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AS LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2B – Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Comedy  
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 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. 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. When students do this their arguments lack direction and often become chaotic.

**Specific comments about 2B**

Although the entry for this paper was less than 200, some interesting responses were seen and the questions were clearly accessible across the ability range. It was good to see answers on all the prose texts and two of the poetry texts. Most students seemed to have managed their time well and they completed answers on both texts. They seemed to have really understood the comedic genre and enjoyed reading texts through this lens. Some students did not seem to be making the most of their open books and it might be worthwhile for centres to develop strategies to help students to use their open books more effectively.

**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 construct their arguments and most students do find them helpful when they understand and have good knowledge of the poem from which the extract comes and when they understand the extract 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. Those who understood the extract well could confidently use it as a base for their arguments. The extracts are chosen specifically to provide a line into the question, to support the view or to provide material for a significance question. If students used the extract thoughtfully and critically, then they were on their way to achieving a good mark.

Apart from working with the extract, students were then required to range more widely around the same poem from which the extract was taken or refer to another poem in the collection as well. In making choices, either from the same poem or from different poems, students needed to think about what would best support their ideas in relation to the question and not force a best liked or best known poem into the answer.

**Question 1: The Nun's Priest's Tale**

There were no responses to this text but if centres are thinking of offering Chaucer in future examinations - and if they do they will see how fruitful it is for comedy - then a word on this year's question will be given here. The question asked students to explore the view that Chauntecleer is presented as foolish and not at all admirable. Here the focus was on the comedic aspects of foolishness and not being admirable. The extract provided evidence of Chauntecleer's behaving foolishly and of the narrator's comic despairing over that foolishness. Certainly, the narrator presents Chauntecleer as not admirable here. However, the cockerel could be seen as admirable in other parts of the poem and there is also evidence elsewhere of more of Chauntecleer's stupidity.

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**Question 2: Poetry Anthology: Comedy**

The Anthology is a very popular text and students seem to enjoy engaging with the different comedic voices and the range of comedic aspects that are contained in the collection. In this year's question, students needed to explore the view that the poems in the Anthology are more disturbing than amusing. The given extract was from *A Satirical Elegy* and it provided much to work with in terms of the question. Some students focused on the subject matter of the death of the General as being disturbing while others focused more on the corruption and arrogance of the General himself while he lived. Many students agreed that the fact that Swift writes a 'satire' makes the poem funny and not serious and there was some good understanding here of how comedy operates. Students seemed comfortable ranging around the wider poem to support their ideas and there was plenty for them to work with whatever their views. There were a number of different poems chosen as the second poem, and on the whole, these were well chosen to support students' arguments. Good choices for being more disturbing than funny were *Sunny Prestatyn* and *The Flea*. Several students chose *Tam o Shanter* but struggled to make a case for why it is disturbing. The students who chose this poem to argue that the poems in the collection are more funny than serious fared better. There was some particularly insightful discussion of *Sunny Prestatyn* in terms of its being disturbing. Students really seemed to be engaged with the ideas in the poem and expressed strong personal views. It proved to be a good choice. Authorial method was generally handled well in the responses to both *A Satirical Elegy* and the second poem.

**Question 3: Betjeman selection**

Several students answered on Betjeman and they seemed to have enjoyed writing about the speakers being made weak by their desires. There was generally good understanding of the extract from *The Licorice Fields at Pontefract* and students embraced the lightheartedness of the poem, linking it to the weakness of the speaker who is smitten with his 'red-haired robber chief'. There was some good analysis of the speaker's voice and Betjeman's choice of language to show the speaker's weakness. Other poems that worked well were *Senex* and *Late-Flowering Lust*.

**Section B: Prose****Question 4: *Emma***

*Emma* was the most popular choice of prose text and there were some very good answers written by those students who knew the novel well and could range around it for details about the significance of misunderstandings. Many students focused on the misunderstandings caused by Emma's matchmaking and there was some good discussion of Emma's misunderstanding of Elton's intentions towards her and of his misunderstanding of her promoting Harriet Smith as his potential wife. Students seemed to be thinking well about misunderstandings and how they contribute to the novel's comedy. Some very good comments were made about misunderstandings in terms of the novel's structure and its romance and many wrote about Emma's misunderstanding of Mr Knightley and his misunderstanding of her, misunderstandings which are ironed out in the comic resolution when the two marry. The students who didn't perform well were those whose

textual knowledge was insecure and those who were not using their open books to support their ideas.

### **Question 5: *Small Island***

There were fewer students doing this text than in 2019. The question asked students to explore the view that the novel ends optimistically. Those who answered focused on the issue of baby Michael and his adoption by Hortense and Gilbert. Many saw this as an optimistic end for the child and for the couple. However, many countered this by focusing on the sadness of Queenie at losing her baby and still being married to someone she does not love. Students tended to integrate good comments on method by focusing on the voices of the narrators and thinking about structural issues in relation to the novel's ending.

### **Question 6: *Wise Children***

Rather fewer students responded to this text than were seen in 2019 but those who did seemed to have enjoyed it. The question asked students to explore the view that in *Wise Children* men are presented as being ridiculous and silly. Given the number of male characters in the novel there was plenty of material for students to work with. Most students seemed to know their text well and there was very good discussion of Peregrine and Gorgeous George in relation to the question. Ideas were often linked to the carnivalesque spirit of the novel and of the voice of Dora, the novel's narrator.

### **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.