

AS

# **ENGLISH LITERATURE B**

7716/2B Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Comedy  
Report on the Examination

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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 2B: Literary genres: Prose and Poetry: Aspects of Comedy**

Although the entry for this paper was less than 200, some interesting responses were seen and it was good to see answers on all six texts. As was noted in the Tragedy paper 2A, there was often an imbalance in the two responses with students clearly knowing one text much better than the second. Unfortunately this will have affected their overall mark. Some students did not seem to be making the most of their open books and it might be worthwhile for centres to develop strategies to help students to use their open books more effectively.

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. The most effective responses throughout this paper were from students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout.

**Section A: Poetry**

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 and have good knowledge of 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, students 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.

Apart from working with the extract, students were then required to range more widely around their text for material to support their views. Questions are written that are interesting and accessible and it is important to note that the number of poems that students are required to answer on 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 whether they have to range more widely across the same poem from which the extract is taken or refer to another poem in the collection as well.

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

Although this text was not offered by many students, those who wrote about it generally knew the poem well and were able to respond with some confidence. The question asked students to explore the view that 'in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, Pertelote is presented as an idealised, attractive and good-natured female'. Most responses agreed that Pertelote is positively presented and there was good use of the text to support ideas about her physical attractiveness and her being frequently described as fair during the tale. Most responses also discussed her attributes in terms of courtly love and focused on her being gracious, courteous and discreet. There was plenty of debate around her relationship with Chauntecleer: his views of her (her being his favourite and his sexual attraction towards her) and her caring or arrogant manner towards him after his dream. Some students were very critical of her seeing her as a kind of harridan. Whatever the views of the student, most seemed to enjoy the question and the text had clearly been taught in a way to bring out a sense of fun.

### **Question 2: *Poetry Anthology: Comedy***

In this question students needed to explore the view that 'Tam is nothing more than a drunken fool'. Students were asked to focus on the given extract where Tam is presented as a drunkard and where his behaviour could be considered foolish. They also needed to refer to other parts of *Tam o'Shanter*. The question which focused on a single poem was of the same design as the question on *Lamia* on the Tragedy paper last year. 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 chose to do so, in effect writing their own question since nothing relevant could be said about any other poem. The question was about Tam and his being nothing more than a drunken fool, so writing about *Mrs Sisyphus*, for example, could not yield any useful material.

While it is true that last year's question asked students to write about two poems from the Anthology, that was because the question was broader. There should not have been any confusion if students had answered the question set unless they did not know enough about *Tam o'Shanter* to argue a case. It was certainly true that some students did not know the poem very well and could not range around it for material and detail. Some perhaps chose not to revise or study it because of the perceived difficulty of the Scottish dialect. However, many did have good knowledge of the poem and engaged well with the question. These students seemed to see the straightforwardness of the task and entered into some lively debate about Tam, drawing widely across the poem for details.

Tam was clearly a favourite with many and much sympathy was expressed for him. Although they recognised his foolishness they argued that Burns is on his side and that Tam 'is just enjoying himself'; they were happy that at the end of his adventures he is unscathed. Most students were able to select details from the extract and wider poem in support of arguments about Tam's

excessive drinking and his foolish disregard for the gathering storm and his wife's wrath. Much was written about his foolish decision to watch the witches dancing and his desire for Nannie though most students thought this was funny rather than something to be censured. There was good discussion of 'is nothing more than' with some students arguing that the story is simply one that entertains us and that Tam is simply nothing more than a drunken fool created by Burns to amuse readers with the antics Tam displays. Others argued that Tam is more than a fool as he has warm relationships with others, that he is convivial and in the end quite heroic in his bravery. Several students commented on Burns' didactic intentions through Tam and when ideas were grounded in the poem they worked well.

### **Question 3: *Betjeman selection***

Several students answered on Betjeman but the success of the responses largely depended on whether they knew and understood *Executive*. Unfortunately several students did not seem to have studied it and therefore they got into a muddle from the start. Those whose knowledge was secure were able to write about the humour that is generated from the pomposity of the narrator and those students argued that the humour is uncomfortable because of the views and attitudes that either the executive expresses or the views that can be deduced from his behaviour such as his cruelty to animals, his work ethics and his pursuit of power. The choices of second poems which worked particularly well for students who had good understanding of them were *Advertising Pays*, *Senex* and *In Westminster Abbey*. When students performed well they were able to integrate comments on Betjeman's methods with the best comments being on his use of narrators and irony.

## **Section B: Prose**

### **Question 4: *Emma***

Several centres offered *Emma* and there were some very effective responses written by those students who knew the novel well and could range around it for details about Frank Churchill. Many students focused on Frank's likeability and there was good discussion of his charm, his adding a bit of spice to the dull world of Highbury, and his general attractiveness. Some students saw him as a saviour - not only of Harriet when she encounters the gypsies but also of Jane Fairfax who might otherwise have been consigned to the sad depths of being a governess. For those who liked Frank Churchill, there was a general readiness to excuse his follies and deceptions because no harm is ultimately done and all ends well. Many were ready to excuse him because Emma does and because even Mr Knightly is able to find him a very good fellow at the end. As expected there was a lot of criticism of Frank and some students were unforgiving of his cruelty towards Jane, his deception of all at Highbury and his failures to visit his father. A number of students did not seem to know the text well and criticised Frank because, as stated in the introductory comments, they thought he breaks Emma's heart because she loves him.

### **Question 5: *Small Island***

This was a popular text and students seemed to enjoy the question which asked them to explore the view that the sexual encounters in *Small Island* are presented as comic rather than romantic. There was some detailed discussion of Queenie's humorous descriptions of her love making with her husband and of her more romantic encounters with Michael. Much was also written about Hortense's descriptions of her early experiences with Gilbert. Students integrated comment on narrative voices very well here and there were some engaged responses. Some students were able to make comparisons between Hortense's descriptions of early married life with Gilbert when they had set up a business transaction to the more muted account of their later sexual encounter

when Hortesne, having developed warm feelings for Gilbert, finally invites her husband into bed. Some responses focused on Bernard and his descriptions of sex with the prostitute though many struggled to say how these encounters were comic.

**Question 6: *Wise Children***

A significant number of students responded to this text which is enjoyed by students and most seem to know it well. It is clearly an excellent example of the comedy genre. The question asked students to explore the significance of places to the comedy of the novel. Most were able to write about Bard Road where the twins live and the places on the other side of the river where Nora and Dora long to be and which signify grandeur and belonging. Some very good arguments were constructed around what the places might symbolise and how they are used by Carter to structure her story. There were also some interesting and valid discussions of Hollywood and the various theatres and music halls. When students struggled it was generally because they did not identify places very securely and just wrote about events and some could not find any significance in the places that were identified. Some responses ignored places altogether and just wrote about the novel and why it is funny.

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

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