
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2A PAPER 2A
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 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 2A: Elements of Crime Writing

Students taking the examinations this summer have obviously had to cope with interruptions to their studies due to the pandemic and it is therefore important to start by congratulating both the students themselves and their teachers for the standard of work they have managed to produce in the course of their answers and it is encouraging to see their resilience. Examiners were aware of an increased number of rubric infringements this summer which may have been a side effect of less direct teacher contact. Some students failed to address a poetry text or a modern text and some used the same text in sections B and C. The same text clearly cannot be rewarded twice.

As always good time management is one of the keys to success in the examination. It is a long examination and it is important to realise that reading, thinking and planning time should be built in; students are not expected to write solidly for three hours. Some students wrote far too much and included material which was not helpful in answering the question. Knowing the texts and knowing what to leave out is as important as what to include. Clear question focus is essential to success. Students who ensured the examiner knew how their material helped to answer the question achieved higher marks than those who left the examiner to try to work it out for themselves, searching for implied relevance.

Fluency and clarity of expression were hallmarks of good answers. Students who structured their responses coherently and whose writing engaged the reader's attention were rewarded. Those answers where the quality of writing meant that the meaning was unclear were self-penalising.

Section A

Many students clearly enjoyed this year's extract and there were some very good answers where students appreciated the subtlety in the writing, including the comic tone, pointing out the absurdity of events. Answers which explored the subtext and did not just see Martin as a cold calculating criminal were impressive.

It is advisable for students to take time to read the extract through carefully before starting to write to make sure they have understood it thoroughly. There were quite a few misunderstandings of the extract this year, particularly of the ending where students thought that Martin had died or lost consciousness and did not realise that the 'blackness' referred to the painting. It is also important that the students read the introduction to the extract carefully and make use of the information. Some students made errors such as assuming Laura was Martin's wife when the introduction clearly stated that she was married to Tony.

Many of the best answers started with a helpful overview of the extract. This was the best way into an effective answer as it pinned down the important crime elements to start with and showed an understanding of the passage. Answers which started by giving a general overview of crime writing were really wasting time. Equally, answers which tried to impose sub-genres on the extract were not helpful. Trying to spot features of 'hard-boiled' or 'golden age' crime writing in the extract at

best lead down dead ends and at worst distorted the reading of the passage. Comparisons to other crime texts were usually equally unhelpful.

Good answers often approached the extract in a non-chronological way after giving the overview, as they focused on the key crime elements they had found there. It is important to look at what is actually in the extract and not point out what is not there. Students who relied on negative comments such as saying there was no detective, no murder no police etc could not really be given credit for their negative observations. It suggested they were coming to the extract with a 'crime checklist'.

Close reading of the extract was a key to success. Those students who quoted from the passage to support their views were rewarded, as they would be in other sections of the paper. It is important, however, not to pick on certain words and take them out of context. An example of this was in the sentence, 'My order of doing things...'. Some students seized on the word 'order' and talked about the restoration of order at the end of the extract which, in context, was not the meaning.

Finally, it was important that students used contextual knowledge effectively and did not make sweeping assumptions about social and political contexts as well as literary contexts. It was surprising how many students thought that in 1999 women were subjugated to men and did not have equal rights. Laura was sometimes seen as a victim of patriarchal suppression which was not a very convincing assumption to make!

Section B

Firstly, it is good advice for students to come to this section with an open mind about which of their three texts they will write on. There is only one question on each text in this section and it is far better to remain flexible and choose the text and question the student is most comfortable with on the day of the examination. Clearly some students had already decided or had been told which text to write about in Section B and this was not always to their advantage. It is sound practice to look at the questions in Section C as well before starting to write, as they may wish to juggle the texts across the two sections to use them to the greatest benefit.

The best answers engaged in lively critical debate with the premise in the question, agreeing or disagreeing with it as they saw fit. Again, question focus was key to success. Some answers to question 3 on Coleridge were heavily descriptive and relied upon narrating the plot rather than developing relevant arguments. It is also important to read all the terms of the question very carefully. Question 3, for example, asked whether the 'agents' who punished the Mariner were 'cruel and unforgiving'. Many students focused on 'cruel and unforgiving' yet did not identify the 'agents'. Whilst not irrelevant, the work was not as sharply argued as it could have been.

Similarly question 5 asked for debate as to whether the criminals got away with their crimes so the focus was on criminals. Students who wrote about characters who were not criminals, such as Robbie, could therefore not score much in those sections. Those answers which did explore the questions from different angles, however, did score well. For example, in response to question 8 which asked whether Poirot's pursuit of truth could be considered beneficial to the inhabitants of Kings Abbot, those students who looked at several different characters in the light of the question often performed better than those who just argued the benefits of Poirot's uncovering the truth about the criminal.

Finally for this section, examiners would like to stress the importance of using the texts in an open book examination. Those answers in the higher bands always used close textual reference and quotations from the texts in front of them to support their views. As the texts are actually allowed into the examination there is the expectation that students will use them and that textual references will be accurate. Students need to know their texts and know where to look for the support they want. There is not time to search for relevant information during the examination and those who depended upon the first few pages or a random page at which they happened to open the text did not produce very successful answers.

Section C

As already advised, students should choose the question carefully to suit their texts and their interests. Both questions in this section proved equally popular this year. In response to question 10 those students who thought carefully about the ‘ills of society’ and whether they could be deemed responsible for crime, did well. An interesting range of ‘ills’ was identified from corruption to the desire for social or financial gain but some answers depended on very unconvincing definitions of what might be considered an ‘ill’. Some students just seemed to think it meant ‘bad things’ or ‘things wrong with society’ which produced some very vague, imprecise thinking. ‘Religion’ as a whole, for example, was occasionally considered an ‘ill’ which was not a convincing argument, whereas more subtle and specific definitions of the extremism or corruption of religious beliefs might have been made credible.

Question 11 produced some good answers with a wide range of both powerless and powerful women chosen. Some successful answers separated the idea of power from the idea of the victim and thoughtfully debated both question terms. However, those students who focused on ‘victims’ and overlooked ‘women’ could not be credited. For example, long sections on Robbie as a victim in *Atonement* could not be rewarded as the question was clearly about women.

Finally, there was occasionally some uneven handling of the two texts. Whilst there is no expectation that treatment of the two texts should be exactly fifty per cent each, students are asked to cover both texts ‘substantially’. Substantiality may be judged by depth and detail rather than length but if the coverage of a text is not deemed substantial, students will penalise themselves

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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