
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

7717/1B Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy
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 on 7717 1B

The 1B Comedy paper continues to be a successfully answered component for many students, often giving rise to some very good responses that reveal an excellent knowledge of the texts studied and how they employ comedic elements. Although following sections of this report will dwell on areas for improvement, it is important to state that the general pattern of responses tends to be strong and that students and their teachers deserve much credit for their preparations.

Section A

The passage-based tasks in Section A invite students to closely explore how comedy operates in a specific part of their chosen play. Although students are invited to see how the passage links and fits in to the rest of the play, it is essential that most of the response should centre on the passage: examiners don't measure the amount of material written about the extract versus the amount of material on the rest of the play – there is no suggested balance. However, for the sake of clarity, the passage is where the students' main focus needs to be. The best responses therefore centralise the extract and its comedic mini-story and look closely at some of the details, explain how the comedy works, and offer thoughts on the significances arising.

Problems arise when students interact briefly with the extract and then spend a lot of energy on other parts in the play. This approach often suggests a lack of understanding of the given passage and/or a desire to write about pre-learned issues despite the main concerns of the passage. Arriving with knowledge of relevant issues and readings is clearly a useful thing, but it's the application and relevance of this knowledge that is key. The passage from *The Taming of the Shrew* featured the exchanging of clothes between Lucentio and Tranio. Some less successful responses this year identified the relevant idea that issues of power (amongst other things) could be seen in this exchange, but then spent several pages writing about power generally in the play, with a lot of emphasis on Petruchio and Katherine, even though they didn't feature in the passage. The *Twelfth Night* passage this year focused on the initial meeting between Viola and Olivia. Some less successful responses used this as a springboard to write in detail about Orsino's feelings and actions, even though he didn't appear in the passage. While this has some relevance, it is difficult for examiners to give much credit when students divert the focus away from the action given.

It is therefore a good idea for students to begin their responses with an overview of the passage. This helps them to focus on the specific events shown and allows them to see the shape of the comedic narrative as well as begin to make some structural comment. Examiners are instructed to credit this identification of plot and reward brief contextualisation, i.e., what has happened prior to the scene and afterwards. The initial bullet points in the mark scheme are useful to show to students as an example of the level of detail they might offer. Once the story has been pinned down, students are then free to focus upon some specific comedic issues.

Selection is also a key skill for students: choosing the most fruitful things to focus on is the hallmark of a good student. Previous reports and training sessions have made plain that the most

effective approach is to make sensible selections of *some* comedic aspects and explore the significances that arise. For some years in English studies the phrase ‘say a lot about a little’ gained traction. Taken literally, this often resulted in students writing a paragraph about the significance of a comma or individual word while overlooking the big ideas being explored in a text. Microanalysis of language never really works in a specification which is about genre: 7717 is interested in the big ideas arising from genre, so in the Comedy paper, a close exploration of e.g., love, marriage, amusing events, stupid behaviour, comic villainy, foolery, etc. is where focus is required, rather than labelling of nouns and spending time writing about iambic pentameter when there are far more telling things to be said about ideas.

Of course, there does need to be an appreciation of authorial methods, and in the case of drama, thinking about structural issues, e.g., the comedic trajectory, dramatic irony, climactic events, use of soliloquy, introduction of characters, dialogue, exits, entrances – and how they shape the comedy – is encouraged. For example, in *The Taming of the Shrew* passage, the exchanging of garments provides some dramatic spectacle – some on-stage energy that can be played for laughs. Given that Shakespeare has previously shown the audience the rapidity of Lucentio’s attraction to Bianca, the haste of the swapping of clothes provokes amusement because we recognise deeper ideas about life, for example, how desire causes characters to act rashly and quickly; how desire can inspire characters to do anything to achieve their wishes; how even powerful and intelligent characters are caught up in love’s blindness; how companions will help each other out when love is at stake; how the subversion of master/servant relationships occurs in comedy; how disguise can fool others (with the extra joke being that Sly is watching this event occur whilst also being the victim of a deception himself).

Likewise, in the *Twelfth Night* passage, the differing levels of knowledge that the characters and audience possess aids the comedy. While the audience are aware of Viola’s disguise, the characters aren’t and therefore amusement and laughter are provoked when Malvolio comments unwittingly on Viola’s boyishness. We also find entertainment in Olivia’s developing interest in Viola’s appearance as described by Malvolio precisely because we have previously learned of her supposed deep grief. Once we see her, the joke lands that either she’s telling an elaborate lie to keep Orsino at arm’s length or she’s less of a grieving ice queen and much more of a lively character with a healthy interest in handsome young men (with an extra layering of humour because only the audience know that Viola is in disguise). Thinking about how the comedy is structured naturally allows students to see comedic ideas and truths. In the example cited, it’s a short stretch to see how the structuring of the scene reveals ideas about: how characters are easily duped by disguise; how desire can have a transformative effect; how desire drives behaviour; how characters can become the target of unasked for attention; how love triangles commence and lead to amusing and troubling consequences.

For the most part, Section A responses were good and often impressive. When they were successful, it was because the students focused on the details of the passage, saw how the comedy was organised and above all, had things to say about the big comedic ideas that arose. It is always ideas that drive interpretation. To this end, the ideas listed under AO5 in the mark scheme are always the best indication of the sorts of things highly valued by examiners.

Section B

Tasks in Section B offer students a view which can be debated or invite them to write about the significance of a comedic element. This year, there were some excellent responses that were a pleasure to read. For every question on the paper, examiners have to decide whether a response is irrelevant, simple, straightforward, thorough or assured (the key words for each of the 5 bands).

While it is beyond the scope of this report to exemplify each band, there are certain qualities that help to distinguish between types of response.

Initially, examiners are interested in question focus: they check to see that the task is being addressed in all of its details. It's therefore imperative that each paragraph in a response is relevant to the given task, so avoiding the temptation to write about e.g., Bianca when the task is about Katherina, or Viola when the task is about Orsino. Assuming that question focus is secure, the quality of answer – its ideas, range, references, depth and intelligence – is the main driver of the mark awarded. When all is said and done, if students know the text well, then they can select wisely. When students don't know the text, they find it harder to select and tend to write about things they know, rather than things that are directly relevant.

Question 3 in this year's paper focused on Katherina's transformation into an obedient wife, and the extent to which this could be seen as an 'uplifting end' to the play. This is a central issue in the play, and students engaged with it wholeheartedly. A range of interesting views was given, many suggesting that in fact her apparent change is a troubling one, raising issues about coercive control and female submission. Some argued equally well that given the play's nature as a comedy, the contented Katherina seen at the end is uplifting – a perfect comedic ending. Others offered the reading that Katherina's transformation is an act and the clever comedic heroine has found a way to put one over on Petruchio and could be celebrated on those grounds. It was also valid to see this change in relation to the frame of the play, with Katherina's manner an entertainingly satirical comment on the ridiculous fantasies of Sly and therefore uplifting in that sense. When students were less successful, it tended to be because of a lack of engagement with the central debate. Students who wrote such answers spent a long time exemplifying the process of change – Katherina's first meeting with Petruchio, the tailor scene, the wedding, the journey – rather than the central question of whether or not it provides an uplifting *ending*.

Question 4 posited the view that 'romantic love is absent' from *The Taming of the Shrew*, even though courtship and marriage is central. This was a slightly less popular choice with students, but there were some stand-out responses. Many explored the financial desires voiced by Petruchio and the way in which the sisters' marriages are regarded as transactional by their father. The mistreatment of Katherina was also cited as evidence of a lack of romance. Some responses offered interesting readings of Lucentio's feelings, sometimes suggesting they are romantic, albeit foolish, or that his feelings are simple lust based on appearance and that the play does much to satirise the hollowness of his sentimental romantic posturing.

There were some responses which dwelt on historical context, exploring 16th century English marriage patterns and social attitudes towards marriage over time. These approaches seldom resulted in success, because they were often devoid of contact with the play and could at best be seen as generalised rather than illuminating what happens in the *play*. 7717 is not a specification whose tasks invite historical readings – it is interested in genre and cultural contexts such as marriage, power and gender, i.e., ones that arise naturally from a study of the world of the play and what happens in it, rather than a study of what happens external to the play.

Question 5 offered the view that misbehaviour and trickery are 'great fun for the audiences' of *Twelfth Night*. Many students sensibly chose to explore the gulling of Malvolio and the view that the joke goes too far. This led to some interesting debates around the nature of trickery and at which point things tip into pity rather than fun. The drunken antics of the revellers and the merry madness of the festive world were also given space in responses. Some slightly less obvious examples of misbehaviour were selected, such as Feste's mockery of Olivia and Viola's adoption of a disguise as a form of trickery. While these examples are valid, they did lead to less convincing arguments at

times, mainly because there was probably less mileage in them as ideas. This highlights an important truth about exam responses – far better to choose obvious examples and write about them really well rather than select off-kilter ones and struggle to sustain them.

Question 6 focused on Orsino and whether he is a ‘ridiculous romantic hero who cannot be taken seriously’. Sensibly, much weight was given to the opening scene of the play which highlights the character’s melodramatic lovesickness, his overblown sentiment and general wallowing in musical misery. Arguments were made to the effect that he is a figure of ridicule whose posturing and futile pursuit of Olivia make him impossible to view as a serious romantic figure and some students suggest some satirical fun is being poked at the clichéd moonstruck lover. Some subtle responses looked at his feelings for Viola which, depending on performance and reading, might be seen as more heartfelt. Those who knew the play well took the opportunity to explore the perhaps more dominant Orsino of the final act, one who at least gets involved in the action and seems to have a sense of urgency about his feelings, even if that new-found urgency is comically undercut by the rapidity of his betrothal to Viola. Knowing the details of the play allows a more detailed response to emerge and, in this task, allowed students to write about more than just the memorable opening scene.

Section C

The range of texts in Section C and the different ways in which they use comedy often gives rise to some very different and fascinating responses. *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains a more popular choice of drama text than *She Stoops to Conquer*, but both gave rise to some perceptive and sophisticated answers. All of the non-drama texts had responses, with the *Poetry Anthology*, *Small Island* and *Emma* being popular choices

As has been said before, Section C is not comparative in the old-fashioned sense of producing running comparisons between texts or trying to find points of similarity and difference. It should be seen as connecting texts and that connection is done via the genre term/idea set up in the task. The best approach is for students to write substantially about one text in relation to the task followed by a substantial section on a second text in relation to task. The skills of question focus, knowing the text and writing a clearly expressed response stated in previous sections of this report remain true here.

Question 7 set light-heartedness and seriousness against each other, suggesting that comedies ‘have nothing to say about serious matters’. A range of views are possible here, partly dependent on the texts studied. Some thoughtful responses centred on the fact that in the end, comedy is really about entertainment, so although serious issues might be present, nothing of any consequence is said about them. For instance, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* many argued that issues of snobbery, superficiality, class and gender were presented in a light-hearted way rather than any serious investigation of them or an attempt to argue for change. It was equally possible to argue that serious criticism was being levelled in these texts, perhaps mostly so in *Small Island* with its representation of racism or the biting criticism of warmongering in Swift’s elegy. As mentioned earlier in the report, biographical information can occasionally get in the way of some responses and this is particularly true of Wilde, whose personal story is sometimes overused in Section C responses. It never helps an answer, because the task is always focused on the text, not the writer and while it may be interesting to know about writers’ lives, given that students only write for around 20-25 minutes per text in Section C, they are far better off exploring the events of the text than trying to fit irrelevant biographical details into a response.

Question 8 seemed roughly equal to question 7 in terms of popularity. Very often, tasks set up debates by positing black-and-white views, often using words and phrases such as ‘have nothing to say’, ‘are nothing more than’ ‘are always...’ etc. Students should be alert to these phrases as key triggers in the debate. In this particular task, the debate was ‘Male characters ...are nothing more than figures of fun’. The vast majority addressed the task head-on, showing how, e.g., Gilbert in *Small Island* is a character to be laughed at, a type of comic fool, but he is also a kind of hero who readers want to succeed. Chaucer’s Chauntecleer was also judged a character whose strutting and folly make him seem ridiculous, yet also likeable in the same way Burns’ drunken Tam is. There were plenty of characters to choose from and many intelligent arguments were offered. For a handful of students, some warping of the task occurred which was difficult to credit. For example, the question doesn’t invite comments about female characters. Likewise, the term ‘figures of fun’ means more than just ‘characters who do amusing things’, so students who knew that it encompassed ridiculousness, invitation to mockery and foolishness fared better than students who treated the key term broadly.

It is worth concluding by reiterating that examiners were very impressed by the responses in this year’s paper. Students and their teachers deserve much praise for their efforts, especially given the challenges faced by this cohort of students.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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