

AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/1B Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy
Report on the Examination

7716
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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 1B: Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy

Section A

Question 1: The Taming of the Shrew

In responses to this task, many students impressively handled the presentation of Petruchio, Grumio and Hortensio in this extract. The most effective responses here were able to see how the verbal and physical comedy was created in the early half of the scene through Petruchio and Grumio, not only exploring this moment, but linking it to the humiliation of Katherina later in the text.

Likewise, students had a good understanding of the importance in dramatic comedy of the relationship between servants and masters. Hortensio’s structural purpose in the second half of the extract was also ably discussed - particularly in terms of Petruchio’s arrival in Padua and the wider set of marriage plots.

Question 2: Twelfth Night

This was a popular task and one which, in general, produced some effective responses from students. The most successful responses were able to give a full appreciation of this early comedic scene from the play, noting fully the aftermath of the shipwreck, Viola’s transformation and her interaction with the Captain - and linking this moment to later events in the play.

More effective responses here saw this moment as the start of a comedic trajectory and students were able to reflect on the structural implication of this extract to the whole of the play. These responses examined the detail of the language and relationship between Viola and the Captain, considering the full implications of how Shakespeare develops this sequence. Less effective

responses here wanted too quickly to connect events with familiar earlier and later scenes in the play, such as Orsino 'falling in love' with Cesario.

Several responses were able to consider the structural significance of the Captain, as well as examine the more daring act of disguise by Viola. Some responses were aware of the context of the theatre during the original performance conditions, noting the significance of a young male actor playing Viola, and how this assisted understanding of the text.

Section B

Question 3: She Stoops to Conquer

Several students responded to this question about the significance of Mrs Hardcastle to the comedy of the play. The more effective responses were able to explore her significance as a structural comedic force within the text, exploring issues such as her pretensions, corrupt nature and over-protection of her son Tony.

Some specific sequences were given due attention in answers, not least her confusion over the jewels, events on Crackskull Common and her interactions with Mr Hardcastle. More successful responses also considered how Mrs Hardcastle's misunderstandings made for considerable comedic interest because of the way in which she represented a collision of social classes.

Question 4: The Importance of Being Earnest

This question allowed students to explore the view that Bunburying is nothing more than a device for Wilde to create comedy. Most responses were able to show and support the view that Bunburying was a device for Wilde to create comedy. It was entirely legitimate for students to support this particular view of the function of Bunburying as a comedic device if it was illustrated and supported. Some did also articulate how the notion criticised the society of the play and poked fun at the upper classes constructed in the drama.

Some less successful responses were not always entirely confident in their definition of Bunburying and therefore wrote too vaguely about lynchpin scenes in the comedy where the notion features. A particular difficulty with *The Importance of Being Earnest* is that students sometimes feel the need to write in detail about the plot complexities of the play, and in so doing, do not always engage fully with the task itself.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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