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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 1A Literary genres: Aspects of tragedy  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

This is the second year of the new A-level examinations and there is a growing confidence in schools and colleges about how to approach the exam. Many centres have acted on the advice given by AQA in official courses and in materials that are available on the website. Where this advice has been central to teaching, students have clearly benefited. It makes sense that all centres look at the materials available and build the central information into their teaching. The two key essentials for success are:

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

There are several teaching suggestions in the course materials on the website to help centres to foreground these necessities.

All four papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen by examiners. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management. Students need to think carefully about the questions and plan what they are going to say, before starting to write.

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 levels of response mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (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. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours. Both papers were marked as paper scripts.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts.

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, understandably, very similar.

## **The importance of students knowing their texts**

Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation on both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. 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

and organised their ideas to shape meanings. When students have good textual knowledge they are able to address the questions confidently and to 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. The very best answers were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the point they were making, rather than those who used what they could remember and then shaped their argument around that. When this happened, students often drifted from the task. Being equipped with good textual knowledge also helps students to be specific and accurate. It should be noted that Band 2 of the mark scheme has a headline descriptor of 'generalised' – and even here it has to be relevant to the task - so if students are aiming to gain marks in the higher bands they need to be precise and accurate.

Some students gave inaccurate responses. Examiners noticed this with quotations, some students created their own and then analysed their own version of authorial method. Inaccurate quotations and textual details detract from students' arguments – often because they lose any sense of the author's subtlety or creativity in choice making. Students should understand that close textual references in support of relevant arguments are perfectly acceptable – and quotation marks should only be used when students are certain that they are accurate.

Knowing texts is more important than citing critical reading or knowing background information about writers' lives and times. Some students were much happier writing about what they thought was relevant context about racial attitudes in Elizabethan England and Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne, than writing about the texts themselves and what is revealed within the texts in relation to the tasks.

Part of 'knowing' texts also involves students understanding their texts in terms of genre, although the text's story and the narrative arc must have priority before work on genre can be made meaningful. Students need to know how their texts connect with what might be regarded as traditional generic patterns and how they disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. It is worth reminding students that genre is a loose set of conventions and these conventions are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

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

Once students are equipped with secure textual knowledge, they have to be trained to answer the questions that *are set* in all their details and not partially address them or respond to their own questions. In order to be successful students must answer the questions set taking account of all the words in the question. 'Answer the question' is an important reminder for 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 use extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question. What students need to focus on is to construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passage, firstly in terms of its mini narrative and then see what specific features were evident and which opened up meanings. In

Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Emilia as victim in *Othello*, Sir Toby as a riotous festive figure in *Twelfth Night*, atoning for crime in *Atonement* and the rejection of authority in *Henry 1V Part 1*.

### **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, comedy, crime or political and social protest writing and students are then invited to explore a view or explore the significance of an aspect. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word ‘significance’ is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings. Unfortunately some students thought that the word significance itself was up for debate and some tried to argue that extracts and ideas were not significant. This was an unhelpful approach and led many students into a dead end.

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 can be valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who argued with personal voices and wrote relevantly were duly rewarded. 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 and sensitively. For some, however, it did not work. Some students used critical material, including the Critical Anthology, that was not clearly understood and they tacked it on to arguments, often subverting questions. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used specifically to further the student’s argument, they are best left out.

### **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 an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail. A specific skill is required here which is to work closely with text in an independent way, tracking its narrative trajectory and seeing its relationship with the genre to which it belongs. Bringing in material that is not closely connected to the printed extract does not help students to answer the question successfully.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding, in a tight and detailed way, to a section of a play that they have studied and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. The connections to the wider play need to be sharp and obvious. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. It is worth repeating advice that was given last year.

*In all extract based questions, students need to read – or reread – the extracts 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, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.*

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is very helpful if students establish an overview of the extract taking note of its shape and the dramatic and narrative (and tragic or comedic) 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, climax or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. It would be a useful teaching exercise for teachers to spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways so that they have an anchor for the rest of their discussion.

Clearly students need to know the play well though so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come *immediately* before and *immediately* after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages, but if students do have a secure sense of the whole they will see the benefits of writing about the extract as drama. As long as the extract is the *central* focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play. Although it is important to refer to the wider play, the comments must connect directly with the extract. Some students for example in their writing about the *Othello* extract unprofitably wrote more about Othello, who does not appear in the extract, than Iago and Roderigo, who do.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to think about the drama itself and the playwright's construction of the play. They 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 invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

Students need to see that the skills for Section A questions are quite different from the skills needed for Section B questions. A number of students thought that they needed to debate whether the passage was or wasn't significant and several thought they should construct their own debate like those in Section B.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to see that these questions are different from those elsewhere in the paper. Students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and work with what is *there*. Although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed and how the mini story being told at this point is being shaped.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial or dramatic methods. 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 did not respond to the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analyses of single words.

A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not fully understand. Last year advice was given about students writing about iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play and although there was a little less inaccuracy this year, there was still some unhelpful discussion and some comments which were wrong. The same was true for several students who wrote about metre in the poetry questions. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Students can generally write about these features sensibly and confidently.

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

There are still some students who think that they have to include material that exists outside the text and work it into their writing, often taking the place of analysis of the text itself. The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts, those which are set up in the questions and those which relevantly form part of their argument. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and naturally. Some students, unfortunately, still thought they had to include all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was not well understood. In the weakest answers there were generalised – and often inaccurate – claims about women and patriarchy, society, class and race and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the question.

Although there were fewer claims this year that various audiences and readers in past ages 'would have been shocked', this still existed in some responses. Examiners across all papers reported that students were still asserting that audiences of the past would have been shocked by characters' behaviours or the language writers used. It is worth ensuring that students know what the word 'shocking' means and then reminding them that it is unwise to claim that audiences of any time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Students also need to think more carefully about what they are actually saying. They need to think what a Shakespearian audience comprised (different people with different views and proclivities, like those in their own literature classes, experiencing drama in a theatre probably not for the first time). Would all those people viewing *Othello*, for example, really have been 'shocked' when they heard Emilia disobey Iago? Students need to be made aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex, to social order being overturned and to feisty and outspoken women.

There were also some assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and 'enlightened' readers of today. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. There is no requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To

what extent do **you** agree with this view?’ and students need to be prepared to commit themselves from their own perspectives. Their voices are what examiners want to hear.

There were also some students writing and making claims about the effects of pronoun use, particularly the use of ‘I’ and ‘me’ which many students said showed arrogance and selfishness. When speech is used it is natural for pronouns to be used, so students really do need to think more carefully before making claims about what ‘I’ reveals.

Another increasing trend is the way that students, regardless of the task, are becoming fixed on the ‘issue’ of women and how appallingly they were treated in previous ages. While students are to be congratulated on using their Critical Anthologies to open up ideas about texts (and here specifically feminist theory), they have to be careful about making sweeping statements and forcing material into answers that does not relate to the question. The ‘issue’ of both women and men is important, but the texts offer so much more to think about than the single concern of gender inequality. Sometimes readings are imposed on texts that are not supported by evidence in the texts themselves and have no bearing on the question set. There needs to be some subtlety in the application of theoretical concepts.

### **Writing skills**

When students are debating and discussing meanings, it is important that they try to express themselves in clear and logical ways. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. It is not necessary for writing to include an excess of critical, tragic and comedic terminology, perhaps using that terminology for its own sake and not fully understanding it. 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. Some students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty.

### **Removing burdens and giving students ownership**

Some students seemed to be burdened with material they felt they had to include. Apart from contextual material and terminology, 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, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Some 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.

### **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. Students need to be able to look at questions on the day of the exam with a clear mind. They need to approach the paper and questions without any



preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully. Students should remember that if the question does not ask for something, then they are not required to include it.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were, of course, rewarded appropriately.

### **Specific comments**

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing and there were many delightful responses to the questions showing what students could achieve after two years of studying and working with the genre of tragedy. Many students focused well on the questions and seem to have acted on the advice given last year and during AQA courses. Those who performed less well did not know their texts adequately. Given that this paper is closed book, students need to have excellent textual knowledge so that they can draw from it effectively in the construction of arguments. There was still reference to peripeteia, hubris, harmatia and anagnorisis which proved unhelpful to many students, obstructing their thinking. The best writing was produced by students who wrote carefully and relevantly using language they understood.

### **Shakespeare**

On the whole most students had good knowledge of their Shakespeare play. *Othello* was by far the more popular choice, though there were several centres offering *King Lear*. It is fair to say that the responses to *King Lear* were slightly stronger than those to *Othello* and on the whole there was less critical clutter in the *King Lear* responses and less irrelevant contextual material. In the answers on *Othello*, there was much discussion of Othello's race, regardless of relevance, and some responses on both texts contained unfocused and generalised material on women and patriarchal societies. Much critical debate from feminist and postcolonial perspectives prevented students from focusing on the questions. It was also noted that in the *Othello* questions, some students attempted to make the tasks into questions about Othello as a tragic hero. The same was true to some extent about the *King Lear* questions, though Questions 2 and 5 invited some discussion of Lear. Students must be open to other aspects of tragedy rather than just the aspect of the tragic hero; and they must be sensitive and open to what is specifically happening in their particular tragedy so that their thinking does not become formulaic and limited.

### **Section A**

In the passage based questions, students need to establish a sense of the narrative and tragic trajectory of the extract, ensuring that they focus on how the passage begins and, significantly, how it ends. Engaging with the dramatic story that is unfolding is essential and it gives students a springboard for their ideas.

The extract from *Othello* was from Act 2 scene 1. The story being dramatised here is the end of a conversation in which Iago cruelly manipulates Roderigo into agreeing to provoke Cassio later that night, stirring Cyprus to mutiny. Before this extract, having seen the arrivals in Cyprus of Desdemona and Cassio and then Othello, Iago opportunistically tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. He also tells him that, now the wars are ended, Cassio watches on the court of guard and that if Roderigo can discredit Cassio, Roderigo will then be able to find a quicker path to Desdemona. Roderigo takes the bait, agrees to Iago's commands and exits. Alone with the

audience, Iago soliloquises. His ideas tumble one after the other, at times baffling, but always measured and balanced in delivery. His evil and villainy are obvious as he offers a range of unsubstantiated motives. In terms of the plot, he plans to tell Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful, stirring Othello to jealousy so that he will thank Iago. Beyond this, Iago has no further plan: he celebrates his knavery but knows that as yet his ideas are confused. After the extract, there is the proclamation, ordered by Othello, that there will be celebrations. Cassio will be on the watch and Iago will get Cassio drunk so that Roderigo can follow the instructions of the string puller.

There is obviously much in this extract that could have been discussed in terms of tragedy but primarily students needed to focus on Iago's terrible villainy. He is manipulative and dismissive of Roderigo and it is not at all surprising that later in the play he disposes of him, as collateral trash. Iago's soliloquy and his relationship with the audience certainly needed to be discussed. Here students could have engaged with the irony and ambiguity of his pronouncements and his possible motives, the sense that he is double dealing with the audience as well as the onstage characters.

Other aspects that students could profitably have discussed were: Iago's power; Roderigo as a tragic victim; and the dominating theme of sexual jealousy. While several students were able to write succinctly and sensibly about Iago's plans to bring Othello to madness, those who wrote about Othello's race and his tragic fall as the key feature of this extract, were missing the point. Too many focused on the word 'Moor' and wrote their entire answer on racism. Some focused on Othello's jealousy and wrote what appeared to be a prepared response on that in relation to the whole play and some focused on 'wife for wife' and wrote about the problems women have in the patriarchal world of the play – both Venice and Cyprus.

The students who performed best wrote incisively about Iago's villainy and the complexity of his soliloquy which he delivers after the stage exit of Roderigo. Students who knew their texts well and were really thinking addressed the peculiarity of Iago's comments on love which he equates with lust and revenge, his ambiguous use of the word 'dear', his strange confessions of jealousy which gnaw at him and the couplet which ends the scene. When students focused on these aspects, writing about method was automatic and seamlessly integrated. Those who understood the difference between verse and prose had much to work with here and some interesting observations were made.

There were some students whose textual knowledge was less secure and they seemed to have little sense of what the passage is about, where it comes in the wider play or where it is set. These students also struggled to read the extract and glean evidence from it (for example: 'I have brought you from Venice' or 'Act 2, Scene 1' which is printed after the extract).

The extract from *King Lear* was from Act 4 scene 7, and is the moving spiritual reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia which offers hope after the terrible events which have occurred previously. Directly before the extract, Cordelia speaks with Kent and the Doctor about Lear's frail condition. After his ordeal on the heath, Lear is now in the French camp dressed in fresh garments and is sleeping. Music is playing and Cordelia kneels by her father's chair as he awakes. In the extract, although she is nervous about speaking to her father, the Doctor advises that it is best that it is she who addresses him. The dialogue that follows is tender and tentative. Although Lear is confused, the madness that plagued him on the heath is no longer evident. He speaks in controlled verse. The key climactic moment is when Cordelia asks her father to hold his hand in benediction over her (the last time they were together, when he banished her, he had denied her his blessing) but unexpectedly, it is Lear who goes down on his knees in shame to beg forgiveness of the lady he can barely believe is his child. As they are reunited, they are both overwhelmed with emotion. As Cordelia weeps Lear offers her comfort: 'I pray, weep not'. The extract ends with Lear and

Cordelia gently walking away together, with Lear acknowledging his foolishness and his old age, asking for forgiveness. After the extract Kent and the Gentleman speak of the English forces that are approaching. The warning that the war is likely to be bloody casts an ominous shadow.

The extract was rich in aspects of tragedy that students could have discussed. Those who understood the dramatic impact of the scene, who focused on the beauty of the reconciliation and its religious qualities performed very well. In the best answers, students discussed Lear's changes of mood and fortune and Cordelia as a redemptive figure. Relevant links were made to other parts of the play. In the less successful responses, students missed the power of the drama and just wrote about Lear's fall as a tragic hero.

Some students claimed Lear is just mad here, just as he was on the heath. In these answers there was little sense of the subtlety of what happens in the play regarding Lear's state of mind. While there was some interesting discussion of dementia by those students who engaged well with the text, some made rather unfounded claims and did not engage with the language Shakespeare wrote or the stage actions.

## **Section B**

The Section B tasks require different skills from students. Here students have to debate a given critical view about their Shakespeare play. The critical views set up in the questions are challenging to meet the demand of an A-level qualification. To succeed, they have to deal with the proposed argument and the key terms in the task. Students are reminded also to include relevant comments on Shakespeare's dramatic methods. Students cannot access all the marks available when they do not fully address the task.

The initial part of Question 3 was as follows:

'Venice and Cyprus are polar opposites: Venice representing civilisation and control, Cyprus representing catastrophe and chaos.'

To what extent do you agree with this view?

Here the students were asked to think about setting (thereby engaging automatically with dramatic method and context) and the oppositions that might be seen in the two settings. This was by far the more popular question and while it was done very well by many who had good textual knowledge, some students struggled because they did not know what events happened in the two places. Some students also took the opportunity to just write about Othello and so mentioned the locations in passing. Some brilliant work was seen by students who engaged with polar opposites and argued that the two places are more similar than different. Excellent work was also seen by students who wrote succinctly and systematically about the key terms - civilisation, control, chaos and catastrophe - debating how they apply to Venice and Cyprus.

Question 4 was generally done much better than Question 3 especially by those students who knew and effectively used details about Emilia from the play and who understood 'malice'. It was certainly the question which seemed to excite students, stirring them to argue with strong personal voices. This was regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition set up. Many argued that Emilia is a victim from beginning to end since she is either under the spell of Iago or the target of his cruelty. There was some excellent writing here on Emilia's initially having 'no speech' (as commented on by Desdemona), her finding a voice to expose both Othello's murder of

Desdemona and Iago's villainy, only then to be silenced by her husband's malicious stabbing her in the back.

There were also some superb answers by students who argued that Emilia is not simply a victim but is heroic in standing up to male power since she is the one who prevents Iago from succeeding and she is also the one to openly accuse Othello. Some argued that her bluntness and wit (she might readily commit adultery 'in the dark') makes us see her as much more than a tragic victim. Less successful answers were produced by students who did not know the text well enough to support ideas or those who just wrote generally about the plight of women in Elizabethan and Jacobean societies. Some did not know enough about Emilia so turned the task and wrote about Desdemona as the 'true victim' or even Othello. A number of students also included paragraphs about Bianca as a victim.

Question 5 was by far the most popular question on *King Lear*. The key tragic aspects were 'right', 'just' and 'taught a lesson' and students also needed to focus on 'wilful old men'. The question was well done by those who knew the play and could range around it for detail. Most students wrote sensibly about Lear and Gloucester and some wrote validly about Kent too. Not many students addressed 'wilful' but most were able to write about the old men behaving badly and needing to be taught a lesson. A few realised that the quotation was an adaptation of Regan's 'to wilful old men/ the injuries that they themselves procure/ Must be their schoolmasters' and they tended to perform well. There was plenty of interesting debate about whether the old men deserved their punishments – a number surprisingly arguing that Gloucester's blinding was just and right given that he had fathered Edmund out of wedlock.

Question 6 was much less popular. Those who did answer the question were generally very good. These students thought about Albany in relation to his being a moral force, the changes that take place in him and his bringing (or failing to bring) salvation to the kingdom.

## SECTION C

Although students will have spent some time studying the two texts they deal with in Section C, realistically they will only write for about 20 minutes on each one. This means that the knowledge that they have secured must be used wisely as they select material that is absolutely in line with the question. The choices they make will be crucial. The art is to choose the question that best suits their combination of texts and then choose relevant sections of those texts which work for the task.

The tasks are set up around broad tragic concepts. In Question 7 it was 'villains and antagonists' and whether they are always 'wickedly attractive'. In Question 8 it was 'the pride' displayed by tragic heroes and heroines and whether it 'elevates or diminishes' them.

In Question 7 students needed to identify the villain or antagonist, write about the villainy and then say whether the villains/antagonists are 'wickedly attractive'. 'Wicked' was legitimately interpreted in a number of different ways. Some students got themselves into problems at the first hurdle by saying that it is not clear who the villain is or that there is no villain. This led them into a very different debate and they never reached the heart of the question. This was largely seen in responses to *Death of a Salesman* and Keats. A number of students claimed that Willy Loman is the villain and although it was sometimes possible to gain some credit (depending on how the material was used), generally students struggled to construct a clear argument and simply wrote about Willy's flaws. It was generally the case that those who wrote about Willy as a villain did not

show a very secure understanding of villainy or tragedy. The best choices on *Death of a Salesman* were Ben, the Woman, Howard or the American consumerist society. When students made those choices they could generally construct a good debate around 'wickedly attractive'.

When students got in a tangle with Keats they tended to write about villains and victims being blurred and this discussion did not allow them to engage with the proposition set up – they never got to 'wickedly attractive' because they were caught up in who might be the villain. The students who did well were those who chose Lamia as the villain, or la belle dame, the brothers in *Isabella* or Porphyro. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, some good discussion was seen on Alec and in *Gatsby* there was some very good consideration of Daisy and Tom. Bolingbroke was the obvious candidate for the antagonist in *Richard II* and students really seemed to enjoy debating his wicked attractiveness.

As was the case last year, in the weakest answers, students struggled more with *Death of a Salesman* than the other texts, often because they did not know enough details of the play and often because they were unsure of the chronology. The weakest answers were seen by students who just wrote generally about the play, the American Dream, 1950s society and 'mobile concurrencies' without much understanding. This was true of Questions 7 and 8.

In Question 8, the best answers were produced by those who pinned down specific moments of the tragic hero's or heroine's pride and then discussed whether the pride elevates or diminishes them. The focus throughout should have been on pride. Unfortunately several students did not seem to know what pride is and instead wrote about anything in the texts that might elevate or diminish the heroes. Some used the word but could not locate any examples and so they could not engage with elevates and diminishes at all. Some very good work was seen when Willy's prideful rage against Charley was discussed or when, in the flashbacks, he shows pride at the achievements of Biff. Other good examples used by students writing about other texts were Richard's pride at being an anointed king whose balm cannot be washed off by all the seas, Tess' proud refusal to give in to the pressure Alec places on her and the pride she feels when she turns away from the Clares' door instead of asking for money, Gatsby's pride in his achievements – his house, boat and cars, the knight's proud telling of his story of sexual prowess to the unknown narrator and Porphyro's proud entrance into the castle of Madeline's family were other good examples that led to insightful discussion. The best responses were by students who engaged well with the debate about whether the pride of the hero and heroine elevates or diminishes them – and those students were thoughtful about who was making the judgement: the reader, audience, other characters or the protagonists themselves. In the weaker response, sometimes students wrote about villains rather than the heroes and heroines (for example the brothers in *Isabella*).

Overall, this was a good second year of the specification and there is much to celebrate. Of course, there are also lessons to be learned and we hope that this report will give some guidance to support centres as they prepare for 2019.

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

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