's happy resolution. Other secrets which students identified and explored well were the secret of Bunburyism, the secret of the double identities of Jack and Algernon and their appropriation of the name Ernest, the secret feelings of Gwendolen and Cecily's in terms of their love interest and the secret Miss Prism holds about the baby in the handbag which was left at a railway station twenty-eight years ago.

In the best responses there was good focus on Wilde's dramatic methods, particularly his use of structure and word play in relation to secrets and their discovery, with several students commenting on the witty over polished dialogue which hides secrets. The students who struggled with this question often did not focus sharply on secrets or did not know the text well enough to give examples of secrets. These students often were unable to develop their ideas. There were also a number of students who chose not to write about the play but instead wrote about Victorian society and Wilde's homosexuality. It would help if students were told not to write in detail about Wilde's life but to focus on the play.

Questions 3 and 5

There were no responses to these questions which was a pity, but not surprising since Wilde is always very popular.

Looking forward

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material regardless of the question.

The best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read. Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level reports on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2023.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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