

AS

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2A Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: 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 2A: Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Tragedy**

Although the most popular choices were again Keats and *The Great Gatsby*, responses were seen on all the set texts. More effective responses were seen across all texts when there was tight focus on the question set. Although students generally wrote better about authorial method when they were writing about poetry, it was pleasing to see many students also making sensible integrated comments about narrative method in their answers to the prose texts. It was particularly pleasing to see the engagement with narrative voices and aspects of structure and settings. The questions remind students of the requirement to include analysis of authorial method. However, the comments on method must be made relevant to the argument being made. Marks are not given for detached discussion of method which has no relation to the questions.

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material regardless of the question. The most effective responses throughout this paper were from students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout.

What is becoming apparent on this paper is that some students only seemed to be adequately studying or revising one text, possibly thinking that they would not be using the second text for A-level. This led to some uneven responses with students often performing quite well on one text but not the other. This is not a recommended approach.

### **Section A: Poetry**

When answering the questions on poetry, students have to engage with printed extracts. This means that there are no short cuts when studying the poetry text as students have to be prepared for an extract from any of the poems in the selection. The extracts are chosen to help students construct their arguments and most students do find them helpful when they understand and have

good knowledge of the poem from which the extract comes and when they understand the extract itself. This is why so much emphasis has been placed in the introductory comments on students knowing their texts really well. Given that this is an open book exam, students can also look again at the poem from which the extract comes and briefly contextualise it. However, if students do not know their texts well they tend to struggle. It was certainly the case this year, as it was last, that some students had little understanding of the extracts, sometimes responding as if they were reading them for the first time. As a result they did not use them confidently as a base for their arguments.

Apart from working with the extract, students are then required to range more widely around their text for material to support their views. Questions are written that are interesting and accessible and it is important to note that the number of poems that students are required to answer on will be married to the question so that students can manage the question adequately in the time required. If students read questions carefully they will see what is required of them in terms of the extracts and whether they have to range more widely across the same poem they have just written about or refer to another poem in the collection as well.

### **Question 1: Keats**

In this question students were asked to explore the view that the male tragic lovers in Keats' poetry are presented as foolish rather than noble. An extract was provided from *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. There was plenty of interesting discussion about the knight and how he is foolish in his abandonment of his noble status and in his pursuit of the faery. Students who chose *Lamia* as their second poem often performed well as Lycius can easily be seen as foolish or noble or both. The choices of *Isabella* and *The Eve of St Agnes* also worked well when students were in control of their arguments and the stories being told but arguments based on these poems required more careful thinking and shaping and for some students this was a challenging task. Some struggled to argue how Porphyro might be seen as foolish or noble and just wrote about him as a villain. When Lorenzo was discussed, again some struggled to tease out the two key terms and just wrote about him as a victim of the brothers.

Other problems arose when responses subverted the task to write about female lovers, focused on villains and victims or produced analyses of the poems with no sense of the question. There was still a lot of material on Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne. For most students knowing biographical material is a hindrance as they feel that they have to write about it and it takes them away from the poetry.

### **Question 2: Hardy**

Several students responded to the Hardy question and although there were some very effective responses, in many cases students did not appear to know the poems well enough. The question asked students to explore the significance of time and the past to the tragic experiences in Hardy's poetry and an extract was provided from *Your Last Drive*. Those students who understood the poem were able to engage with the speaker's reflections on his wife's last journey a week before her death and unpick and comment on the time references in the extract (including the significance of the title). Those responses could see the ironies, sadness and tragic implications of the time references in relation to the story being told. Unfortunately several responses did not understand that the journey taken by the speaker's wife was taken alone ('I was not with you' having been missed) and this affected their discussion. Often not enough attention was given to time and the past in the responses and students simply wrote about Hardy's grief and his realisation that he only cared for Emma when she was dead.

The choices of other poems which worked well included *Under the Waterfall* and *At an Inn*. Those students who made less appropriate choices selected poems that they knew, and perhaps liked, and wrote about those in general terms with no sense of the task. *Lament* and *Rain on a Grave* were choices that did not work for many as the focus was not on time and the past but simply on bits of content or imagery.

### Question 3: Poetry Anthology Tragedy

In this question students were given an extract from *Jessie Cameron* and asked to explore the view that in the *Poetry Anthology: Tragedy* the pride shown by tragic protagonists is admirable. The extract was specifically on Jessie's pride and there was plenty there to set the debate going. Some very more effective responses were seen and a lot of fierce debate. Some students clearly admired Jessie's pride, equating it with her courage and autonomy; others were less impressed and saw it as a mark of her arrogance or even foolishness. Quite surprisingly, some students argued that her would-be lover should have been treated more favourably and that Jessie simply should have married him. The choice of the second poem was problematic for some students. Choices which worked well were *The Death of Cuchulain* and *Extract from Paradise Lost*. Students found it harder to focus on pride when they chose 'Out, out -'.

## Section B: Prose

### Question 4: The Great Gatsby

In this question students were asked to explore the view that 'in the world of *The Great Gatsby* all are tainted by corruption'. There is much in the novel that students could focus on: Gatsby's criminal associates, the adultery of Tom, Daisy, Gatsby and Myrtle, Jordan's cheating at golf, Wolfshiem's fixing of the World Series, Wilson's murder of Gatsby, the corruption of the consumerist society and the American Dream, for example. However, many students struggled with focus. In many cases this was because the text was not known well enough but there were problems for some students who did know what corruption is. For those who did, some very effective responses were seen when Gatsby and his criminal dealings were discussed and there was also some interesting debate on Tom. Some students decided to challenge the question and some wrote effectively about Nick's turning away from corruption. Several students argued that George Wilson is not tainted by corruption even though he murders Gatsby.

### Question 5: Tess of the D'Urbervilles

In this question students are asked to explore the significance of Tess' surname and noble ancestry to the tragic experiences. Less successful responses did not demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the text to explore the many references to her ancestry. Those responses struggled and just wrote anything about the novel. Most were able to write about Parson Tringham's meeting with John Durbeyfield at the start of the novel when he tells him that the family is related to the ancient D'Urberville family and that they have a royal lineage. These students could then argue that this is the catalyst for Tess' misfortune. Students who had good knowledge of the novel were also able to write about Alec's appropriation of the surname and the impact this has on Tess' being persuaded by her parents to go to him to claim kin. There was also good discussion of Angel's views on old families, his hypocritical attitudes and how damaging this is for Tess. Some students argued well on the significance of the D'Urberville legends and the significance of her ancestors ultimately sleeping in their vaults while Tess suffers.

### **Question 6: The Remains of the Day**

Although there were fewer students writing about this text than those writing about *Gatsby* and *Tess*, a number of responses were seen and these were generally very good. Responses were interesting and showed real engagement. The question asked students to explore the view that *The Remains of the Day* is a warning of placing duty above human feeling. In the most effective responses students discussed ‘warning’ very well and then debated Stevens’ devotion to Lord Darlington and ‘butlering’ at the expense of his human feelings for Miss Kenton and his father. Many students produced sensitive responses to this question and included relevant detail to support their ideas. While much of the focus was naturally on Stevens, a number wrote thoughtfully about Stevens’ father and his placing duty above the human feeling he might have shown to his sons. There was much that was insightful in these responses and most students were able to integrate relevant comment on authorial method to support their arguments.

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

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