
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

Aspects of Tragedy: 7717/1A
Report on the Examination

7717
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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 are congratulated for their hard work in what have been very difficult circumstances.

Consistent with national patterns in students studying English Literature, the A-level entry for Specification B was slightly lower than in 2019 but the entry was still healthy and examiners reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers. Students seemed to have enjoyed their A-level experience of reading texts through the lens of genre. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the three required answers on each paper. The best responses were by students who wrote succinctly, knew their texts exceptionally well and therefore made good choices about what to include and what to omit and then answered the questions set in a precise way. 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 so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely 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 on all papers often tended to get caught up in contextual discussion, single word analysis and debates not asked by this year's questions but often those of previous years.

In relation to contextual material that students imposed onto their answers, it was interesting that only responses to some texts were heavily burdened by this. The Shakespeare answers were too often taken off course by the inclusion of assertions about what people would have thought and felt in Elizabethan and Jacobean England; in the answers where *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* were used, there was much generalised and often unrelated material about Victorian society and about Wilde's life; when Keats was the studied text for Questions 7 and 8 of the Tragedy paper students' writing was too often beset by material about Romanticism and Keats' love life. Material about Romanticism was also attached to the responses to Blake, Coleridge and the unseen extract on the Crime paper. Other responses to texts which suffered from extraneous contextual material were: *The Kite Runner* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and there was some unfocused material on sub-genre in answers to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Examiners noted that there was less baggage when students were writing about The Poetry Anthologies, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Emma*, *Harvest*, *Atonement*, *When Will There Be Good News?* and *Brighton Rock*. In their responses to these texts, students seemed free to simply focus on the question and drive their answers forward without hesitation.

The rest of the introductory comments this year will focus on three key issues: the importance of knowing the texts, the essential business of answering the questions set and AO1. Other issues raised in previous reports remain relevant though and it would be advisable for teachers to revisit those reports.

The importance of students knowing the texts

In past reports 'knowing the texts' has been flagged as being essential, but perhaps something more specific that teachers could ensure their students focus on is knowing the facts of what happens in the stories they are studying and the sequence of events. 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 of *Atonement*). For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously. In stories the facts are the events that are shown and the actions of the characters, what the characters say and do, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to and where things happen. If students get the facts of the narrative 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 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, and how events are sequenced, enables students to interpret the texts with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method in a confident and meaningful way. But the stories have to come first. There is little point writing about intradiegetic narrators if students haven't got inside the stories that the narrators are telling. There is also little point in writing about genre elements if students haven't grasped the story that is being told. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers – which is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do.

In this specification it is clearly a requirement that students read their texts through the lens of genre, but the texts still have to come first. Students shouldn't just be focusing on knowledge of 'aspects' or 'elements' of the genre. In the same way, although the specification places much emphasis on different ways of interpreting texts and how authors shape meanings, interpretations and discussion of authorial methods have to emerge from sound knowledge of the text and the stories being told. It is better for A-level students if their ideas come from within the text rather than without.

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

The students who knew their texts well were clearly in the best position to tackle the questions. When students were equipped with secure textual knowledge then 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: that is all students have to do. 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.

AO1

AO1 skills are also essential. Clear and fluent expression help students to communicate effectively, so time spent during an A level course refining phrasing is time well spent. Students are at liberty to adopt a formal style or a lively one – sometimes the personal, almost journalistic voice works well. But, however they choose to voice their thoughts, it must be clear what they mean. For most students, it is better to go for clarity in an exam situation rather than trying to impress with pseudo-impressive words which are often misapplied. Clarity and communication can also be aided when students have good control of their sentences. For most students it is best not to write sentences which have multiple clauses. It is also worth stressing that the very best responses are carefully sequenced. Therefore it is best for students to think and plan before writing commences. Deciding an angle, organising the points to be made in their argument and selecting which parts of the text to use, are sensible things to do.

Specific comments about 1A: Aspects of Tragedy

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing and there were many superb responses to the questions. Many students focused well on what they were asked to do and there was plenty of evidence of students really thinking about texts, the relationship of those texts with the tragic genre and the questions being asked.

Those students who performed less well were those whose textual knowledge was insecure, those who chose not to answer the questions set and those who did not support their ideas with detailed material from the texts. Given that this paper is closed book, students needed to have spent time acquiring excellent textual knowledge to draw from effectively in the construction of their arguments. This is especially true of the Shakespeare text which is used in both Sections A and B and accounts for two thirds of the marks for this paper.

There was also a problem with those students who incorporated into their answers generalised (and largely made up) contextual material, often writing at length about it and often writing about it with little historical understanding. Many students assumed that Shakespeare's audiences all thought the same, were all racist, were all misogynist, were all conservative. This is strange given the nature of Shakespeare's plays themselves and of the times in which he wrote. Shakespeare's England was full of people who had different views, as reflected in the plays.. So, in terms of background, the only thing we can say with any authority is that there was no accepted, common Jacobean or Elizabethan attitude or point of view. Just as we wouldn't say that everyone in an audience watching a play today has the same opinion about issues such as gender, sexuality, race, power, religion, family, duty, identity and justice, it is wrong to assume that Shakespeare's audiences were any different and had homogenous views.

Some students seemed aware of this and took up the opportunity to explore what values characters stand for, what principles are at stake for them. These students saw the plays as dynamic rather than static. When characters were discussed in terms of their values and not just their characteristics students' ideas were often interesting.

Sections A and B (Shakespeare)

On the whole most students had good knowledge of their Shakespeare play though they did not always use their knowledge wisely. *Othello* was by far the most popular choice, but several centres offered *King Lear*. It is fair to say that although excellent answers were seen to all questions, the responses to *King Lear* were slightly stronger than those to *Othello* with less forcing of interpretations into answers and less obstructive cramming of irrelevant contextual material. The main issue with the less focused answers on *Othello* was the inclusion of writing about Othello's race, regardless of relevance.

Section A

This year students had been told which act the extract would be taken from (which for both plays was Act 1) and therefore they should have been able to focus well on the dramatic, narrative and tragic events in a tight and confident way as they explored the extract's significance.

Some excellent answers were seen by those students who located the extract precisely, wrote about its dramatic significance to the tragic trajectory of the play and explored in detail what precisely is happening and being said in the extract itself - as if it is happening now as we watch and read. These students quoted well from the extract and used it in a way to advance their ideas. When students securely engaged with the story of the extract and saw it in relation to what happens next, they were in a good position to explore the significance of tragic aspects that are evident there - or are emerging. Although there is a difference between the extract question and the unseen question on Paper 2, in that students are required to make links with the wider play in the *Othello* and *King Lear* questions, the strategy that students develop in Paper 2 responses could profitably be employed by students answering the extract questions on Paper 1. On Paper 2, students really do work with the extract and see its internal shape and story. If students had the same approach here and made some relevant connections to the wider play, they would fare much better than just using the extract as a springboard for spotting aspects of tragedy or writing about characters in a general way because they appear or are mentioned in the extract. When students just picked out aspects of tragedy or honed in on a character who is in the extract and wrote about them in a fixed way, they got boxed in, often unable to see that characters and ideas develop and change through the course of the drama. The focus should be on the story of the extract and how the characters in it behave at that particular point in the play.

As always, where students wrote about the play on the stage rather than the page, responses were more engaging. For example, writing about the problematic intimacy of Roderigo and Iago on stage or the impact of the confrontation between Lear and Cordelia was more successful than writing about Shakespeare's use of the word 'spinster' or 'tush' or 'dragon' and what these words might mean in isolation. Most students who focused on single word analysis found it very difficult to engage with the vibrant dramatic narratives of either the extract or the play. So, it is best to tell students not to focus on the discussion of single words.

Question 1

The extract from *Othello* was from Act 1 scene 1 and is the opening of the play. This is Shakespeare's introduction to the tragedy. What we see are two characters who are arguing; something underhand seems to have been going on regarding the syphoning of money away from

Roderigo by Iago and Roderigo is unhappy. It is only later we learn that money has been extorted by Iago to apparently woo Desdemona on Roderigo's behalf. Shakespeare hints here that Roderigo has more money than sense (something which is again developed later), but at this point Roderigo is cross that his friend has taken his money. As Iago fends off the criticism, and tries to explain himself he presents himself as a man with an acute sense of having been wronged, overlooked in terms of promotion, despite having the backing and voices of three great ones of the city. This grievance of not getting promotion is one that many theatre goers could be familiar with, and is not exactly evidence of Iago's being a demi-devil at this point in the play. The little drama that is taking place in the extract is that Iago is trying very hard to win back Roderigo's trust by explaining his feelings of hatred and jealousy towards Othello and Cassio, telling Roderigo stories of what has led to those feelings.

The students who engaged with the drama that was before them as something that is happening now were well on the way to achieving a good mark. Some students were able to see that although Othello is not physically present in this opening extract that he is made real to the audience through Iago's description and through Iago's voice. Interestingly, Iago gives Othello presence and it is Iago who speaks Othello's first words as he reenacts the promotion dispute that happened in the play's past when three great ones of the city vouched for Iago and Othello proudly dismissed them: 'For certs' said he 'I have already chose my officer'.

Those students who did not focus on the extract's story and saw everything as foreshadowing something else often moved so far from the extract that they lost themselves in writing about other parts of the play. While it is true to say that a seed is being planted in the extract which will eventually lead to the tragic loading of the bed in Act 5, that is three hours of theatre time away and several days of the *Othello* world time. It is not taking into account how characters change and develop, how they respond to situations and events. It is moving from A to Z too quickly and not seeing how narratives develop incrementally. When students argued that Iago is the Machiavellian villain and devil incarnate at the start of the play, then they were not pausing to think about what is actually happening in the extract, and wondering, perhaps, if Iago is being presented as having a point. The students whose line of argument was Iago is a villain from the word go seemed to ignore Iago's later confession that he is making things up as he goes along. Those who saw him as an emergent villain often produced more incisive responses.

Reading closely is obviously crucial in extract questions. When students were reading closely here, they could also see that Roderigo is not a simple pushover, not the 'fool' the character studies set him down as. In this extract he is actually resisting Iago, challenging what he says. While it is true that Roderigo doesn't understand the speech that continues directly after the extract, the complexity of which confuses him into an alliance, in this extract he challenges Iago with some robustness.

Those students who pinned down the story of the extract, engaging with its nuances carefully and thoughtfully did well. Those who just plunged in picking out aspects (like Iago's villainy, Roderigo's victimisation, Othello's race and misogyny) and then wrote generally about those ideas outside of the extract produced less secure answers. Rather surprisingly, given that students were told to prepare for Act 1, several did not know that this extract is the first words of the play. Several thought that it comes after the scene with Brabantio - the scene that many clearly would have preferred to write about and about which many of them did.

Question 2

The extract from *King Lear* was from Act 1 scene 1, and it centres on the final part of Lear's love test in view of his entire court. Here he rewards Regan, who like Gonerill, uses her glib and oily art to obtain her third of the kingdom, and then invites Cordelia to speak and draw a third more opulent than her sisters. Cordelia's reply of 'nothing' fractures the ceremony and Lear's composure - although at first he does attempt to steer her into saying something more palatable to him, giving her multiple chances to change her mind. He invites her to mend her speech, threatening that nothing will come of nothing. When she refuses to stroke her father's ego, questioning why her sisters have husbands if they say they love Lear all, Lear explodes in an avalanche of hostility, swearing by the cosmos as he disclaims all his paternal care, divorcing himself from his daughter. After the extract, there is of course no abatement of Lear's anger and he banishes both his daughter and her defender Kent, who tries to come between the dragon and his wrath.

The scene is tense and then explosive. Students who visualised the confrontation and were able to engage with the extract as drama were able to score good marks. Those students focused on the build up to Cordelia's public statement, drawing on her earlier asides where she agonises over how she will reply. Many students commented on the anticipation, the growing tension and the silence as Cordelia's single word reply stuns both the stage and theatre audiences. Some excellent comments were made by students who wrote about Lear's rage and the violence of his language. Some linked it to the awful love test where he pits his children against each other in a horrible competition. There was also some incisive commenting on Cordelia's bare language in contrast to the heavily rhetorical and extravagant speeches of her sisters and her father. Much was said about Cordelia as a victim, though there was also some debate about whether she could have pleased her father more. The students who were really thinking and reading carefully did not just provide a set of character points about Cordelia's being pure, loving, good, Christ-like, honest, true, kind, loyal, faithful, respectful, devoted, etc. Some argued persuasively that she is just young and naive. Some posited ideas about her not being good, kind and loving at all. Some suggested that she is sullen and cold - 'I love your majesty according to my bond' - and some focused on her rather holier-than-thou attitude in relation to her sisters. Some students saw her as defiant and even hypocritical (she claims that love cannot be measured and yet wants to give her husband ; 'half her love', 'half [her] care and duty'). Some also saw her as selfish, one who has to speak her truth, whatever the consequences. And the consequences couldn't be more appalling. Those who really engaged with the extract focused on the disaster that unfolds because of what Cordelia says - and because of what she doesn't say. Some students argued that what happens on stage is a family row on a grand scale.

When students struggled it was usually because they did not know the play well enough and did not focus their discussions on the detail of the extract. Some students moved away from the extract too soon and wrote about other parts of the play sometimes with only a loose connection to the extract, for example, Lear's being cast out on the heath because he banishes his good daughter.

In both Question 1 and 2, the best responses were by those students who focused tightly on the extract, saw its dramatic narrative and made brief and valid connections with the rest of the play. When apt connections to the wider play were made, they did not take the student away from the extract but enhanced points that were made about it. In the very good answers the extract was always central.

Section B

The Section B tasks required different skills from students. Here students had to debate a given critical view about their Shakespeare play or, in the case of Questions 4 and 6, explore the significance of marriage in *Othello* and the storm and the heath in *King Lear* in relation to the tragedy as a whole. Students performed well in this section when they took ownership of the debate and hit the question head on.

When students wrote clearly and responded to all the terms of the question they were quickly moving through Band 3.

Students who organised their ideas into clear arguments did well. Their paragraphs were connected and their arguments moved forward. Several students' responses were shapeless and in such cases students tended to just produce some writing about the play or about pride, marriage, greatness and majesty or the storm and heath in a rather formless way.

The significance questions were generally well handled.

Question 3

Question 3 invited students to focus on Othello's pride and to debate the view that his pride ennoble him rather than diminishes him. The key to success here was understanding what pride is, being able to identify where it is displayed dramatically, show how it manifests itself and how it shapes the behaviour of the protagonist. Only when this was done could students discuss whether that pride ennoble or diminishes him. Those students who scored good marks often focused on the pride shown by Othello in Act 1 where he makes much of his achievements in war and where he boasts about Desdemona's falling in love with him because of the dangers he had passed. There was also good discussion of Othello's pride in his manhood, pride that is exploited by Iago, pride that leads to Othello's violent behaviour towards his wife as he fears the loss of his reputation. Many good responses also focused on the pride that drives Othello's murder of Desdemona when he asserts himself as a justicer who will save other men and several students wrote about Othello's pride in his final speech, when he reminds his audience of the services he has done the state before he takes his life to try to rescue his reputation.

Those students who struggled didn't write about pride or they used the word but didn't refer closely to the text to show Othello's pride in operation. Some just wrote about Othello's being noble or being diminished as a tragic hero because of his behaviour.

Question 4

Question 4 asked students to explore the significance of marriage to the tragedy of the play. There were some very good answers to this question by those students who focused securely on marriage and teased out a number of significances. Some looked at the significance to the tragic plot, some to the significance of the tragic aspects of death, betrayal and power. There was much that could have been discussed and was discussed by those who were really thinking about the significance of marriage in this domestic tragedy.

When students did not perform well they often simply wrote about women in a general way - sometimes about Bianca. There was also much from Act 1 about Iago's and Rodrigo's calling up of Brabantio to tell him of Desdemona's elopement and while this was relevant, several students

got so caught up in discussing Othello's race and attitudes towards it that they lost all sight of marriage.

Question 5

Question 5 invited students to say to what extent they agreed with the view that although Lear gives away his kingly power he retains his majesty and greatness. There was much to engage students in this question and there were some very good arguments against the given view. Those students suggested that from the moment that Lear decides to abdicate and give away his kingly power he is not majestic and can hardly be seen as retaining any sort of greatness or majesty given that he uncontrollably loses his temper, banishes two of the people who most care for him, backs the wrong children, is cast out from their royal palaces, becomes mad, is rescued by the French forces and then dies of heartbreak after being reunited with and then seeing his beloved Cordelia hanged. Some good answers were also seen by students who offered a more nuanced view, arguing that although Lear is not great or majestic when he loses power, he does restore some when he recognises his kinship with the beggars on the heath and realises and apologises for his blindness to their needs. A few students agreed with the proposition and focused on Lear's magnificent presence which is recognised by all who come into contact with him and is lauded by the disguised Kent ('you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master').

When students did not produce good responses it was generally because their textual knowledge was not secure enough to support their ideas or enable them to construct an argument.

Question 6

Fewer students answered Question 6. Those who knew the play well wrote about the significance of the heath and storm in relation to the plot, in relation to Lear's character development and his fall as a tragic hero, in relation to the key tragic aspects of suffering, betrayal and power, and in relation to positives emerging with the building of relationships with Edgar and the blinded Gloucester. Some argued convincingly of how the storm and the heath enhance the play's pessimism. Some students wrote about the storm as a metaphor for Lear's madness and that worked well.

Section C

In this section students had to manage two texts in relation to their chosen question. Some excellent answers were seen to both questions when students were choosing wisely, thinking about what exactly was being asked and then using their texts to construct well supported ideas and arguments.

Students wrote best when they hit the questions head on and did not try to over-complicate their approaches. Given that students have to manage their two texts in about 45 minutes they really do need to get to the point of the question quickly and make selections from the stories told that enable them to drive their arguments forward. Here, as elsewhere, it was best when students saw the texts as narratives. It did not help when particular interpretations of the text as a whole got in the way of the specific question and prevented student from engaging with what is actually being asked. This was sometimes the case when 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' was used, when students were often so keen on offering a feminist reading of the text that the question was lost in the pursuit of that reading.

Question 7

This question was the most popular of the two and it was done well by students who quickly identified the villains who are far from good and then thought about whether or not the villains are evil. Students who performed well and understood what a tragic villain is made choices that immediately worked for them and enabled them to construct a relevant and coherent argument. The choices which worked well and were unproblematic were: Ben, Howard and capitalism in *Death of a Salesman*; Bolingbroke in *Richard II*; Alec in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; Tom or the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*; and the brothers, Lamia or la belle dame in Keats. These choices worked well when students understood that villains are opponents of tragic protagonists; or villains who aren't entirely in control but who are perhaps pursuing morally ambiguous logic; or villains who somehow cause ruin in the tragedy, sometimes with intent, sometimes inadvertently; or villains who directly affect the fortunes of the hero, who engage in a contest of power and who are partly responsible for the hero's or heroine's demise.

When students struggled with this question it was often because they did not know what a tragic villain is and so made choices which led them into a blind alley and where often, during the course of their writing, they proved themselves that the choice did not work. Sometimes students showed that they had little understanding of the literary genre of tragedy (slightly surprising given that the title of Paper 1A is: Literary genres: Aspects of tragedy). These students did not know the difference between a tragic hero and a tragic villain and they did not seem to know that a tragic hero is himself or herself flawed and capable of cruelties. Some students thought that any character could be called a villain just because they did some bad, selfish or thoughtless things (for example a number wrote about Linda as the villain and some wrote about Tess' mother). When students chose to write about Willy Loman as the villain they seldom produced convincing arguments. It was also difficult to give much credit to those students who claimed that Tess is the novel's villain, or Isabella, or Gatsby or Richard.

Having said this though, there were some very good responses where Richard was identified as a villain in terms of the damage he causes to his country. These students argued that Richard was a villain in terms of his poor leadership and his neglect of his country which had become an unweeded garden under his management. Much was also said about how the country suffered since he was responsible for enabling civil war. When students wrote about Richard's entitlement and his narcissism they could build a convincing case for his being a villain. Some students struggled with Keats because they engaged in a debate about who actually is the villain and the argument never got beyond that. Rather than enter into a debate about whether the knight or la belle dame is the villain, they fared better when they pitched for one of them and then answered the question.

Question 8

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of places to the tragedies of their two texts. What they needed to do was quickly identify some key places which are significant to the tragedies and write about how those places contribute to the tragedy for the characters and audiences. When students knew their texts well they were able to produce some very good answers and really work at significance. Choices which led to good discussion were Willy's home, New York, England, Pomfret Castle, The Chase, Talbothays, Flintcomb-Ash, Stonehenge, Gatsby's mansion, The Valley of the Ashes, the Plaza Hotel, the cold hillside, the elfin grot, the forest, Corinth and Madeline's family mansion, though there were others which also worked well.

Concluding Note

In all questions students were successful if they responded freshly to the questions and knew their texts. They were less successful when they tried to shoehorn in pre-learned material and micro analysis of methods in a decontextualised way. So the clear message here is that students need to place the texts themselves and the stories of those texts at the centre of their study and their thinking.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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