

AS

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1A Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

Although the entry for AS was slightly smaller this year than last, examiners still reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers. The statistical data indicates that over 96% of students obtained a grade E or above and over 13% achieved a grade A. Students and examiners alike seem to have enjoyed the papers. For those centres offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously very good preparation for developing students' understanding of texts and genre and it allows them to study and write about their four texts in discrete ways while still seeing their connection to generic conventions. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers on each paper. The most effective responses were seen by students who knew their texts exceptionally well, answered the questions set in a precise way and made good choices of textual detail in answering the questions. When students didn't perform as well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely and because they did not focus on the tasks set, sometimes because they had own agendas.

Issues raised in previous reports remain relevant and it would be advisable for teachers to revisit previous AS and A-level reports for details about contexts, writing skills and for guidance on answering the different types of question.

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

'Answer the question' is our mantra. There are no hidden requirements. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text, they do well. Arguments tend to lack direction and can become chaotic when students try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question.

## **Knowing the texts**

It is better for AS students if their ideas come from within the text rather than without. The students who knew their texts well were, of course, in the best position to tackle the questions and it was easy to see the confidence they brought to the exams because they knew their texts. The most successful answers were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the arguments they were making, rather than those who tried to use whatever they could remember and then shape their argument around that.

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 enables students to interpret them with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method. But the stories have to come first. There is no point writing about Nick Carraway as an intradiegetic narrator or 'aspects' of genre if students haven't got inside the story of Gatsby that Nick is telling. 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. The text is 'the thing itself' and for students it is more important than what critics say about it and more important than what theorists have said about the genre to which the text belongs. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers – which is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do. Only when the story has worked the imagination can readers engage in critical thinking about their reading.

## Know the ‘facts’ of the text

Knowing the text is essential, but perhaps something more specific that students should focus on is their knowing the *facts* of what happens in the stories they are studying. 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 in some post-modern texts). 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. If a wrong fact becomes the basis for discussion, it is clear that everything that follows will get the student into difficulty. For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously. In stories the facts are the characters, what they say and do, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to and where things happen. There cannot be a debate about something that is palpably not evident in a text or a debate about factual inaccuracy. There has to be a responsible observation of what is written by the author and students have to be respectful of and responsive to it. This applies to stories that are in drama, novels and poetry texts.

An example here might help. In the Comedy paper 2: Prose and Poetry, some students responding to the *Emma* question about Frank Churchill’s being a likeable romantic hero, argued that he is not likeable because Emma is in love with him and he breaks her heart when she learns of his engagement to Jane Fairfax. These students then wrote at some length about Emma’s broken heart and got themselves into a muddle. Although Frank Churchill occupies much of Emma’s thinking time her being heartbroken by him is not a factual accuracy.

## Specific comments about 1A: Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy

### Section A

*Othello* was the more popular text here, although there were many responses to *King Lear* too. There was evidence that many centres had heeded the advice given in previous Reports on the Examination and in feedback meetings and online resources to encourage students to start by giving an overview of the dramatic trajectory of the extract, and where students did this, in a concise, sensible way, they tended to get their response off to a good start. The bullet points in the question, which are not there in the extract questions on the A-level paper, are there to help students, acknowledging that they have only studied for one year at post-16 and might appreciate a little guidance about the most useful aspects of tragedy to write about. Some students chose instead to focus on aspects of the play they felt they knew better – such as those included in last year’s paper which they had presumably done as practice. This sometimes resulted in contorted responses, which focused on Desdemona and Emilia (who were the focus of last year’s extract) and argued that the absence of women from this year’s extract proved that women were not given a voice in the play and then went on to write about the scenes with Desdemona and Emilia at the end of the play as further evidence of the mistreatment of women. It is important that students answer the question on the paper rather than an alternative they may have preferred.

Some students who answered the question on *King Lear* were unsure where this extract came in the play but most wrote well about the extract. Nearly all students were able to write sensibly about the presentation of Regan in the extract and link this to elsewhere in the play; it was less helpful when students used this bullet point as a springboard to write all they knew about all the female characters in the whole of the play – thus losing focus on both Regan and the extract. Students were less confident when writing about Cornwall, with some ignoring the second bullet point completely and some unsure about who exactly Cornwall is or what happens to him. The importance of knowing the play cannot be emphasised enough. Finally, students sometimes became so caught up in micro-analysis of individual words or phrases that they ignored the action

on the stage and some people managed to write about the extract without mentioning Gloucester's blinding, the servant's death or Cornwall's wounding.

## **Section B**

The overwhelming majority of students answered on *Death of a Salesman* and examiners only saw a handful of responses on *Richard II* and *A Streetcar named Desire*. This is a shame because both these plays elicited excellent responses from students and schools studying *Richard II* could find it opens up different choices to them if students go on to study A-level. However, the question on *Death of a Salesman* was answered by almost everyone and, as expected with such a large number of responses, there was a considerable range. There were some exceptionally thoughtful and insightful responses which made good choices about which characters to write about as villains and/or victims and sometimes made convincing cases for the American consumerist society or the American Dream as the villain of the play. Students who knew the play well were able to write about Howard as a representative of society, using his obsession with consumer goods (such as the recording machine which Willy doesn't understand) as evidence. Dave Singleman and Ben also produced interesting discussion.

Students who were less confident in their knowledge of the text or in formulating their own ideas tended to stick to the members of the Loman family and tried to write about each of them as a villain and/or victim. In doing so they tended to lose sight of what the terms 'victim' and 'villain' mean in the context of tragedy – a villain is not simply someone who makes mistakes, for example, and it was hard not to think that poor Linda is being judged harshly if she is said to be a villain. Some students struggled when trying to argue that Willy was both the villain and the victim of the play – 'a victim of his own villainy' was a phrase which occurred more than once – because he suffers and he does things wrong. Ideas from Aristotle were poorly used in the responses to this question. Every event which happened to make any character a victim was sometimes described as producing catharsis in the audience.

Although the above report highlights some common mistakes and unhelpful approaches, the overwhelming impression left on examiners was one of positivity. All students were able to engage with the texts and the questions, often coming up with their own ideas about the plays in relation to the questions. The most effective responses showed an impressive knowledge of the details of the text and an ability to produce assured and confident arguments.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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