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A-LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/1A Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Tragedy  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

Examiners saw much excellent work across all four papers this summer and the statistics were again very favourable: over 99% of students achieved a grade E or above in the subject overall and over 27% achieved a grade A or A\* in the subject overall. Teachers and students therefore should be congratulated on their hard work.

The best responses were seen from 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 so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely and because they did not focus on the tasks set.

Issues raised in last year's report remain relevant, and it would be advisable for teachers to revisit previous reports which are on the website 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. Students need to answer questions that *are* set in all their details and not respond to the question they wish had been asked. Students do well when they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text. 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 A-level 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 very best responses 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 intradiegetic narrators or 'aspects' of genre if students haven't got inside the stories that the narrators are 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 what English Literature primarily ought to do. Readers need to be enabled to enter fictional worlds in as three-dimensional way as possible and only when the story has worked the imagination can readers engage in critical thinking about their reading.

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## 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 of *Atonement*). 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.

An example here might help. In the *Othello* extract question on paper 1A a significant number of students did not know that Iago is on stage witnessing Othello’s suicide, having been arrested by the Venetian officials beforehand and wounded by Othello. Those who were aware of this fact were able to comment on the silent and haunting figure, who bleeds as he watches while Cassio gets promoted and while Othello stabs himself and dies. Not knowing the factual detail of Iago’s presence resulted in erroneous comments being made. Not knowing the factual details of texts was also seen in other papers, for example on paper 1B some students thought that Emma is in love with Frank Churchill and is heartbroken when she discovers his engagement to Jane Fairfax and on the crime writing paper there were several students who did not know the facts of the story of *Peter Grimes* and wrote erroneously and at length about Peter’s having been abused by his father when he was a child.

## Specific comments about 1A: Aspects of Tragedy

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing and there were many superb responses to the questions showing what students can achieve after two years of studying and working with the genre of tragedy. Many students focused well on the questions and there was plenty of evidence that the advice given in previous reports and in the official AQA courses had been taken.

Those students who performed less well were those who had seemingly decided beforehand what they were going to write, those who did not know their texts well enough to supply supportive material for their arguments and those who did not read the questions carefully or simply misunderstood them. Given that this paper is closed book, students needed to have spent time acquiring excellent textual knowledge to draw from effectively in the construction of their arguments. This is especially true of the Shakespeare text which is used in both Section A and B and accounts for two thirds of the marks for this paper.

## Shakespeare

*Othello* was by far the most popular choice, though more centres now seem to be offering *King Lear*. Excellent responses were seen to all questions, although the responses to *King Lear* were slightly stronger than those to *Othello*. The main issue with the less focused answers on *Othello*, was the inclusion of writing about Othello’s race, regardless of relevance. An issue seen in responses on both plays, though, was the unfocused and generalised material about women and

patriarchal societies. Much generalised critical debate notionally from feminist and postcolonial perspectives prevented students from focusing on the questions.

## Section A

In the passage based questions which ask students to ‘explore’ a printed extract, students need to establish a sense of the extract’s narrative and tragic trajectory, ensuring that they focus on how the passage begins, how it ends and what factually happens in it. Engaging with the dramatic narrative that is unfolding is essential, and given that we are dealing with tragedy, that engagement may well be of an emotional nature since tragedy deals with such heavy matters. If students securely see the story of the extract and place it accurately they are in a position to begin their exploration of the significance of tragic aspects. As always, where students wrote about the play as drama, responses were more engaging. For example, writing about the subverted intimacy of Gonerill and Albany on stage together or the impact of the tragic loading of the bed in full view of the audience was more successful than writing about Shakespeare’s use of the word ‘milk’ or ‘fool’ and what these words might mean in isolation.

### Question 1

The extract from *Othello* was from Act 5 scene 2. Although not quite the ending of the play (there are another 12 lines to go), this is the end of Othello’s story and where he commits suicide. The extract begins after Othello’s murder of Desdemona and just after Lodovico, Cassio, Montano, Iago and officers enter the bedchamber. Othello has learned he has made a terrible mistake and tries to kill Iago – who promises to never speak again. Cassio reveals that Roderigo is dead but has written letters which reveal Iago’s plot. Othello asks Cassio how he acquired Desdemona’s handkerchief and Cassio says he found it in his chamber and that Iago had said he put it there.

It is because of this that Othello calls himself a fool, which is where the extract begins. The story of the extract is that Cassio reveals more of the contents of Roderigo’s letters which pertain to how Cassio was ‘cast’. Lodovico then, as a representative of the Venetian political world, formally tells Othello that his command is taken off and he must leave with Lodovico as a prisoner. Lodovico says that Iago will be tortured and Cassio is promoted to rule in Cyprus. Othello interrupts at this point and takes control to deliver his final speech. At this point he is crying profusely, (his eyes are dropping tears as ‘fast as the Arabian trees their medicinal gum’). He gives what might be his own epitaph and then stabs himself with a weapon he must have hidden from view. The stabbing is fatal and he falls on the bed, on which the dead Desdemona and Emilia lie; he kisses Desdemona and dies.

There is much in this extract that could be discussed in terms of tragedy but primarily students needed to focus on the final speech and death of the tragic hero. At the point when Othello delivers his final speech he is a broken and conflicted man; he is being watched by a number of people on stage (the Venetian officials and his tormentor) as well as the theatre audience who are sharing this imaginary moment with him. Othello’s weeping is a fact that needed to be established. Othello, himself, wants it to be put into Lodovico’s account to the state: ‘set you down this’. He wants his audience to pay attention to it, as presumably does Shakespeare. Now whether Othello is crying for himself or Desdemona or both of them or just at ‘the pity of it’ is something that students could have debated.

His death also needed to be paid attention to. It would be hard in a theatre not to focus on the hero who takes out a dagger and thrusts it into his body, staggering then to reach the corpse of his dead wife in order to kiss her. This is surely a significant aspect of the extract and the tragedy as a

whole. Some students did write incisively about Othello's death and the completion of the tragic pattern. There was also plenty of good debate about the validity of Othello's assessment of himself and whether his speech is noble and magnificent or more of his self dramatising and self importance. Those who were aware of Iago's presence wrote tellingly of his silence and there was also good discussion of Cassio and whether he offers resolution and hope for the future or whether he is actually a poor choice being more susceptible to manipulation than Othello (with 'poor and unhappy brains for drinking').

However, there were many students who did not write about Othello's death at all which was unfortunate. Some students got no further than Othello's saying 'O fool, fool, fool'. What then followed was a discussion of the use of triplets here and elsewhere in the play, the various meanings of 'fool' and who else might be a fool and how the repetition showed Othello's language had lost its dignity since, as a result of Iago's influence, he can only speak crudely and in prose. Such comments are inaccurate. Many students made much of Othello's speaking in prose when he says 'O fool, fool, fool', not seeing that the words in fact (because of their placing on the page) complete a line of blank verse that has occurred before. Students need to look more closely and think more carefully before claiming Othello speaks Iago's language after he is poisoned by him. While there is some accuracy in the claim, students must avoid sweeping statements. If they look at the text they will see that Othello mostly speaks in verse even in Acts 3, 4 and 5 and his soliloquy over the sleeping body of Desdemona, that happens just before his extract, is anything but Iagoesque.

However, some students were able to write more subtly about Othello's language in this scene and his calling himself a fool. Much was of course written on the monologue and there was some excellent discussion of what Othello says and the language used to express his ideas. Some good discussion focused on his loving Desdemona not wisely but too well and of the final emotive couplet. Some responses made odd selections of things to comment on, however. The phrase 'circumcised dog' was a favourite of many since students saw this as an opportunity to write about other examples of animal imagery in the play – including all the times 'dog' is used. Many responses ignored the dramatic and tragic narrative of the extract and wrote an essay on race. Those who thought that Lodovico is calling Othello a slave used this as the basis of their argument and then picked out all the references to foreign places in Othello's speech to support ideas about Othello being an outsider and a victim of a white society that is inherently racist towards him. Inevitably this approach took the students back to Act 1 and the old black ram and Barbary horse. Although many students like to quote these derogatory terms from Act 1, the words are rarely used effectively to make apt points. This is largely because the phrases are decontextualised and no sense is given of the dramatic purpose of their use at the point of the play when they are delivered.

When writing about the extract, some responses, of course, made valid interpretations about Othello's culture and otherness, with some good comments on how he positions himself as both a Turk and a slayer of the Turk, a dog and a dog killer, but such comments were always linked to what is happening at this point in the play's story.

## Question 2

The extract from *King Lear* was from Act 4 scene 2, and it centres on the altercation between Gonerill and Albany signalling Albany's moral awakening. The argument is explosive and vituperative and comes after the conspiratorial and flirtatious exchanges between Edmund and Gonerill with Oswald alerting them to the change in Albany. The extract opens with Oswald's muffled warning to Gonerill that Albany is on his way. Albany then enters and Oswald leaves.

Although Gonerill opens the interaction with a sniping comment, Albany soon dominates the scene accusing her and Regan of vile conduct towards their gracious father. He also prophesises that if the gods do not intervene to stop this terrible and unnatural behaviour then humanity will self destruct.

Gonerill is not cowed by Albany's assault and accuses him of unmanly weakness. She reminds him and the audience of the impending invasion from France and husband and wife continue to viciously trade insults in a way that makes it clear this is no domestic tiff. At the end of the scene, a messenger arrives with the information that Cornwall is dead, having been slain by his servant while he was putting out Gloucester's second eye. After the extract Albany expresses his shock, horror and pity at what he has heard about the terrible injustice inflicted on Gloucester. Albany's reaction contrasts with Gonerill's aside in which she shows no remorse for Gloucester but is consumed with jealous fears that Regan is now be available for Edmund.

Many students responded well to this extract and some excellent comments were made about Albany who is now placed firmly on the side of the good, aligned with Lear and Gloucester, Kent, Edgar and Cordelia. There was plenty of interesting discussion of the nature of evil and the cracking and breaking of relationships as revealed in the extract. Much was said of the state of marriage and the father /child bond and excellent links were made here to the wider play. There was also insightful discussion of the roles of Oswald and the messenger, who are both on the side of evil and who serve those in power.

When students struggled it was usually because they did not know the play well enough to locate the scene contextually and did not really know what takes place here. Some students also chose not to write about what actually happens and instead wrote about the patriarchy and attitudes to women in the rest of the play. While it was valid to discuss Albany's cruel verbal abuse of his wife, it was hard to see, given how she responds to him, that Gonerill is simply a victim of his bullying. Students need to respond to gender issues with more subtlety and with an eye on the complexity of the text.

In both Question 1 and 2, the most effective responses were those which focused tightly on the extract, saw its dramatic narrative and made valid connections with the rest of the play. Those connections did not take the response away from the extract but enhanced points that were made about it.

## **Section B**

The Section B tasks require different skills from students. Here students have to debate a given critical view about their Shakespeare play or, in the case of Question 3, explore the significance of something (here the military world) in relation to the tragedy as a whole. The critical ideas set up in the questions inevitably include some challenge but they are views that are palpably easy to endorse if students wish to do so. Indeed for many less successful students a good approach might have been to agree with the given view and simply deal with the key terms in a direct and straightforward way. Students performed well in this section when they took ownership of the debate and hit the question head on.

## **Question 3**

Question 3 was the less popular of the *Othello* questions but it was often done very well. Many responses focused on the significance of the military world to Othello as the general of the Venetian army arguing that it gives him status as a tragic hero. There was also some good

discussion of how the promotion of Cassio to lieutenant triggers Iago's jealous plotting. Several students wrote insightfully about the collision of the military and domestic worlds and how this collision leads to the ultimate catastrophe. Students who took this approach were able to incorporate sharp comments about the play's structure. When students struggled with the question it was because they did not know the text well enough to range around it for details. When they ran out of things to say about the military world they often just wrote about anything to do with tragedy.

#### **Question 4**

Question 4 was far more popular but several students created difficulties for themselves by choosing not to focus on the question which is about Othello as a murderer. The debate set up is whether Othello is cruel or misguided as a murderer. Several responses ignored the word murderer and just wrote about Othello as a man. The key issue though was with understanding the word 'misguided'. Several students did not understand that a guide is someone who leads and that it is Iago who is the misguider.

What students wanted to write about here was race and society and invariably this took students to Act 1 which is not where Othello is a murderer. Much was written about how Othello is not cruel in Act 1 and this was not a very helpful direction to take especially when students often based more than half of their answer on Acts 1 and 2. The students who performed most successfully began their answers with an immediate focus on Othello's murder of Desdemona and then examined how Iago leads him to this point with the details coming from Act 3 onwards. Some students wrote insightfully about how Othello is cruel to Desdemona both in the build up to the murder and during the murder itself. Several focused on his method of strangulation and his tormenting her during it. A surprising number of students, though, did not write about the murder at all.

#### **Question 5**

Question 5 was answered well by those students who knew what justice is and could distinguish between human and divine. Some excellent work was seen when students wrote about the outcomes of the different trials in the play and then debated how justice is meted out – if at all. There was some really good discussion of the lack of intervention of the gods in the treatment of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia and students focused well on the terrible irony of characters calling for justice only to be met with further horrors. Some responses challenged the view set up and said that there was evidence of human justice in the defeat of Edmund by Edgar in the trial by combat though there were many responses which claimed that Edmund in fact receives no justice from the society which mocks him for his illegitimate status. When responses were less secure it was often because the term justice was not understood which was surprising given how important justice is in this play and how it is also a key element in both the Crime writing and Political and social protest writing papers. Some responses confused the question with something relating to the divine right of kings and went down the wrong route altogether.

#### **Question 6**

Fewer students responded to Question 6. There was plenty of good discussion of Cordelia as a victim and some students wrote well on her being saintly, drawing upon her Christian behaviour in Act 4 and her being sacrificed in Act 5. Some interesting ideas were raised about her being tender and human and much was made of her kindness to Lear and Kent in the reconciliation scene. Some students disagreed with the given statement and argued that Cordelia is stubborn (though still human) and rather irritating in her displays of pride and self-righteousness.

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## Section C

This year the questions in this section were largely done well and students seemed to enjoy writing their responses. It was often the case that question focus in this section was sharper than in Section B. However, occasionally a particular interpretation of a text got in the way of the question and students then struggled to make their comments relevant. This was often seen in the discussion of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* when students were so keen on writing about the knight as a rapist of the faery that the question got lost and the interpretation became everything.

### Question 7

Question 7 was answered particularly well and there was a pleasing range of ideas and opinions on all texts. This showed that students were thinking for themselves and benefitting as a result. In the responses where *Death of a Salesman* was one of the chosen texts, there was very good focus on the Requiem and many different ideas about positives and negatives. Those who sympathised with Willy felt that his sad story eclipsed everything else. Much was said about the insurance money and whether this is a negative or positive. Unfortunately only a few discussed Miller's ambiguity regarding the insurance payout and students either claimed that the family received the money and were now happy and debt free or that they didn't get the money and were likely to accrue more debt and unhappiness. Whichever line they took some credit was given.

Some good discussion centred on Linda though there were some simple claims that her repeating 'we're free' meant that she is happy. It would help if students were more aware of the ambiguities which arise from the play in relation to Linda in the Requiem. It could of course be that Linda's saying we're free could mean that she expresses some kind of freedom at the prospect of a life which is not dominated by a controlling and erratic husband. However, Miller's stage direction at this point, after Linda has repeatedly apologised for not being able to cry is 'A sob rises in her throat' followed by 'Sobbing more fully, released' and then finally 'Linda sobs quietly'. This puts a very different spin on her saying 'we're free'. The stage direction is challenging for actors as Linda is clearly breaking down with the sobs coming from deep within her. Whether this is then judged as positive or negative is for the students to decide but her sobbing should not be ignored.

Other texts were also handled in interesting ways. When *Richard II* was discussed there was good focus on the ending and Richard's growth as a man which was seen as a positive. Several students argued that his courageous defiance against his murderers is also a positive. Other interesting comments were made about King Henry and how he offers no positive since he will start his reign with blood on his hands replicating the position Richard was in at the start of the play with the suggestion that the death of his uncle Gloucester is his responsibility.

With *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* there was some perceptive discussion of Angel's holding hands with Liza-Lu and walking ahead into the future. Some argued that Tess lives on through her sister and so this is a positive; others argued that the image is more disturbing given Angel's treatment of Tess and given that Liza Lu is little more than a child. Most students though focused on the terrible sadness of Tess' death and the negativity of the black flag presided over by the President of the Immortals who had ended his sport with Tess.

When Keats was the chosen text, it was answered well by those students who selected appropriately to suit their ideas. Some really interesting discussion was seen on all the endings of the poems. Although *Isabella* was seen to have a very negative ending, some students argued that given that her story becomes a legend that is frequently retold, the story's endurance is itself a positive. A similar kind of interpretation was put forward about *La Belle Dame*. Most argued that the

circular structure of the narrative consolidated the unremittingly bleak feel to the story, but some argued that the fact the knight can tell his story to the unknown narrator is a positive of sorts, given the story can be passed on as a kind of warning.

The ending of *The Great Gatsby* was largely seen as negative with Gatsby's death and Tom and Daisy's continuation being sad because Nick considers it so. This text was often well handled.

### **Question 8**

In Question 8, the most effective responses were produced by those who thought about 'exceptional', 'falling from good fortune' and misery'. Students needed to debate the terms in relation to the protagonists. There was a lot to cover in this question. A few students, unfortunately, did not get beyond discussing who the protagonists might be which did not take them far into the question and some students only managed to discuss 'exceptional' though when the discussion was apt they were still credited for their ideas. Students responded in a range of different ways to 'exceptional' and many challenged the claim.

Tess, Willy and Gatsby were thought to be unexceptional socially because of their lower class backgrounds, but some students argued that Tess' purity and beauty make her exceptional in a different way. Some said that she is unexceptional as her story is tragically common. Students were generally very thoughtful here. Gatsby was said to be exceptional because of his extraordinary gift for hope and Willy was seen as having exceptional depth of feeling with an exceptional desire to succeed in an unforgiving capitalist world.

On the whole, there was good discussion of all the texts when students knew them well and referred closely to details. The fall from good fortune was largely debated well too, particularly in relation to Richard, Lycius and Lamia. The least successful part of the question was the discussion of misery. Although misery was mentioned it was not often interrogated. However, it was well done in the discussion of the knight, Isabella and Richard.

### **Conclusion**

In all questions students were successful if they responded freshly to the questions and knew their texts. They were less successful when they tried to shoehorn in pre-learned material and micro analysed methods in a decontextualised way. So, the clear message here is that students need to place the texts themselves at the centre of their study and their revision. An interesting question for teachers to think about is how many times students should actually read their texts before they take their final exams.

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

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