

AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 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 smaller than in previous years, the students who had taken the AS course and had been prepared for the exam had clearly gained much from it. They had understood how to read and write about texts through the lenses of tragedy and comedy and they seemed to have enjoyed their studies. All examiners reported that they saw some really interesting and engaged work. The AS examination is very straightforward in its design and is clearly accessible to students. For those schools offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of 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.

As with previous years, 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 sharing the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. 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 25 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.

As with A-level, there are two essentials for success on Specification B:

- thorough knowledge of the set texts
- answering the questions in all their details.

The importance of students knowing their texts

This might seem obvious, but those students who had a clear sense of the order of events in their texts (who knew how the stories of the texts begin and end and where climaxes and crises occur) had a clear advantage over those who did not. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had a good understanding of the characters, ideas, ideology and genre of their texts and who understood how writers have constructed their narratives to shape meanings. Having good textual knowledge enables students to confidently address the questions and select material appropriately. Making good choices is crucial and the student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood.

Although Papers 1A and 1B are closed book exams and Papers 2A and 2B open book, there is an expectation in both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. This should be prioritised over any critical reading or background and contextual information about writers' lives and times.

Clearly for this specification, 'knowing the text' also requires students to have an understanding of the text's genre both in terms of how the text connects with a traditional pattern and how it may diverge, as seen if the writer consciously plays with and subverts genre. Several students still 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 answering the questions set in all their details

When students are armed with secure textual knowledge then they have to be trained to answer questions that are set and not to subvert them or only partially address them. In all AQA courses, official communications and support materials for Specification B, 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 or requirements that are not asked in the questions. When students 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.

Section A: passage based and extract 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 to 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 and not just pick out themes and words to comment on.

The main difference between the sections of text 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 to 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 as this 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' wider 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 immediately enables them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

Section B questions

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that students are invited to debate a view or construct an argument around key aspects of tragedy or comedy (signaled either by 'Explore the view that' or 'Explore the significance of'). This is also the case with the poetry questions which have an extract. 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. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students needed to centre their debates are also clearly set up in the question, for example Gaunt's and York's having more greatness and nobility than Richard in *Richard II*, Lady Bracknell and whether she is the principal source of comedy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Daisy's ultimately being a victim in *The Great Gatsby* and Bernard Bligh's being nothing more than a figure of fun in *Small Island*.

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 specifically to further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

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.

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. Some students wrote about features that they did not understand, for example iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose. Many students did not seem to know what the terms mean and they invariably got into a muddle. The same was true of many who wrote about rhyme schemes. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and students integrated these into their arguments.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which are set up in the questions and which emerge naturally from texts. 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 write about writers' lives or the times in which they lived. In the least secure 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 this helped them to construct powerful arguments. To write well 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.

Taking ownership

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.

There is no requirement for students to compare texts. There is no requirement to incorporate historical or biographical context. There is no requirement to do anything that the question does not set up.

It is also 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 best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read.

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 2019.

Specific comments about paper 2A

Although the most popular choices were again Keats and *The Great Gatsby*, there were responses to questions on all the set texts and good answers were seen on all when there was tight focus on the task 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.

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 to construct their arguments and most students do find them helpful when they understand 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, they 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.

It is also important to say that students must not have a preconceived idea about the number of poems that they will be required to answer on. Questions are written to be interesting and accessible and the number of poems required 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 how many other poems they need to write about.

Question 1: John Keats selection

In this question students needed to focus on the aspect of the ‘tragic outcome’ of Lamia and Lycius and decide whether they agreed that the tragic outcome is a result of Lamia’s and Lycius’s ‘unwise and excessive love’. Students were asked to focus on the extract and other relevant parts of *Lamia*. The question was very clear about what was required of students in terms of the text. However, unfortunately, some students thought that they ought to write about other poems and some chose to do so, in effect writing their own question. Given that the question was about the protagonists of *Lamia*, Lamia and Lycius, any writing about *The Eve of St Agnes*, for example, could not be relevant. There should not have been any confusion if students had answered the question set, unless of course they mistakenly believed they had to do something that was not set up by the question.

The selected extract was from the start of Part 2 and here, the narrator stands back from the narrative and comments on the nature of excessive love in an abstract way. The narrator, in a sense, contextualises the intense love of Lycius and Lamia suggesting that such excessive love is always doomed since Love itself, will grow jealous of ‘so complete a pair’ and will destroy them. For the students who understood the extract and the poem, it was easy to integrate comments about the extract into their arguments. There was plenty of intelligent debate and some fascinating arguments with excellent use made of other parts of *Lamia*. Most students were able to write about the tragic outcome of the lovers and engage in a thoughtful debate. A number of students argued that the lovers’ tragic outcome is not caused by excessive love but by the lovers’ lack of wisdom in believing that they could merge the human and immortal worlds. Some argued that the fault rests

with Lamia and her deception, or with Lycius who wants to show her off as a trophy wife; some placed the blame squarely with Apollonius. Unfortunately there were several students who did not know what the tragic outcome is and they were all too happy to move on to other poems. When students wrote about other poems, they did not have marks deducted but they could not be credited for irrelevant material. Most students who moved away from *Lamia*, though, were still able to score marks from the sections of their writing which were on task.

There was generally some good analysis of Keats' methods in the printed extract, the best being on structure and voices, particularly the voice of the narrator and the use of foreshadowing in announcing the end that is to befall Lycius. Language analysis worked when it was firmly connected to the question; it worked less well when single words were analysed in a detached way.

Most students saw that the contexts they were required to work with were literary, moral and the human condition but some still thought they needed to write about Keats' personal life, his Romanticism, his tuberculosis and his relationship with Fanny Brawne and this did not lead to focused writing. It seemed this year that even more students were writing about Keats' personal life.

Question 2: Thomas Hardy selection

There were again several responses to the Hardy poetry selection and Hardy was often chosen alongside the prose text of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. This pairing can work well in shoring up ideas and confidence. The key tragic concept in the question was tragic loss and students had to debate whether it is always linked inextricably to romantic love. The printed extract was from the middle of *Tess's Lament*. Students producing the best responses understood the poem and the narrator's state of mind at the point from which the extract is taken. These students were able to argue that Tess's grief and despair are directly connected to the love she feels and felt for the man who has left her to her 'misery'. Clearly love and loss are linked in this poem and students were able to mount a detailed argument in their discussion of it. Several students chose to use other poems in support of the argument and useful choices were *A Sunday Morning Tragedy*, *The Going* and *Lament*. When students chose to counter the argument, poems which worked well included *Under the Waterfall*, *At an Inn* and *At Castle Boterel*.

Comments on authorial method were generally well integrated and there was particularly good discussion of Hardy's use of Tess's voice and the use of repetition to highlight the linking of love and loss.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

Several centres offered the *Poetry Anthology: Tragedy* as their poetry text and this year it was done quite well. Success, of course, depended on students having an understanding of *Tithonus*. There were several spirited responses with many students arguing that they felt no sympathy for Tithonus because he fails to see his own responsibility and because he displays arrogance. Several students though were more sympathetic and focused on Tithonus' humanity and his unenviable position in being unable to die. Most students selected well for their second poem and good discussion was seen in response to *Miss Gee*, the Extract from *Paradise Lost*, *The Death of Cuchulain* and "Out, out –".

In terms of method, some of the best writing centred on the authors' choice of narrators and the different voices used within the poems.

Question 4: The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby was again the most popular prose text and the question elicited some really good responses when the students focused entirely on Daisy, which is what they should have done given the question. Unfortunately some students thought that the question invited them to argue who is the true victim of the novel and several students wrote irrelevantly about Myrtle, George Wilson and, of course, Gatsby.

The key aspect here was ‘tragic victim’ and students had to think about whether Daisy can ultimately be considered a tragic victim. ‘Ultimately’ could have been, and indeed was, handled in a number of ways in relation to where the student was positioning themselves in making their judgement – whether it was from the end of the novel or from any number of points within the text or after weighing up a number of interpretations. The best answers were by students who knew their texts really well and used details judiciously in evaluating their positions. Many students were able to incorporate ideas about Nick’s authorial bias and several students argued that Daisy is unfairly maligned and that the text does not take readers inside her head.

Weaker responses tended to focus on material outside the text, in particular, the 1920s and ideas here tended to be very general and sweeping. Students should be discouraged from writing about society’s supposed expectation that all women should be housewives. If students wish to use historical context as part of their argument, then they should see its complexity and evidence their sources; they should not write things as fact that are contradicted by the text itself.

Question 5: Tess of the D’Urbervilles

This text was offered by a number of centres, and on the whole students wrote very well about the significance of Flintcomb-Ash to the tragedy of the novel. Many were able to link the setting to Tess’ tragic trajectory, pointing out that at Flintcomb-Ash Tess suffers physical and mental anguish that takes her to despair. Many students used their texts well here, locating the relevant chapters in their open book and incorporating all kinds of interesting detail. Some excellent arguments centred on Tess as a victim of the setting and of the industrial world where women are treated as ‘hands’, part of the machinery of the industrial revolution. Other good debate focused on the setting as a place where nature turns its back on its own child, leaving her exposed to the ravages of men like Farmer Groby and Alec D’Urberville. Given that the question focused on setting, in writing about Flintcomb-Ash, students were automatically engaging with authorial method. Several argued that Flintcomb-Ash is significant in a structural sense since its miserable location is juxtaposed to the warmth of Talbothays.

When students performed less well it was because they did not know the text well enough to write in a sustained way and some did not know where the Flintcomb-Ash chapters are. Some students wrote about any setting they could think of and some subverted the question and tried to argue that Flintcomb-Ash is not significant but that other locations, especially Marlott and Trantridge, are.

Question 6: The Remains of the Day

Although there were not many responses to this text, examiners reported that they saw some excellent writing on the significance of the relationship between Stevens and his father to the tragedy of the novel. Students found all kinds of significances and there was some very good writing about the attitudes of Stevens' father being replicated and intensified in the son creating tragic experiences for both.

The weakest answers were by those students who did not know the text well enough to select and explore key passages in the construction of their arguments.

Conclusion

So, the key messages for centres as they prepare students for the AS exam are:

- that students should be armed with excellent textual knowledge and
- that students must know how to focus on the questions set and then stay on task.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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