

AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7716/2B Literary Genres: prose and poetry: aspects of comedy
Report on the Examination

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.

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 Latinate, 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.

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.

Question 1: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

Students tended to write well about this text which required them to explore the view that married life is shown as ridiculous. As was the case last year, students who responded to this text tended to write well on it possibly, in part, due to their engaging with the challenging nature of the language. Responses provided were generally very well considered and thoughtful. The most successful responses considered the view that marriage is indeed ridiculous and chose apt references from the extract to explore this view and the hilarity of the domestic silliness surrounding the laxatives. Weaker answers tended to resort to a narrative approach and bring in other texts as comparisons which was not what the question required. Students did not benefit from identifying small bits of language and analysing them. They were more successful if they considered the voice and focused on this and the represented dialogue instead. In other words, as was evident in last year's examinations too, students were more successful if they considered the larger structural features of the narrative.

Question 2: Poetry Anthology: Comedy

The Poetry Anthology task required students to explore the view that serious aspects overshadow humorous aspects in the poetry collection starting with an exploration of *Sunny Prestatyn*. The majority of answers tended to focus on the sexual language used in the poem such as ‘fissured crotch’, and many students then linked that to the ‘fight cancer’ poster at the end. The more successful responses also tended to write about the poem from a wider perspective and explored the effects of capitalism and its effects on society and the coarse language used. There is no preferred answer to the question, and no preferred specific poems, although some choices worked better than others. Some students wrote about *The Flea* and the fact that the serious aspects of what the speaker in the poem was expecting of the female recipient did in fact overshadow the humour in the poem. Her eventual purpling of the flea, they argued, is indicative of her refusal to conform to his desires and submit although of course there is humour evident in the absurdity of the speaker’s conceit.

Another poem that students chose to write about was *A Satirical Elegy of a Late Famous General*. The weaker students tended to write about the poem narratively, arguing that the very nature of it is negative in itself and that therefore there are no humorous aspects evident at all. Stronger responses discussed the satirical nature of the poem and then explored whether the humorous aspects overshadowed the serious ones, often arriving at the conclusion that they did. Similarly, some weaker students writing about *My Rival’s House*, often arrived at the conclusion that there are no humorous aspects evident. Stronger answers identified the irony in the language choices and explored these.

Question 3: Betjeman selection-John Betjeman

The Betjeman task required students to explore the view that women are always shown as silly and frivolous. This question appeared to act as a discriminator for students; the weaker ones simply focused their argument on the word ‘silly’ and whether or not the women were portrayed in such a manner. The additional word ‘frivolous’ provided scope for the more able students to engage with the meaning of the word and apply this to their chosen poems. As with all of these tasks, the importance of choosing the second poem carefully was of paramount importance and this of course demonstrated how well the student was able to understand these texts. Some of the weaker responses tried to subvert the question and argued that it is in fact men who are silly and frivolous, citing the speaker’s adulation for Miss Joan Hunter Dunn in *A Subaltern’s Love Song* in support of their argument which of course wasn’t answering the question.

Question 4: Emma – Jane Austen

Students were required to explore the view that Mr Woodhouse is portrayed as an inoffensive and kind old man who amuses the reader. Some students went down the route of simply retelling the narrative, selecting parts of it that exemplified this statement, but the vast majority of students responding to this text were able to explore the counter view and provide evidence of where this is not always the case, citing Mr Woodhouse’s reluctance for Emma to marry and leave him as an example of his lack of kindness. Some students also focused on his obsession with avoiding danger and wrote about instances of this in their responses such as his over reaction when leaving the party when snow is falling. Some able students were able to identify the fact that Austen uses Mr Woodhouse as a stock character to highlight the flaws of the upper classes and their inability to

identify and empathise with the lower classes. What was evident, in the majority of cases was that students had a solid understanding of the text and the question was enabling for students of all abilities to respond to. The best students dealt with the question terms in full and spent some time looking at whether Mr Woodhouse amuses or annoys the reader.

Question 5: *Small Island* – Andrea Levy

The question on *Small Island*, requiring students to debate where there is an overriding sense of optimism despite the distressing events, produced some excellent responses. The strongest responses produced by students were those which ranged around the text using apposite examples of where the characters, despite the distressing events, are able to overcome them. Weaker answers, as ever, attempted to subvert the question and chose instead to focus simply on the distressing events in the novel, producing a straightforward rundown of them. In addition, some students completely ignored the ending of the novel which was where most of the useful material was.

Students of all abilities were able to identify many of Levy's comedic methods and many opted to focus on the ending of the novel, arguing that despite the obvious tragedy of Queenie having to part with her son, her desire for him to have a better life could be construed as overwhelmingly optimistic as it allowed her to move on and rebuild her marriage and of course allow baby Michael to be brought up by parents with the same colour skin, thus avoiding racial prejudice for all involved. Some students opted to focus on Hortense's eventual acceptance of her life in England and her growing love for Gilbert as well as their optimistic future together with a house and the baby. Others chose to write about Queenie's life, of Bernard's return and their acceptance of one another.

Additionally, many students focused on the comedic methods used by Levy to describe Gilbert throughout the novel and his overwhelming positivity throughout, despite his many obstacles along the way. Gilbert's emotional reaction to being offered a sweet was a popular example of his enduring positivity which many students chose to exemplify his enduring optimism. The better responses really focused on voice and Levy's effervescent humour throughout the text as grounds for optimism. As ever the best responses were those which displayed a coherent overview of the text but chose carefully and most importantly, answered the question.

Question 6: *Wise Children* – Angela Carter

Students responding to this text were asked to write about the presentation of sex as being comically absurd, and what was most apparent was the fact that students of all abilities were able to range around the text confidently to provide examples of this. The question firstly required students to pick out the pertinent points in the narrative when the sexual acts take place, and then debate whether they are portrayed as comedically absurd or not. Such a task was accessed well by students who produced some interesting points as to why the sexual acts are comedically absurd; the most straightforward of them choosing to focus on the age of the protagonists and how in engaging in such activities is subverting a stereotype. Additionally, some responses chose to engage in the debate around incest, commenting on the sheer inappropriateness of the relationships and the resulting comedic aspects to this.

Many students also focused well on authorial methods when responding to this question, choosing to write about the bawdy humour used by Carter and the crude language in these scenes. As ever,

students who focused on the overall effects rather than fixating on the minutiae produced more successful responses. One thoughtful response explored the idea that far from being a comically absurd act, the sex featured in the text between Dora and Perry is borne out of love and Dora's need for a stable relationship and that therefore, the sex isn't in fact comedically absurd at all but a reaction to her desire for love.

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.