
AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2A – Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Tragedy
Report on the Examination

7716
June 2022

Version: 1.0

Further copies of this Report are available from aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2022 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

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 to 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 in the next part of the report 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 students 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 them 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 factual uncertainty 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. If a wrong fact becomes the basis for discussion, it is clear that everything that follows will get the student into difficulty.

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. In Specification B there are no hidden requirements, no guessing games that students have to partake in about what else might be required. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question.

Specific comments about 2A

Responses were seen to all the questions. Keats and Hardy were the most popular poetry texts and *The Great Gatsby* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were the most popular prose texts. Even though there were fewer students answering on the Poetry Anthology and *The Remains of the Day*, there were still several answers on these texts and generally the questions were answered well. Good answers were seen across all texts when there was tight focus on the question set and when students had good textual knowledge. Although students generally wrote better about authorial method when they were writing about poetry, it was pleasing to see many students also making sensible integrated comments about narrative method in their answers to the prose texts. It was particularly pleasing to see the engagement with narrative voices and aspects of structure and settings. The questions remind students of the requirement to include analysis of authorial method. However, the comments on method must be made relevant to the argument being made. Little credit was given for detached discussion of method which had no relation to the questions.

Section A Poetry

When answering the questions on poetry, students have to engage with printed extracts. This means that there are no short cuts when studying the poetry text as students have to be prepared for an extract from any of the poems in the selection. The extracts are chosen to help students to engage with the questions set and the extract gives them an anchor for their arguments. Most students find the extracts helpful in this respect and work well with them in terms of structuring their response. However, being able to work with the extract does depend on students having good knowledge of the poetry text itself. This is why so much emphasis has been placed in the introductory comments on students knowing their texts really well. Given that this is an open book exam, students can also look again at the poem from which the extract comes and briefly contextualise it. However, if students do not know their texts well they tend to struggle. Some students by-passed the extract altogether.

Apart from working with the extract, students were then required to range more widely around their poetry text for material to support their views. This was where choice became crucial. If students knew the text in its entirety they could choose judiciously. Those who only knew one or two poems tended to use them and shoehorn them into the question regardless of whether they were appropriate or not.

The questions also asked students to 'analyse closely' authorial method. When this was well done, students were integrating comments about method into their arguments in a thoughtful way. Focusing on voices, settings and structure tended to work well. When students focused on single word analysis, often on the use of pronouns, they seldom moved their arguments forward.

Question 1: Keats

In this question students were asked to explore the view that in Keats' tragic stories women can be admired regardless of whether they are villains or victims. An extract was provided from the early part of *Lamia* where Lamia transforms from a snake to a woman and where the narrator, in dazed admiration, describes the dazzling beauty of Lamia's appearance. The key word in the question is 'admired' and admiration could have been discussed in terms of the physical appearance of women or of their characters or of their behaviours. Students could also have considered whether women in Keats' tragic stories can be admired from the perspective of narrators, characters within the poems or in terms of readers; they could have responded from an entirely personal stance. The students who performed well engaged with this debate and made good use of the extract. There

was good discussion of admiration that could be felt for the beauty of la belle dame, the innocence of Madeline, the determination and cleverness of Lamia and the devotion of Isabella. When students did not perform well it was usually because they got into a debate about whether women were victims or villains (which was not what the question was asking) and ‘admired’ was often ignored.

As in previous years, there was a lot of material on Keats’ relationship with Fanny Brawne. For most students knowing biographical material is a hindrance as they feel that they have to write about it and it takes them away from the poetry, the tragic stories and the question.

Question 2: Hardy

The Hardy question was popular and there were some very good answers. Many students had studied Hardy’s poetry alongside *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and they seemed to have enjoyed the experience of looking at an author’s work in two different ways.

The question asked students to explore the view that in Hardy’s poetry, it is women who cause suffering and unhappiness. The extract given was from *The Newcomer’s Wife*. The extract provided key material for the debate and students could have focused on the characters within the poem who condemn the wife for her deception and promiscuousness and/or the narrator who is more critical of social attitudes and the gossips. Many students, who knew the poem well, discussed the complexity of the views within it. The choice of the second poem was also crucial in enabling students to focus clearly on the debate. Many chose *A Sunday Morning’s Tragedy* and *A Trampwoman’s Tragedy* and these worked well. Those who chose *The Going* were also able to get to the heart of the question. When students did not perform well, it was usually because they did not know the poems well enough or when the choice for the second poem did not work.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology Tragedy

There were several responses to this text and it was pleasing to see students engaging with it and making good choices in constructing their arguments. In this question students were given an extract from *Miss Gee* and asked to explore the view that in the Poetry Anthology: Tragedy the tragic figures are ordinary, unexceptional people. There was generally good discussion of the extract and the wider poem. Many students were sympathetic to Miss Gee in relation to her ordinariness and her tragic experiences. Some argued against the question suggesting that although Miss Gee is ordinary in her life she is extraordinarily in her death in terms of her sarcoma and her being used for medical research. The choice of the second poem helped students to consolidate their answers. Those who wanted to counter the question wisely chose the Extract from *Paradise Lost* or *The Death of Cuchulain*. Those who supported the given proposition chose *Death in Leamington* and *Jessie Cameron*. Some good answers were seen when *Tithonus* was discussed, an ordinary man who became extraordinary but whose tragedy is that he wanted to be ordinary and to be allowed to die an ordinary, unexceptional death.

Section B: Prose

When writing responses to their prose texts students needed to look carefully at the questions, decide on a line of direction and then decide which parts of their novel would best help them to construct their argument. Given that students had their texts in front of them, they needed to quickly find key parts of the text that would enable them to produce a detailed evidenced argument. As with poetry, the choices that students made in selecting appropriate parts of the text on which to base their arguments was fundamental.

Question 4: *The Great Gatsby*

In this question students were asked to explore the view that 'George Wilson is not a victim: he is weak, deceiving and vengeful'. Although *The Great Gatsby* was a very popular choice on this paper, it was surprising how many students did not know the text well enough to construct a clear answer or to use their texts to find appropriate material on George Wilson. Several students did not know who George Wilson is and some wrote about Tom Buchanan and called him George. It seemed that those students were not using their open book at all. Those students who wrote good answers were really thinking about the presentation of George Wilson and how, although he is the killer of Gatsby, he is a casualty of the American Dream and a tragic victim. When students used their texts for evidence, they could mount a good personal response to the question. Many wrote about his treatment of Myrtle or her treatment of him as they constructed their arguments and this worked well. Many saw him as a victim of Tom and also of Nick Carraway who does not present him sympathetically.

Question 5: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

This was a popular text and on the whole students seemed to have good knowledge of it. In this question students were asked to explore the view that journeys undertaken by Tess or those close to her always intensify her suffering. Success depended on students knowing their texts and being able to identify journeys made and then discuss their impact on the tragic heroine. Tess' journeys to Trantridge and The Chase were the journeys discussed most, but many students wrote about Tess' journeys to Talbothays, Flintcomb-Ash and Stonehenge in a thoughtful way. These were good choices, as was Angel's journey to Brazil. Some students wrote successfully about Tess' life journey in terms of her suffering and these students were really thinking about their responses. In writing about journeys students were able to engage with the structural placement of these journeys and this led to integrated discussion of authorial method.

Question 6: *The Remains of the Day*

Although there were fewer students writing about this text than those writing about *Gatsby* and *Tess*, a number of answers were seen and these were generally very good. The responses were often interesting and showed real engagement. Students seemed to enjoy writing about the novel. The question asked students to explore the view that Stevens is a tragic victim whom readers pity. Several students clearly sympathised with Stevens, seeing him as a victim of his upbringing and the aristocracy. Some students were more critical, blaming him for his tragic blindness and his self deception. Most students were able to comment on how Ishiguro's authorial methods influence reader response in terms of whether or not Stevens can be pitied.

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 report 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.