



A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/1B Literary Genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy
Report on the Examination

7717
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Introductory Comments

Examiners saw much excellent work across all four papers this summer and the statistics were again very favourable: over 99% of students achieved a grade E or above in the subject overall and over 27% achieved a grade A or A* in the subject overall. Teachers and students therefore should be congratulated on their hard work.

The best responses were seen from 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 so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely and because they did not focus on the tasks set.

Issues raised in last year's report remain relevant, and it would be advisable for teachers to revisit previous reports which are on the website 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. Students need to answer questions that *are* set in all their details and not respond to the question they wish had been asked. Students do well when they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text. 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 A-level 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 very best responses 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 intradiegetic narrators or 'aspects' of genre if students haven't got inside the stories that the narrators are 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 what English Literature primarily ought to do. Readers need to be enabled to enter fictional worlds in as three-dimensional way as possible and 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 of *Atonement*). 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.

An example here might help. In the *Othello* extract question on paper 1A a significant number of students did not know that Iago is on stage witnessing Othello’s suicide, having been arrested by the Venetian officials beforehand and wounded by Othello. Those who were aware of this fact were able to comment on the silent and haunting figure, who bleeds as he watches while Cassio gets promoted and while Othello stabs himself and dies. Not knowing the factual detail of Iago’s presence resulted in erroneous comments being made. Not knowing the factual details of texts was also seen in other papers, for example on paper 1B some students thought that Emma is in love with Frank Churchill and is heartbroken when she discovers his engagement to Jane Fairfax and on the crime writing paper there were several students who did not know the facts of the story of *Peter Grimes* and wrote erroneously and at length about Peter’s having been abused by his father when he was a child.

Specific comments about 1B: Aspects of Comedy

Examiners marking 7717/1B have reported many interesting and perceptive responses to all questions and texts. This report will draw attention to some shortcomings in student responses, but it is important to recognise the overall success enjoyed by many students and the quality of engagement and thought shown.

Section A

The passage-based tasks offer students the opportunity to work with a printed part of their chosen play, something that occurs nowhere else on the paper. Therefore, students who work closely with the details of the passage stood every chance of success and this year, there were many incisive responses which centralised the passage.

As has been said in previous reports and training material, students are not expected to identify and comment upon every possible comedic aspect in a passage: such an approach leads to superficial responses. The most effective approach is to make sensible selections of *some* comedic aspects and explore the significances that arise. Making sensible choices is a key skill in any exam. For instance, it may be possible to identify many comedic features in a passage, but it is likely that only some of these will yield more telling points. There is little to be gained by choosing unusual or minor aspects to focus on: far better to pick the big issues and write about them really well. In the end, it is the quality of the ideas and perceptiveness of comments which determine marks, so choosing potentially fruitful areas is vital.

In previous training sessions and reports, the point has been made about beginning Section A responses with an overview of the passage. Examiners credit this and for students, it has the benefit of encouraging them to see the shape of the comedic narrative and helps them stand back and survey how the comedy and dramatic method are operating. It also has the bonus of settling the students into the exam and liberates them too: once they have pinned down the story, they are then free to focus upon some specific issues. This approach is recommended and the mark schemes include this suggested narrative identification and contextualisation in the first bullet point.

As noted previously, knowing a text really well is imperative. When students know their texts, they arrive at the exam hall with confidence and can, in theory, attempt any task without fear. When students don't know texts, they shy away from the passage or fix on small details rather than knowing how the passage fits in to the comedy of the whole play. It is textual knowledge which is at the heart of literary study, rather than surrounding support materials or theory. A useful question to ask students as they near the end of their studies is 'How many times have you re-read the text?'

Question 1

This question invited students to explore a passage towards the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Many effective responses noted how the passage starts with comic confusion and disagreement, progressing to the revelation of disguise and concluding with the apparent harmony of Katherina and Petruchio. Responses could and did achieve full marks by exploring in detail the significance of obvious comedic elements here, such as disguise, chaos and harmony. In doing so, such responses saw how the comedy worked, noting the way in which Shakespeare positions the audience so that they know the truth of the situation and how that enables them to enjoy the role-playing of Tranio and the frustration of Vincentio. The placing of Lucentio's upbeat confessional speech and its position in amongst the anger and busy nature of the scene also produced some of the more thoughtful responses. Other interesting responses noted the passage's narrative significance as the beginning of the end, where disguises are unmasked and truth is emerging.

Question 2

This question focused on an important moment in *Twelfth Night*. Students who could see the main events in the passage usually produced effective responses: the mistaking of Sebastian for Viola, the comic fight, the initial meeting of Olivia and Sebastian and Sebastian's willing acceptance revealed the ongoing confusion of identity at the heart of the play. Effective responses appreciated the dramatic method at work here, in particular the way in which Shakespeare allows the audience superior knowledge over the characters and invites audiences to find humour in characters' confusion. The fun that an audience would experience as they watched the skirmish was also handled well, especially when combined with an understanding of how comedy generally indicates that problems are short-lived and threats are seldom fulfilled. Linking the key meeting between Sebastian and Olivia to the later unravelling of the tangled relationships also led to interesting comment.

What doesn't work in passage-based tasks is where students very quickly look away from the passage and make indirect comments. For instance, a response which spots that Feste appears in the passage and then launches into a lengthy account of his interaction with Olivia in Act 1 is not going to enjoy success. Likewise, a response which notes Gremio's comments and then rehashes a previous exam task about the function of old men in the play is not focusing on the big issues of the 2019 passage. Other pitfalls noted by examiners included some pre-learnt paragraphs about

iambic pentameter or the frequency of exclamation marks. These features didn't lead to insightful comments about comedy.

On the whole, though, Section A responses were good and often impressive.

Section B

There were some excellent responses seen in this segment of the paper. Tasks in Section B offer students a view which can be debated. There are different ways to approach these. Some students like to write a two-sided debate. This can and does work but there is no requirement to do so. Another approach is to argue firmly in favour or against the view in the task. Either approach is valid. What matters is the quality of argument and how convincingly the case is made. Once again, text knowledge is paramount. When students possess excellent text knowledge, they can confidently select the 'right' parts of the text to exemplify their argument(s). Knowing the details of the text leads to confidence.

Section B differs from Section A in that it does require responses to have an essay shape, i.e., it should be an argument which is built and structured to drive home the central view of the student. Clearly, planning and logic are important here, and as always, AO1 writing skills underpin everything. A student who has spent their A-level studies refining their phrasing and has learned how to sequence a response stands a good chance of success. However, none of these skills are useful unless a response is tackling the question which has been set. One of the first things an examiner checks is the extent to which the question has been addressed. Students who focus sharply on the debate being set up and stick to it stand every chance of success.

Question 3

This question centred on a familiar comedic debate - whether cruelty is funny or not. There were some specific words around which to build an answer: '*cruelty*', '*humiliation*', '*laugh*' and '*pity*'. This task was more popular than Question 4, with many students enjoying writing about the manner of Katherina's taming and capitulation. Some perceptive answers took the line that the inclusion of the Induction and the audience's awareness that the play which follows is an elaborate joke at Sly's expense meant that the audience were absolved from any feelings of pity and were free to laugh. There were some excellent and forcefully argued answers here. A handful of responses warped the task by losing sight of '*cruelty and humiliation*' and tried to argue that some other comedic aspect, eg disguise was responsible for laughter. These approaches could only be given limited credit.

Question 4

This question allowed those with detailed knowledge of Bianca to shine. Some excellent responses were seen, with able students spotting the subtlety of the phrase '*knows how to exercise*' as well as the key terms '*Bianca*', '*heroine*', '*power*' and '*cunning*'. Knowledge of the full sweep of Bianca's narrative was part of the key to success. Being able to pinpoint events and exemplify a view once again revealed the importance of text knowledge. Many students noted the irony of Bianca's disguise as a compliant daughter who reveals her true colours in the wager scene. It was equally refreshing to read responses which argued her heroic qualities as a smart young lady who skilfully navigates her way through a male-dominated world.

Less successful responses sometimes got tangled up in writing half-understood analyses of patriarchy which weren't required or accounts of family roles in Elizabethan England which were a

distraction. A handful of students decided to sidestep Bianca altogether and write a response arguing that Katherina was a powerful heroine, which was a line that was very distant from the question focus.

Question 5

This question was very popular. The debates around the ending of *Twelfth Night* and comedic resolution (or otherwise) led to interesting responses. More straightforward answers often took characters in turn and offered views on their happiness or otherwise. More effective responses saw the concept of expected comedic harmony being denied, questioned or fulfilled and argued their case from that point. A lot of engaging, perceptive responses were generated by this task, but sometimes students lost sight of the 'end of the play' and built arguments around e.g., the actions of Malvolio and the trick played upon him earlier in the play. While this obviously has relevance, the more effective essays dealt with these examples quickly, using them as a springboard for a detailed exploration of Malvolio's words and actions in the final scene.

For some responses, there was a tendency to focus a lot of energy on Antonio and his unrequited feelings for Sebastian. While this character's story is relevant to the question, it was often at the expense of some larger issues around betrothal, Malvolio's experience and Feste's song.

Question 6

This question got to the heart of a debate about comedic protagonists: whether they solve their own problems or whether an external force does. The key to this task was working with the term 'resourcefulness'. Students who understood this comedic concept and could cite examples of Viola's resourcefulness (or otherwise) stood a good chance of success. Many responses focused on the go-getting attitude displayed in the first act and the luck of Sebastian's survival and appearance in Illyria. More confident responses also saw how comedy usually suggests that fortune smiles on protagonists. Responses which explored luck and resourcefulness in regard to other characters weren't very successful, although such examples were rare.

Section C

Students seem to relish writing about their texts in this part of the paper. All texts were seen by examiners, with *The Importance of Being Earnest* a more popular choice of drama text than *She Stoops to Conquer*. There were very few examples of unfinished papers this year, which is a testament to the exam preparation of centres and students. In some ways, Section C gave rise to the most interesting and diverse set of responses this year, with some superb responses being seen.

Centres and students are well versed in the fact that Section C is not comparative and the vast majority of responses dealt with texts in turn. Where students tried to do running comparisons between texts, they had only partial success, mainly because such structures preclude development of points. Each question offered a different challenge, with the *significance* task in Question 7 being more popular than the focused debate of Question 8.

Question 7

This question was well handled. Marriage is a central feature of comedy and there was plenty of scope here for interesting views. Some excellent responses on Chaucer explored the parody of domestic one-upmanship; the development of marriage from a business deal to something more

akin to love in *Small Island* was also well-handled. In Wilde's text, the superficial nature of attitudes towards marriage was also explored perceptively. Choice of supporting poems was sometimes an issue, as was factual accuracy. Many effective responses used *Mrs Sisyphus*, *Tam o'Shanter* or *My Rival's House*. Less germane choices were *Sunny Prestatyn* (which features no marriage at all). On occasion, factual accuracy was in question, with some responses arguing that the couple in *The Flea* were married. A more convincing view on this poem was that marriage is used as a conniving strategy on behalf of the speaker.

Question 8

This question centred on the idea that powerful people are figures of fun. On occasion, responses included some odd examples (for example Jane Fairfax in *Emma*) but mainly sensible and convincing choices were made. More effective responses explored how these characters were laughed at and how they performed the comedic function of powerful foolish authority figures. It was possible to construct an interesting counterview here, with some thoughtful points being made in relation to Swift's poem about the revulsion (rather than laughter) which is generated. Less successful approaches decided to sidestep '*power and privilege*' and argue a view that the lower classes were funny.

In conclusion, what emerged once more is the centrality of text knowledge, factual accuracy and question focus. Students who spend their time learning their text and answering questions in all their details stand a very good chance of success. It was a pleasure to read some outstanding responses to this year's paper.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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