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A-LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2B Texts and genres: Elements of political and social protest writing  
Report on the Examination

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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.

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**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 2B: Texts and genres: Elements of political and social protest writing**

Students and centres are commended for the commitment and engagement they have shown in studying this unit and preparing for the examination. This series many students sought to connect their thinking about the texts with relevant contemporary contexts, such as fake news, #metoo, the role of the law/ institutional power in the lives of the individual and engaging animatedly with global politics. Although this is by no means a requirement of the unit, it was rewarding to see so many students thinking about their world through the ideas and literature that they had studied.

The most popular texts continue to be *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Kite Runner*, *A Doll’s House* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. An increasing number of responses were seen on *Harvest*; very little was seen on *Henry IV Part I* or *Hard Times*. Centres have clearly responded to AQA advice about tackling unseen extracts and many students focused their work well to construct relevant responses which pinned down the trajectory of the extract. In Section B, there was clear and sustained engagement with the task. In Section C, they showed their knowledge of the texts and the ability to make effective choices in questions 10 or 11 was a clear discriminator of ability.

**Section A: The Unseen Extract**

The extract was taken from the play *The Winslow Boy* by Terence Rattigan. As a mid-C20th text, it proved to be accessible in terms of language and many centres prepared students to produce an overview of the extract so that they could make effective choices about which genre elements to select for discussion. Producing this overview, though, is evidently a challenge for some students.

Often a single idea was pinned down and this year it was the supposed gender oppression experienced by Catherine, with several responses singling out genre elements with little relation to the extract.

High quality responses linked genre to the trajectory of the extract and so students were able to interpret authorial choices. When this was done as part of the overview, discussion of a key event, or the noting of a silent sleeping Ronnie Winslow on stage, responses were much more detailed and more sharply focused. Credit is awarded for clear understanding of the passage presented in an overview; the first bullet of the mark scheme this year details content that students may comment upon:

*“the discussion between the engaged couple beginning uncertainly and then developing into clearly opposed positions while Ronnie Winslow sleeps in front of them; the fight to clear Ronnie’s name emerging within the personal conversation about the engagement; Catherine’s articulating principled ideas about how the government operates; the key moment of John articulating his view about the greater importance of international and domestic issues (‘the European war’ and the ‘coal strike’) which escalates the tension and causes the estrangement between the two; the ironic ending of the argument as the extract ends with John’s ‘correcting himself’ that he is ‘not wavering’.”*

Students who selected a few of these ideas had a much better understanding of the relationship between the role of government in individual lives and the argument between John and Catherine. Many responses focused on acrimony between the couple and interpreted what they wanted to see, for example that it was about class conflict and Catherine was a representative of the working class and John the upper class, or that by the end of the passage Catherine was submissive to John because she was speaking ‘quietly’. Such readings did not show careful reading of the extract and often students decided they wanted to write about gender; though relevant, this clearly overlooked some of the wider issues of the extract, such as the power of the elites or of individuals taking a stand against institutions.

It is the nature of an unseen extract that students are only asked to comment on the part of the text in front of them so where students come up with a possible reading they will receive some credit if it can be supported by the text. Students and centres should also bear in mind that it may be useful to avoid relying on what they expect to see, or what they see based on other texts they have studied. Many less effective responses saw Catherine as being completely side-lined and silenced by John and this seemed to connect in particular to study of *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *A Doll’s House*, as though any conversation between a man and a woman was always oppressive. These discussions suggested a learnt engagement with ideas surrounding gender oppression and an imprecise application of them to this extract.

The study of dramatic form in Paper 1 should have prepared students to engage with method, looking for example at stage directions. Students homed in on the directions about intonation and some wrote insightfully about the vulnerability of Ronnie sleeping in front of John and Catherine while they discussed his fate. However, less successful responses seemed to construct a version of the dialogue that fitted with what they wanted to say, so for example if Catherine was interpreted as being submissive a student would argue that John’s dialogue dominated the extract and he continually interrupted her. In fact, in the extract, Catherine cuts off John’s speech six times and John interrupts Catherine just once.

More successful responses considered the setting of the play as pre-WWI, and suggested that John may have had some preconceptions about how Catherine should behave as his fiancée but that Catherine was subverting this by her strident defence of her brother and her principles.

It is pleasing to see that some students are engaging with narrative methods and seeking to construct meanings. This was in evidence with consideration of the domestic setting of the Winslow family home in the extract; many responses established a valid connection between the intimate personal setting and the focus on the public sphere of the government, the law, the admiralty and the media and seeing an opposition between the individual and the power of the state.

Many less effective responses struggled to deal with the significance of the pre-war setting suggesting that the chaos in Ronnie's life was intended to foreshadow a war that had not yet started. More effective responses linked the pre-WWI setting to the post-WWII composition and saw Rattigan as offering a model for social change. Such responses showed ownership of the material and made effective use of the text and their own knowledge about genre. The most effective responses were those which saw the interweaving of Ronnie's situation, the government actions and the personal relationship between John and Catherine. This produced sharply focused discussion about the state institutions, normative values and stereotypes and ways to challenge them.

Where comment focused on Catherine and her actions in the extract, her significance was more relevantly interpreted as her being a revolutionary, or a disruptor, or a principled advocate of social justice. These ideas were clearly connected to the key moment of her speech criticising the government department that 'has ignored a fundamental human right'.

Some students wrote with relish about the obnoxious character of John and how patronising and belittling he is to Catherine. They commented on his values (about appearing to be 'ordinary' and 'reasonable') but also revealing his fragile sense of self as he focused on what the 'chaps' in the mess thought about his engagement. Where students focused in detail on a moment in the extract and connected it to genre (seeing its significance) the writing improved in quality and there was plenty to credit.

There was still some difficulty for students who did not reach the end of the extract and so did not discuss the illuminating revelation of the stage direction of John '*correcting himself*'. Students who engaged with this wrote perceptively about his characterisation in terms of significance for genre and for the potential development of the couple's relationship in the story.

Students should remember:

- to focus on the detail and the story of the extract rather than rely on learnt genre elements or transpose learning from other texts onto the unseen extract
- to provide an overview of the extract that links the events in it to genre elements and to authorial choices about methods, rather than simply identify the characters, some basic plot and some genre elements
- to consider the extract in its entirety so that they can comment on revelations or narrative shifts that may appear at the end.

## Section B

Students appear to be more confident answering on this section, where a single studied text is the focus and a view needs to be debated. The most popular question for this section was Question 2 in response to Blake. More successful responses showed independent engagement and a clear sense of voice from students. Less effective responses tended to exemplify miserable or joyful situations. Relevant debates were constructed when poems were suitably chosen. It is worth pointing out, however, that many students rely on a few trusted staples - both *Chimney Sweepers*, *London*, *The Lamb*, *The Tyger*, *A Little Boy Lost* and *The School Boy*. While clearly most of these poems are relevant, some were shoe-horned into the argument and then led away from the task - 'education being a source of misery' is not as sharply relevant as say, discussing the hypocrisy of religious authorities or congregations in *Holy Thursday* which lead to misery by perpetuating poverty.

Where students chose well, they produced shaped, engaging writing because the content of the poem helped them to structure the argument. Choices that worked particularly well were both *Holy Thursdays*, *The Garden of Love*, *Divine Image*, *On Another's Sorrow* and *The Little Black Boy*, where students earnestly grappled with some problematic ideas about how religion was used to perpetuate racism and came up with some genuine and thoughtful responses. Students were given credit for the ambitious nature of their arguments and for use of the text where such poems or arguments teased out the complexity of the task. Students with very secure knowledge of the text tackled poems such as *The Human Abstract* and *To Tirzah* where the selection of poems helped them to construct a more synthesised response to the task. Where students select poems that have a counterpart in either *Innocence* or *Experience*, they show understanding of structure and so begin to engage with methods in thoughtful ways.

Students are showing similarly informed understanding of structure in *The Kite Runner* and *The Handmaid's Tale* where debates opened up focus on authorial choices. Engaging with Hosseini's focus on either the oppressors or the victims created debates. Secure textual knowledge was crucial in showing how sometimes Hosseini is interested in both, or that sometimes the roles of oppressor and victim are blurred. Students developed answers well when they saw the temporal structure of Amir's remembered childhood and the shifts into the narrative present. The same is true for students tackling *The Handmaid's Tale* who selected examples of males from pre-Gilead (Luke), Gilead (The Commander or Nick) or the Historical Notes where Professor Pieixoto came in for a drubbing from many students for his attitudes to women. It was pleasing to see students engage with the whole of the text and unpick implications of Atwood's structural patterning through the narrative.

When writing on Harrison students also demonstrated a very receptive ear for the voice of the poet and often wrote thoughtfully about ways Harrison urges resistance. Overall, students seemed to opt for the shorter poems, with *National Trust*, *Them & [uz]* and *Divisions* all producing relevant discussion, drawing out structural developments in the the poems. *v.* was a less popular choice though it could have been useful for a counter-argument that there is little resistance urged in this poem.

A central idea of this specification is the interpretation of meanings as well as debates about differing interpretations. In Question 8 on *A Doll's House* the task invited students to think about what the title might signify. Students readily engaged with ideas of imprisonment and constraint and drew on relevant ideas about socially normative behaviour. Less effective answers tended to find an example of imprisonment or constraint and then discuss it without precisely linking to the title but many answers had clearly thought about possible associations of the title and offered

alternative meanings - not just about imprisonment or constraint but about the realism of the play or the artifice of social relations, or the way the title linked to the end. Where students had a more secure knowledge of the text, greater ranging around the play led them to moments of conflict, such as Nora's interviews with Krogstad in Acts 1 and 2 or the climactic moment of the dance towards the end of Act 2. Where students could build debate around characters aside from the Helmers, there was considerably more depth and complexity to the argument.

Responses to *Harvest* opened up many engaging responses to what was expected by human decency and this term provided productive discussion. Students explored the actions of Walter Thirsk, Master Kent and Master Jordan and connected relevantly to the psychological and moral contexts of 'human decency' in a narrative about displacement and loss. Not all answers reached 'economic power' so were imprecisely engaging with 'defeated'. Understanding of narrative structure was evident in the more effective responses. Some responses were beset by a rather hazy sense of contexts that were not precisely linked to the task or obviously arising from the text. Generalities about the Enclosure Acts, or about the London Riots were frequently cited. This rather contrived use of context is seen in Blake and Dickens too where inaccurate generalities about Victorian England, child labour, and factory acts rarely gain marks.

Question 6 on *Hard Times* showed how some students are still focusing on learnt material rather than responding to the demands of the question. This task invited students to consider the extent to which women were marginalised and powerless. Louisa and Sissy featured prominently in the relatively few responses seen to this question and where examples of power(lessness) or marginalisation were identified writing was detailed and clear. However, some answers re-directed the focus onto fact and fancy, arguing that because Sissy embodied fancy she was a powerful character and Louisa powerless because she embodied fact. Responses that looked at Mrs Sparsit, Rachael or Mrs Pegler in specific ways drew out subtleties of what constituted power in the world of *Hard Times*.

Centres and students should remember that:

- secure textual knowledge and effective choice-making sharpens arguments; well-chosen textual episodes or poems from a collection create ownership, depth and focus;
- textual support needs to be explicitly linked to the task.

## Section C

Question 10 was by far the most popular question and students were comfortable writing about the concept of power and its abuses. To answer this question successfully, some foregrounding about the power being abused was useful coupled with a precisely located episode of abuse. Students selecting *The Kite Runner* and Chapter 7's pivotal alleyway scene had much to say about Assef and Amir. Where students knew their text and responded to the task, they provided credit-worthy answers. Less successful responses struggled to pin down examples of abuse of power and wrote very generally about political infrastructures or institutions, for example the Taliban in *The Kite Runner*, capitalism in *Hard Times* or the monarchy in *Henry IV Part I* without providing textual detail.

Questions in Section C require students to consider 'significance' in a range of ways including possible meanings, interpretation, authorial methods, and genre. This is a challenge that the most successful students rise to, providing answers that are perceptive and thoughtful about the meanings generated by the abuses of power, the effect on the reader and the message that the author could be trying to generate through the presentation of abuse of power. Although few



responses were seen on *Henry IV Part I*, students wrote engagingly about the political world of Henry's court and his abuse of power in coming to the throne and the way that abuse of power from Hal ultimately leads to enough personal growth for him to seem kingly by the end of the play.

Sometimes responses struggled to show a range of material with students relying on rather general writing for Section C. Secure, detailed, precise knowledge of all three texts chosen for this unit can only benefit students so that they make more informed choices in the exam. When students write generally they often move away from the task. Staying on the text helps keep a student focused on writing a relevant answer.

Question 11 on transgression saw fewer answers. There was an additional quotation for this task which offered a view about transgression and the breaking of boundaries being celebrated. Where students chose to engage with the quotation, there was thought-provoking writing about what actions were (/not) celebrated and this opened up discussion about methods and meanings in insightful ways. The most effective responses set up what the boundaries or normative values were in order to home in on transgression. At times, there was some unsteadiness and tentativeness about locating episodes of transgression. Where students had selected specific episodes or characters (as with Walter or the Beldam in *Harvest*, Moira or Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* or Tom in *Hard Times*) ideas were often discussed with sharp focus and relevance. For some, engaging with the additional quotation created different angles on transgression and students used texts relevantly to argue that one text celebrated and another text condemned transgression.

Less well-structured responses in Section C seemed to be the result of centres preparing students to write comparatively about the two texts used for this section, with constant switching between the two texts making discussion rather diffuse and lacking in coherence. There is no requirement for comparison in this unit and answers that take this unnecessary approach often move away from the task.

Centres and students should remember:

- to keep an open mind about which texts to use in Sections B and C so that students can answer with equal detail across the two sections
- to think carefully about which textual examples provide the most fruitful discussion of 'significance' and remember to range around the text.

## **Conclusion**

This examination is a long, challenging paper for students and it is to their enormous credit that they write with such enthusiasm and understanding about the causes and conditions of protest and the links they build between the world around them and the texts they study. There has been some truly insightful and perceptive writing this series and nearly all students have been able to engage with at least some of the ways in which protest is presented.

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

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