



A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2B: Texts and Genres: Elements of political and social protest writing
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 2B: Texts and genres: Elements of political and social protest writing

Overall students and centres should be commended for the work on this paper as there was a range of impressive and perceptive responses by students across the paper. There was a real sense of students engaging with elements of the genre and considering the meanings arising from the texts in insightful and original ways with many applying the critical concepts with which they had engaged as part of their NEA studies. There was a real sense that many students had enjoyed studying these texts and engaged with them critically and enthusiastically often drawing on contemporary social and political issues to create lively and insightful debates as well as demonstrating how relevant the study of these texts remains.

Those students who performed less well were those who chose not to engage with the questions set or whose knowledge of the texts was not secure enough to draw on the most salient parts of the texts or poems. As an open book exam, students need to be familiar enough with the texts to make sensible decisions about which moments to explore and to find these with ease rather than relying on knowledge of a handful of poems or only the openings and endings of narratives.

The most popular texts continue to be *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *The Kite Runner*, *A Doll's House* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, it was a pleasure to see many more responses this year to Harrison's poetry and *Harvest* both of which were very well managed by students particularly in terms of authorial techniques and elements of the genre. Section A produced some excellent responses with students demonstrating an impressive ability to engage with the poem. Section B, likewise, included some exceptional answers with the best students thoroughly engaging with the debates set up by the tasks. Section C saw a range of responses with many students managing the idea of significance particularly well and often setting up a purposeful argument that they were able to pursue across their response.

Students achieved less well when they made generalised comments about the texts without grounding their ideas in the narratives. For example, there were a lot of assumptions about Blake's political and religious views and a significant amount of extraneous contextual detail particularly on texts such as *The Kite Runner* and *The Handmaid's Tale* that resulted in students moving away from both the text and task in a way that was unhelpful and added little to their responses. Students often achieved most highly when they had a clear sense of argument connected to the

task and grounded all they said in the texts themselves rather than drawing on (sometimes erroneous) contextual knowledge.

It is perhaps also worth noting that this is a three-hour paper and students need to manage their time carefully in order to ensure they answer all three sections and cover two texts in Section C. However, this does not necessarily mean that students must write at copious length. Often, students' responses that were carefully planned and written in a precise and focused way were far superior to those that were pages long but sometimes lost sharpness and accuracy in terms of AO1 as a result.

Section A The Unseen Extract

Clearly centres have worked hard to prepare students for this element of the paper and there were some exceptional responses. Students who read the introduction to the extract carefully were best advantaged as this gave them a clear way into the extract and some of the central ideas they could explore. Many students began their responses with an overview of the extract and those who were able to see the trajectory of the extract and the way it built towards a hopeful and climactic conclusion where the protestors rose up against oppression often achieved highly. Students study poetry both as part of the requirement for this paper as well as for their NEA studies and it was pleasing to see many drawing on these skills to analyse the text.

The best responses came from those students who responded to the extract in front of them rather than approaching it with preconceived ideas about what they expected to be there. For example, many assumed that, because women were mentioned in stanza eight, this was a poem with a feminist agenda and then tied themselves in knots attempting to find the evidence for this. Likewise, there was a lot of misreading around the lines 'The old laws of England – they/ Whose reverend heads with age are gray,/ Children of a wiser day' with many students assuming Shelley was setting up an opposition between an older, repressive generation and a more liberal younger one.

This specification prioritises authorial methods that engage with voice, structure, setting and form as higher order skills than writing about individual words and phrases. There were some excellent ideas about Shelley's use of rhyme scheme with thoughtful interpretations about the way it mirrored the marching of soldiers or the repressive control over the protestors or even the calm, resilience of the protestors themselves. Likewise, students also commented on the significance of the personified voice, the use of direct address, the ambiguity of the setting that universalised the poem making it just as relevant today as it was in 1819 as well as the significance of the five-line stanzas and their climactic effect or significance to possible meanings. There was also some helpful analysis of Shelley's use of images with many connecting these across the poem in terms of their association with nature and what this reflected about the protestors' demands and actions in juxtaposition to those of the soldiers.

The best responses were written by students who were able to see the extract as a whole rather than simply picking out individual lines and commenting on these excised from the wider text. Students achieved less well when they simply tracked through the poem, verse by verse rather than seeing the text more holistically. When writing about the unseen extract, there is no expectation for students to include contextual detail beyond what is provided in the introduction. Nonetheless, there was a great deal of generalisation (and misinformation) about the historical period and other revolutions at the time that resulted in students losing sight of the poem with some, for example, writing at length about either the French Revolution or Mary Shelley.

There were some superb responses here. These responses were written by students who saw the trajectory of the extract and engaged in how the author shaped meanings with a sharp focus on the extract itself and with a clear sense of how methods were being used unimpeded by preconceptions.

Section B

In this section, students are asked to respond to a debate set up by the question. It was clear that many students really flourished on this task and enjoyed considering different ways in which the texts could be interpreted often creating thoughtful and discerning arguments that picked apart the terms in the question. Those that responded to the tasks in a fresh way, unimpeded by questions that they had responded to in the past or pre-learned essay responses did far better than those who simply reproduced everything they knew about the text and were thus not necessarily explicitly engaging with the terms set up by the given question. Students who engaged with the question from the outset, setting up a clear debate that was then explored over the duration of the essay and arrived at a logically argued conclusion, achieved more highly than those who responded in a more nebulous way or skewed the terms of the task.

The best responses by students were often wide ranging in terms of the material they employed from the set texts, often selecting pertinent moments to comment on in detail. Students scored less well when they simply picked individual quotations out of context or commented on single lines from a text without a sense of the overarching narrative or events.

Question 2 on Blake was by far the most popular question in Section B. The best essays demonstrated an ability to select apt poems that were connected to ‘personal relationships’, often considering the different ways in which they were presented in the two distinct collections, which enabled them to give their answers a clear structure.

A whole range of personal relationships were aptly examined between children and parental figures, lovers, or even friendships with some superb responses on ‘The Chimney-Sweeper (Innocence)’ that recognised the narrative voice as reassuring and liberating, but also complicit in Tom Dacre’s continued oppression. There was also impressive exploration of imagery in poems such as ‘My Pretty Rose Tree’ and ‘Ah! Sunflower’ in particular. Those students who were able to integrate comments on authorial method including the use of voice as in ‘Nurse’s Song (Innocence)’ where the children are liberated by the nurse who allows them to vocalise their views in contrast to the silent ‘whisperings’ of their counterparts in the ‘Experience’ version, often achieved highly.

However, many students struggled to make sensible choices or clearly identify personal relationships with several choosing poems such as ‘Holy Thursday’ where personal relationships simply were not in evidence. In some cases, students did not seem to have knowledge of a wide enough range of poems to fully engage with the task or relied on discussion of poems with which they were most familiar such as ‘London’ and ‘The Schoolboy’ that were not the best choices to make for this task. Many students wanted to write about nature or religion, but in so doing, lost sight of the question.

Question 3 was about work being cruel and degrading in Harrison’s poetry. It was pleasing to see so many students tackling this task and many did so with real insight and analytical vigour. Again, where students were less successful, it tended to be as a result of making poor choices with many wanting to talk about ‘Them & [Uz]’ for example. The responses produced by students then

became an exploration of education and class rather than responding to the task (although several argued that the work of the teacher was not cruel and degrading as it clearly gave him power and satisfaction).

Question 4 on *The Kite Runner* was popular as always and elicited some excellent responses. The best students engaged with the term 'simply' and thus the debate set up by the task with many arguing for the complexity of Rahim Khan's character particularly in contrast to the more one-dimensional stock-villain Assef. These students were able to dip into the text with ease to illustrate their ideas and consider both Khan's altruism and structural significance in placing Amir on his redemption arc as well as his deception and complicity with Baba's lies.

We also saw an increasing number of responses to *Harvest*. Again, the best students fully engaged with the debate in the task both in terms of how Walter's sympathy was conveyed and the way he could be seen to despise persecutors. The most able students could see the ambiguity here, making considered comments about Walter's bias narrative perspective and apparent sympathy, but ultimately self-interested or passive behaviour that resulted in a failure to act. The very best responses were written by students who were able to confidently range across the text. They were able to comment just as assuredly on Walter's condemnation at the start of the narrative of the treatment of the newcomers as they were on his final rebellious act that could be read as an expression of protest against Jordan, the chief persecutor. Students struggled when they did not clearly pin down who the victims or persecutors were or became lost in trying to explain why they were victims without connecting this explicitly to Walter.

Question 8 on *A Doll's House* was also popular although weaker responses tended to focus only on the idea of misery and hardship arguing that a range of factors, particularly patriarchal society, were the cause of Nora's misery thus subverting the task. The best responses were by students who recognised that secrets were a cause of both Nora's suffering and her liberation. Many students also made insightful comments about Torvald's eventual misery, the secrets kept by Rank that led to his misery and those of Mrs Linde and Krogstad, whose eventual overcoming of secrecy leads to their joyful reunion. It was pleasing to see many students engaging with dramatic methods and recognising the dynamic and changing nature of the characters over the course of the play.

Question 9 on *The Handmaid's Tale* saw a variety of impressive responses. The best responses were written by students who not only explored the range of ways in which religion was used as an oppressive force, but also considered its efficacy. Students often argued that, given Offred's internal and physical rebellion, it was not an effective method of control as she was able to undermine it at least psychologically. Students who engaged with elements of authorial method such as the nature of Offred's narrative voice, the use of flashbacks and structural features such as the ambiguous ending and juxtaposing perspective of the 'Historical Notes,' often achieved well. Students struggled where they subverted the question and failed to discuss religion at all. Responses by weaker students often argued that a range of other things were more effective methods of control whilst others were reliant on single quotations such as 'Faith' or 'Blessed are the meek' that were taken out of context and often analysed in considerable depth but in a way that was detached from the main narrative.

SECTION C

In this section students have to manage two texts. Although Question 10 on freedom was slightly more popular, both were very well managed. Centres have clearly done a great deal of work

around the use of the term ‘significance’ and the most able students were adept at discussing the different ways in which freedom and gender had significance in their chosen texts whether in terms of plot, character development, thematically or in criticising social and political constructs.

Question 10 on freedom produced some thoughtful responses with the best being written by students who were clearly considering the different kinds of freedom explored within the texts: freedom from guilt in *The Kite Runner*; the idealisation of freedom in Blake; freedom in terms of expression in Harrison; psychological freedom and forms of rebellion in *The Handmaid’s Tale* etc. The best responses were written by students who engaged with the different ways in which these were presented to the reader and commented on texts as narratives. These students recognised the different journeys to freedom and that the characters themselves were not static entities, but often evolved over the duration of the narrative arc with many exploring the endings of the texts perceptively. However, many students chose to write about ‘lack of freedom’ rather than freedom itself and, whilst we were able to credit some of this work, in skewing the question in this way, students were not clearly and explicitly engaging with the task.

Question 11 on gender was also impressively handled by many students with the best responses showing students exploring representations of masculinity as confidently as they were able to comment on ideas associated with female subjugation. Students achieved less well when their responses became character studies with various explorations of Moira or Baba, for example, that were then rather divorced from ideas associated with gender. It should also be remembered that students need to make sensible choices in this part of the paper; several weaker students, for example, who chose to write about gender in Blake found themselves struggling and simply arguing that Blake was not interested in gender or did not write about women, which was ultimately unhelpful.

In both questions, students who remained focused on the texts themselves often did well. Those who were able to pick out the most pertinent moments to discuss and do so in detail, developing their ideas around these central moments were quickly achieving Band 3 and above. These were clearly students who knew their texts and were able to explore the significance of key moments thoughtfully and consider the meanings generated by central events. Where students struggled, it was often because their responses became more diffuse or general and so their ideas were not supported by text knowledge but drifted into discussion about the author’s beliefs or what they might be trying to convey to the reader about gender or freedom in a way that was divorced from the narratives.

It should also be noted that there is no necessity for students to make comparative comments in this section of the exam and those who attempted to link the worlds of Blake with Gilead’s dystopia, for instance, often tied themselves in knots in trying to find forced connections that were not there and got in the way of their response.

Concluding Note

In the case of all questions, students achieved well when they engaged with the key terms of the question in a focused way uninhibited by prior tasks. It is important that students are given the confidence to approach a range of questions with fresh eyes rather than falling back on responses they may have completed in the past. Students also need to make careful, informed choices both in terms of the questions they select for Section B and C and the poems and moments in the texts

that they choose to explore to ensure that everything they say is pertinent and explicitly linked to the task.

What remains a delight about this paper is the thoughtful and often personal ways in which students engage with texts drawing on their own political and social sensibilities and knowledge of the world to offer independent and considered responses that are a genuine pleasure to read.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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