
AS

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 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 smaller than in previous years, the students who had taken the AS course and had been prepared for the exam had clearly gained much from it. They had understood how to read and write about texts through the lenses of tragedy and comedy and they seemed to have enjoyed their studies. All examiners reported that they saw some really interesting and engaged work. The AS examination is very straightforward in its design and is clearly accessible to students. For those schools offering AS as a gateway to A-level, this exam is obviously a very good preparation for developing students' understanding of 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.

As with previous years, 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 sharing the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, as expected, very similar. The 25 marks available for each question are also the same and all the AOs are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive.

As with A-level, there are two essentials for success on Specification B:

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

The importance of students knowing their texts

This might seem obvious, but 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 to shape meanings. Having good textual knowledge enables students to confidently address the questions and 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.

Although Papers 1A and 1B are closed book exams and Papers 2A and 2B open book, there is an expectation in both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. This should be prioritised over any critical reading or background and contextual information about writers' lives and times.

Clearly for this specification, 'knowing the text' also requires students to have an understanding of the text's genre both in terms of how the text connects with a traditional pattern and how it may diverge, as seen if the writer consciously plays with and subverts genre. Several students still seemed to think that there is a tragic or comedic absolute or template which writers are always trying to model. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

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

When students are armed with secure textual knowledge then they have to be trained to answer questions that are set and not to subvert them or only partially address them. In all AQA courses, official communications and support materials for Specification B, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess 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 shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy that are not required by the question.

Section A: passage based and extract questions

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or their poetry text. The passage is provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and to relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play or poetry text. In all cases students need to read – or reread - the extract carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place and not just pick out themes and words to comment on.

The main difference between the sections of text selected for Papers 1 and 2 is that the Shakespeare passage is longer, with the expectation that students will spend most of their time writing about the passage (with guided bullets), linking appropriately to the wider play, whereas the extract from the poetry text is shorter and has been selected to lead students into the debate set up in the question. Students are expected to use the passage for part of their answer and to range more widely around the text, as they construct their argument. This is made clear in the questions.

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it.

This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and bullets and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the bullets are addressed there is no directive as to how much time is spent on each. When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. Students have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words as this is rarely productive and usually takes students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' wider arguments.

In the Section A questions of Papers 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and since students have their texts with them in the exam they can easily contextualise the extracts in terms of the wider text. This immediately enables them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

Section B questions

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that students are invited to debate a view or construct an argument around key aspects of tragedy or comedy (signaled either by 'Explore the view that' or 'Explore the significance of'). This is also the case with the poetry questions which have an extract. The word 'significance' in the Shakespeare passage based question – and where it is used elsewhere - is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students needed to centre their debates are also clearly set up in the question, for example Gaunt's and York's having more greatness and nobility than Richard in *Richard II*, Lady Bracknell and whether she is the principal source of comedy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Daisy's ultimately being a victim in *The Great Gatsby* and Bernard Bligh's being nothing more than a figure of fun in *Small Island*.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used specifically to further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

Authorial and dramatic methods

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. In Papers 1A and 1B, it is specifically dramatic method, where, in relation to the question, students need to give a sense of how the play has been shaped by the dramatists. In Papers 2A and 2B the focus is on the shaping of stories in poetry and novels.

The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analysis of single words or comments about rhyme and metre. Some students wrote about features that they did not understand, for example iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose. Many students did not seem to know what the terms mean and they invariably got into a muddle. The same was true of many who wrote about rhyme schemes. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and students integrated these into their arguments.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which are set up in the questions and which emerge naturally from texts. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to write about writers' lives or the times in which they lived. In the least secure answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

Writing skills

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is of course essential in a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and this helped them to construct powerful arguments. To write well does not mean to flood writing with critical, tragic and comedic terminology, often using that terminology for its own sake and not really understanding it anyway. Some students unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward and cluttered, sometimes making little sense. Such writing was often marred by technical errors. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Several students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty.

Taking ownership

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.

There is no requirement for students to compare texts. There is no requirement to incorporate historical or biographical context. There is no requirement to do anything that the question does not set up.

It is also important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Writing about what is not understood leads to very confused writing.

The best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read.

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2019.

Specific comments about 2B

Although the most popular choices were Betjeman, Austen and Levy, responses were seen to all set texts. The most successful responses were invariably the ones that paid close attention to the question and answered it in full. As is always the case, knowing the texts well and choosing carefully which parts of it to use in support of the answer is the most important skill for students to develop. Students who had prepared well by knowing their texts and engaging with the whole

question tended to perform better than those who were less secure with their textual knowledge and subverted the question to what they actually felt they knew about.

The Nun's Priest's Tale - Geoffrey Chaucer

Although there were not many responses to this text some interesting answers were still produced. More able students were able to engage with the debate and offer a reasoned argument, often citing the fact that the central moral points are positioned at the end of the tale highlighting the seriousness of the message. Many focused on the references to religion arguing that the weight of this implored the audience to take it seriously. Some students relied heavily on context and produced historical-based responses that had little to do with the question, and additionally tended to focus on Chauntecleer's vanity as the main moral lesson, omitting to mention the importance of not succumbing to flattery and folly. As was common with all responses for all questions, invariably the most successful were the ones that successfully integrated authorial method.

Poetry Anthology: Comedy

Students were required to explore the view that the disappointment and frustration felt by female characters was no laughing matter with My Rival's Choice as the central poem. Many chose The Flea to write about, focusing on the female's lack of voice, contrasting this with the female speaker in My Rival's House and arguing that whilst the frustration felt by the character was no laughing matter in this poem, the character in The Flea was able to silence the speaker and assert herself. Some chose to focus on Not My Best Side to support their argument, highlighting the pragmatism adopted by the female narrator but also the amusement in her sexually driven comments and reversal of stereotypes.

Betjeman selection – John Betjeman

The question required students to explore the view that the endings of Betjeman's poems provide enjoyment and a feel-good factor and this was a popular choice of question for many. Less able students appeared to forget that the focus of the task was the endings of the poems and instead wrote a basic description of 'A Subaltern's Love Song' and compared it to another poem from the selection. Many chose 'The Licorice Fields of Pontefract' as it drew obvious parallels, but other poems were chosen too. Some students either produced a response outlining why the endings produced a feel-good factor using one or two poems from the selection to support their argument, or they argued to the contrary and cited such poems as Late-Flowering Lust and/or Hunter Trials, explaining why poems such as these didn't provide enjoyment or a feel-good factor. Some less successfully decided to focus their response on Betjeman's life and based their argument on the assertion that because A Subaltern's Love Song was loosely autobiographical and because Betjeman didn't marry Miss Joan Hunter-Dunn that there wasn't in fact a happy ending. The most able students opted to discuss either or both sides of the debate but most importantly focused on endings and answered the question considering authorial methods.

Emma – Jane Austen

This text was offered by a number of centres, and was on the whole well done. The question asked students to debate whether the parts of the story where characters experience embarrassment are always funny. Students of all abilities explored this view with varying degrees of success, with many identifying the awkward encounter in the coach between Emma and Mr Elton as an example,

focusing on the embarrassment caused to both characters. Less able students tended to offer a recount of the events, explaining why embarrassment was caused due to Emma's unreciprocated feelings, with some also going on to identifying the subsequent humour in this. More able students focused on Emma's obliviousness and unawareness of Mr Elton's feelings, offering a shaped overview of the events surrounding this part of the text and identifying the humour evident to the reader. Another common example that students tended to focus on was the events at Box Hill and then for some, Mr Knightley's consequent scolding of Emma following her behaviour there. Some less able students chose to write about Mr Knightley's proposal to Emma towards the end of the story but struggled to identify precisely why this was a cause of embarrassment.

Small Island – Andrea Levy

The question required students to debate whether the character of Bernard Bligh is viewed as nothing more than a figure of fun and this was engaged with by students who appeared to enjoy writing about the character. Many students selected well from the text citing Bernard's racist attitudes and Levy's portrayal of him as a character worthy of mockery as a consequence. Some students also chose to focus on the narrative significance of Bernard's voice not being heard until later in the novel so that the reader's opinion is shaped by Queenie's recount instead and in particular her descriptions of his physical appearance and sexual shortcomings. Some students also chose to explore the counter-view, noting the change in Bernard's outlook, acceptance of Queenie's infidelity and the illegitimate baby. More able students were also able however to highlight the humour in Bernard's behaviour towards Gilbert and his grudging acceptance of him by the end of the novel.

Wise Children – Angela Carter

For this question students had to comment on Peregrine as a likeable character who brings delight and magic to the reader. Again this was accessible to students of all abilities who engaged effectively with the statement for the most part. The wording of this question afforded students plenty of ways into the task but the very best answers dealt with all of the strands of the question. The majority of students chose to reference Peregrine's larger-than-life appearance both in terms of his size but also for his ability to appear with a sense of drama at pivotal parts of the text. Some chose to discuss the negative aspects of his behaviour-his sexual involvement with Dora for example and the implication that this had also taken place with her as a 13-year-old girl. Additionally, some students cited Peregrine's frequent disappearances and argued that this contradicted the statement. Less able students, although generally able to cite pertinent parts of the text to support their responses, tended to recount the narrative, describing Peregrine's actions during those parts of the text.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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