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AS

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1A Literary Genres: drama: aspects of tragedy  
Report on the Examination

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7716  
2017

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## **Introductory Comments**

This is the second year of the reformed AS examinations for LITB and although the entry was smaller than last year, it was still healthy and plenty of excellent work was seen on Aspects of Tragedy and Aspects of Comedy. For those centres offering AS as a springboard for A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of genre and texts. Students seem to have enjoyed reading and exploring their texts through the lens of literary genres and examiners reported that, on the whole, the performance of students was better this year with answers being more tightly focused on the tasks. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers.

As with last year, it is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and, to an extent, are interdependent. They share the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the AOs are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. This year all papers were marked online using RM Assessor.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts. Indeed, if they do compare, it invariably gets in the way and adds nothing or little to the answers. Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, as expected, very similar.

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

In all AQA courses for Specification B, in all official communications and in all our support materials on the website, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess. When they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy that are not required by the question. Although students are studying the genres of tragedy and comedy, the tasks do not require them to write everything or anything known about the genre including what Aristotle, Hegel and other theorists have said. If students subvert questions they usually get into a muddle.

In 1A and 1B Section A, there is an imperative to write about the specific tragic and comedic aspects set up in the bullets and those that are also evident in the passage itself and which connect to the wider play. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students needed to centre their debates were also clearly signaled, for example Willy Loman's tragic flaw in *Death of a Salesman*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the comedy's being always trivial and never serious, Gatsby's being an admirable tragic hero in *The Great Gatsby* and distressing events and optimism in *Small Island*.

## **The importance of students knowing their texts and then reading them through the lens of genre**

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts *through* the lens of genre and not *at* the lens of genre itself. They are not required to write about various generic theories or indeed about literary theory in general. The text, its story and the narrative arc must have priority before other work can begin. Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation in both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Although this might seem obvious, they need to know what happens and how the story ends. They also need to be able to write relevantly about specific parts of the text and have ideas about what can be analysed in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations, though knowing quotations and using them judiciously always helps.

Students who had a secure understanding of the chronology and characters of their stories could make good choices. They could focus on particular events, use appropriate details and write in an informed way. Making good choices is crucial. The student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. Having secure textual knowledge gives students confidence; it is the base from which all else springs. Some students made bad choices that led them away from the task. These bad choices were often made because of inadequate textual knowledge and this resulted in students struggling with the tasks, often writing in a general, vague and inaccurate way. Several students tried to disguise their lack of knowledge by making things up, particularly quotations, and they then wrote about the significance of their invented words as if the words belonged to the authors. Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from students' arguments. If students do not know quotations then they would be best advised to simply explain their ideas using their own words and, providing that their explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, they will be credited.

Clearly it is imperative for this specification that students also have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how the texts connect with a traditional pattern and how they may disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there is a tragic or comedic absolute or template which writers are always trying to model. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

### **The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate**

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view or explore the significance of particular aspects. This is also the case with the poetry questions. The word 'significance' in the Shakespeare passage based question – and where it is used elsewhere - is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

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## **The passage based questions**

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or their poetry text. The passage is provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play or poetry text. In all cases students need to read – or reread - the extract carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place.

The main difference between the passages selected for Papers 1 and 2 is that the Shakespeare passage is longer with the expectation that students will spend most of their time writing about the passage (with guided bullets), linking appropriately to the wider play, whereas the extract from the poetry text is shorter and has been selected to lead students into the debate set up in the question. Students are expected to use the passage for part of their answer and then range more widely around the text, as they construct their argument. This is made clear in the questions.

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and bullets and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the bullets are addressed there is no directive as to how much time is spent on each. When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. Students have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words which is rarely productive and usually takes students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

In the Section A questions of Papers 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and since students have their texts with them in the exam they can easily contextualise the extracts in terms of the wider text. This will immediately enable them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

## **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. In Papers 1A and 1B, it is specifically dramatic method, where, in relation to the question, students need to give a sense of how the play has been shaped by the dramatists. In Papers 2A and 2B the focus is on the shaping of stories in poetry and novels.

Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest

responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analysis of single words or comments about rhyme and metre. A particular problem for some students was that they wrote about features that they did not understand. This was particularly true of iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose. Many students do not seem to know what the terms mean and they ended up writing inaccurately. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Fortunately fewer students this year were writing about punctuation, but there were still some who tried to find meanings in commas and full stops.

### **The significance and influence of contexts**

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

### **Writing skills**

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is of course essential in a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. To write impressively does not mean to flood writing with critical, tragic and comedic terminology, often using that terminology for its own sake and not really understanding it anyway. Some students unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward and cluttered, sometimes making little sense. Such writing was often marred by technical errors. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Several students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty and which did not gain them marks.

### **Freeing students up and giving them ownership of their writing**

Too often, some students were burdened with terminology or material which they seemed to feel they had to include. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but others included the gratuitous inclusion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology which was not often understood. Such terminology often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if as many as possible appeared in their writing. It is very rare that words like *anagnorisis*, *stichomythia*, and *zeugma*, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence. Often English, rather than Greek or Latin, expressions make much more sense and are understood more by those who are using them.

Similarly some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic and comedic aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students references to other texts got in the way.

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It is important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Writing about what is not understood leads to very confused writing.

### **The importance of clear and independent thinking**

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. They need to approach the paper and questions without any preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded.

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2018.

### **Section A**

In section A students are required to write about one of two plays by Shakespeare: *Othello* or *King Lear*. Examiners saw responses on both of these plays although *Othello* was significantly more popular. The questions in this section consist of an extract with the instruction to consider specific aspects of dramatic tragedy in relation to the extract and the play as a whole. Although examiners have no preconceptions about exactly how much of the response will be based on the extract and how much will be about the rest of the play, it is expected that there will be thorough coverage of the extract and students who merely commented that a certain character or idea was present in the extract and then immediately went on to write about that character or idea in very general terms did not focus on the task set and therefore did not reach the higher bands of the mark scheme. This was especially evident in the question on *Othello* where some students obviously had much to say about Iago and seeing he was present in the given extract, merely noted this fact and then wrote an essay about his role in the play as a whole, without mentioning anything relevant to the first two bullet points of the question. There were also examples of students writing about *King Lear* who spotted the word 'nothing' in the extract and went on to write about the significance of that word in the play, again ignoring most of the extract and the question's bullet points.

In order to avoid being side-tracked in this way, it is important that students start by thinking about what actually happens in the extract and how this fits into the dramatic action of the whole play. If students think about what the audience see and hear on stage, how this is exciting or tense or moving and how it progresses the story, they are well on their way to thinking about dramatic effects and methods. This is a much more fruitful way of writing about AO2 when writing about drama texts than considering individual words and phrases or even, on occasion, punctuation.

### **Question 1: *Othello***

This question was extremely popular and most students had plenty to say. Although the majority of students had no trouble placing the extract in the context of the whole play, a few struggled to remember where it came and these students found the question difficult. Quite a number were unsure who Lodovico was. However, many students knew the play well and could write confidently about the extract: there was much good work on the role of Lodovico, perhaps a character

students had not thought about too much prior to the examination, and there was a sense of students thinking originally and creatively about his role as a representative of Venice; a character whose outsider viewpoint is perhaps shared by the audience and a character who misses an opportunity to stop Othello's cruel treatment of Desdemona before its tragic conclusion. Many students used the fact that Lodovico is a visitor from Venice as a springboard to write about the contrasting settings of Venice and Cyprus in the play, and his incredulity in the line: 'This would not be believed in Venice' as an opportunity to write about the change in Othello from the start of the play: both valid links to the play as a whole.

The second bullet point asked students to consider the dialogue between Othello and Desdemona and this was less well done. Many students wrote in general terms about the relationship between the characters and some used it as an opportunity to write about the change in Othello's language from the start of the play – something which was sometimes made relevant to the bullet point (when considered alongside Desdemona's respectful and concerned language) but was more often an excuse to say that Othello always uses blank verse at the start of the play but from this point in the play on always speaks in prose to show his deterioration. A large number of students said this, showing that they either did not understand the terms or had not read the passage very carefully: much of what Othello says here is in blank verse. This seemed an example of students who were determined to fit in a learned fact, in this case about Shakespeare's language, and ignored the part of the extract which did not fit in with their theory, again proving the importance of students actually engaging with the text and thinking independently rather than relying on generalisations and thinking that merely using technical terms for their own sake will impress.

However, where students were thinking for themselves there was much that was praiseworthy here with students writing about the misunderstandings between Othello and Desdemona, the contrast in their language, the fractured nature of the dialogue and the violent imagery used by Othello. A few thought that the word 'mistress' used by Othello to Desdemona was a reference to her infidelity, missing the change in meaning of this word.

Contexts were not always dealt with sensibly; weaker students tended to say that in Shakespeare's time it was perfectly acceptable for a man to hit his wife and therefore Othello's action of hitting Desdemona would not have caused anyone in the audience to bat an eyelid. This totally ignored the way the relationship between Othello and Desdemona is established in the play as one of mutual respect and love – so the action can be seen as shocking in the context of what has gone before in the play. Audiences were accorded a similar homogeneity by students who stated that everyone was religious in Shakespeare's time and therefore would be shocked by Othello using the word 'devil'. Better students avoided making generalisations about the beliefs and values of very mixed groups of people either in the past or the present.

The third bullet point allows students to consider any other aspects of dramatic tragedy they may find of interest in the extract. Many wrote about Iago and where they selected their material carefully rather than writing everything they knew about the character, the responses were interesting. Many focused on his - mostly silent - presence on stage in the extract and were able to make useful comments about the dramatic effectiveness of this. Comments on the escalating violence in the extract, which will lead eventually to Desdemona's murder, were also relevant.

## **Question 2: *King Lear***

This question was not quite as popular as question 1. There were many good responses where students showed sophistication and precision in their reading of the scene and the play but there



were other responses where students had only a scant knowledge of the Gloucester sub-plot and who therefore subverted the question to enable them to write about the section of the play they knew best – Lear and his daughters, which was the question set on last year’s paper. These students identified the theme of parents and children in the extract and then linked it to Lear’s relationships with his daughters at the start of the play and wrote their whole essay about this. It goes without saying that students who wrote about the extract on the paper and considered the bullet points in the question were far more successful.

The first bullet point asked students to consider disguise as an aspect of dramatic tragedy. Many students knew a lot about blindness – which is obviously linked to disguise – and those who were able to shape this knowledge to address the idea of disguise made thoughtful and insightful points. Those who just wrote about blindness, without shaping their comments were less successful in addressing the question. Much was said about the parallels between Gloucester and Lear in response to the second bullet point and many students engaged sensitively with the character of Gloucester, writing about his suffering, his tragic downfall and his despair in this scene. The significance of this scene in Edgar’s journey was frequently commented on and the pathos of Gloucester’s suicide attempt obviously had a profound effect on some students. The best students had the confidence to question the plausibility of the suicide attempt for an audience and frequently commented on Edgar’s role in creating the scene below for his father and therefore perhaps making it a little more convincing for an audience seeing it on stage; some students considered possible reasons why Shakespeare continues to conceal Edgar’s true identity from his father at this stage in the play.

Although this was an issue for some candidates regardless of their choice of text, it seemed that when writing about *King Lear* especially, students could not resist the use of such terms as anagnorisis, peripeteia, hamartia and catharsis. Although some students used these terms confidently and accurately – and sparingly – others were so desperate to show that they knew them that they shoehorned them in to almost every sentence, detracting from their argument and often using the words incorrectly; the English words for the emotions and structural points described by these terms often communicated the student’s ideas much better.

## **Section B**

In section B students write about one of three plays: *Richard II*; *Death of a Salesman* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Death of a Salesman* was by far the most popular of these texts although examiners saw responses on all three.

In this section students are asked to consider a statement or a point of view about their chosen text. The mark scheme now has the descriptors for AO5: ‘Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations’ printed first to highlight its importance: if students create a sensible and relevant argument in response to the task the other assessment objectives should follow. Students struggled on all three texts when they were determined to offload everything they knew about the play, or worse, everything they knew about tragedy, without selecting and shaping their material.

### **Question 3: *Richard II***

Although not many responses to *Richard II* were seen, those students who attempted it seemed to have enjoyed the play and students of all levels of ability produced interesting and engaging work. There was genuine consideration of the task with students finding reasons why our sympathy

should be with both Bolingbroke and Richard and thinking carefully about how the audience's sympathies might change during the course of the play. Comments about context were well-integrated on the whole with students considering ideas about kingship, Bolingbroke's action of usurping the crown and Richard's representation as a king and as a private man.

#### **Question 4: *Death of a Salesman***

This was by far the most popular text in section B. Students who constructed an argument based on the statement in the question were able to make a range of interesting points about Willy's inability to connect with Linda and his sons and his inability to connect with his friends and colleagues, such as Charley and Howard. Many were able to tie this in with his guilt over his affair, especially when writing about his relationship with Biff and many were able to pinpoint his escape into memory or fantasy to avoid connecting with the present. American consumerism was often woven in nicely as a context and students made relevant comments about the setting of the Lomans' house and the symbolism of the stockings. Students fared less well if they dismissed the view in the question in their introduction – thereby not following the instruction to 'explore' the idea that Willy's tragic flaw is his inability to connect – and wrote nearly all their essay on something else which might be considered his tragic flaw, usually his pride, or if they said that he does not have a tragic flaw, he is destroyed by the American Dream. While it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with the view in the question and come to a different conclusion, it is not wise to ignore the given opinion completely. As always, those students who had the confidence to think about an idea, perhaps one which they had not encountered before, and focus closely on the task, did well.

#### **Question 5: *A Streetcar Named Desire***

Not many responses to this question were seen. Some students tried to subvert the question by saying that the men in the play are not really destructive but that Blanche is and then writing their whole essay on Blanche. Many discussed Stanley at length, with most agreeing that he is destructive and some trying to find excuses for his behaviour. Students who knew the play well enough to discuss characters such as Mitch, the doctor, Allan and Steve were often able to produce a more nuanced and thoughtful response.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall it was pleasing to see students of all abilities engaging so positively with their set texts and producing such an interesting range of responses. There were a number of excellent responses and it is worth noting that students, who, on the whole, were sitting their GCSE examinations only a year ago, can produce work of such a high standard.



**Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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