

AS

English Literature B

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

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It is appropriate to start by celebrating the success of the new AS LITB papers: Aspects of Tragedy and Aspects of Comedy. Students seem to have enjoyed reading and exploring their texts through the lens of literary genres and there was much interesting work seen. Most students seem to have managed their time effectively between the two required answers.

It is also 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 mark scheme, the same structure; they have the same marks available for each question; all the AOs are tested in all questions and in the same ways; all answers are marked holistically and, because the texts are grouped together, when students write about an aspect of tragedy or comedy they are automatically connecting with the wider genre and so do not need to compare texts as such. As might therefore be expected, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were very similar.

The importance of students understanding genre and knowing their texts

Clearly it is imperative that students have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how it might follow a traditional pattern or how writers subvert it. Students need to know too that they will be required to write about ‘aspects’ of the genre (the specific aspects that emerge from passages or from the questions) and not churn out everything they know about tragedy or comedy including what Aristotle and other theorists have said which, in this examination, often had a vice-like grip on student responses.

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts *through* the lens of genre and not *at* the lens of genre itself. The text and its story must have priority before other work can begin and students need to know their texts really well. 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 and can write relevantly about specific parts of the text. Although this might seem obvious, it is important that students know what happens in the stories of the texts and have ideas about what happens in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations. Those students, who did know their texts well could write about particular events, use appropriate details, write in an informed way and make good choices. Secure textual knowledge gives students confidence. Some students struggled in all papers because their textual knowledge was insecure. This meant that they often wrote in a general or vague and sometimes inaccurate way.

The importance of students answering the questions in all their details

As has been said in all training sessions for this specification and in all LITB resource materials, the mantra is that students must answer the questions in all their details. The students who performed well were able to interrogate the questions, focus on the key terms and construct a relevant argument around them. When students ignored the question or tried to subvert it, they got themselves into a muddle.

The papers are called 'Aspects of Tragedy' and 'Aspects of Comedy'. All questions require students to focus on particular *aspects*; they do not invite students to write anything known about tragedy or comedy. If students write generally about the genre and do not write about the particular requirements of the question, much of their writing will be irrelevant. So, in 1A and 1B Section A, there was an imperative to write about the tragic and comedic aspects set up in the bullets or those that were evident in the passage itself and which connect to the wider play. For all other questions the specific aspects on which students should have centred their debates were clearly signaled, for example tragic greatness in *Death of a Salesman*, comedic disguise and false identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, tragic isolation in *The Great Gatsby* and comedic misunderstandings in *Emma*.

The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate

All four papers have the same kind of question format in Section B in that a debate is set up around a key aspect of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view. This is also the case with the poetry questions and the word 'significance' in the Shakespeare passage based question shows students that they need to consider potential meanings there too.

All questions are framed around AO5 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. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions and while this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly, for some it did not. Too much that

was written was ill-understood and tacked on to arguments. Unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

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 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 then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play or poetry text. The main difference between the passages 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. The questions for the poetry texts have the same format as the Section B questions. Students are expected to use the passage for part of their answer and then range more widely around the text, as instructed by the question, as they construct their argument.

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. 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 tragedy or comedy. Schools and colleges 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 part of the narrative that has come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as we want students to engage with the passages and bullets and have a sense of ownership over what they write. 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, they should be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. Comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly.

In the Section A questions of Paper 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 will immediately enable them to write about structure. The extracts are always chosen to give students relevant material for their arguments.

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.

Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. 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 about rhyme schemes, poetic tropes, the possible meanings of colours or detached analysis of single words. The best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information or ideas about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of assertions and claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

AO1

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, using language and terminology appropriate to AS level. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. Some unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward, sometimes making little sense. Invariably such writing was marred by technical errors and language and terminology that was misused. 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. Far too many students write introductions and conclusions which are vague, general or empty and which do not gain students marks.

Unburdening students

Too often it seems, some students were burdened with what seemed like a ‘must include’ list. The needless incorporation of contextual material is one such burden, but others include the gratuitous inclusion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology. This often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if they were shoehorned into their writing. It is very rare that words like peripeteia, megalopsychia and epizeuxis, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence.

Similarly 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 and comedic aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did it 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.

It is also important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Too many included ideas and terminology that were ill-understood and led to very confused writing.

The importance of clear and independent thinking

While it is understood that content and skills have to be taught, students also need to be given the confidence to think and to respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. Some students seemed to be locked into previous questions they had done in class or questions from the specimen assessment materials.

Those who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded. So, this should be key to examination preparation in future years.

Specific comments about 1A

The entry for this paper was almost 8000; the most popular texts were *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman*, though responses to all the texts were submitted. Overall, candidates seemed to tackle Section B on whole texts more successfully than the passage-based extracts where candidates

became somewhat hampered by their knowledge of tragedy. This was largely because they were determined to include as much of it as they could rather than as much as was relevant. Fewer schools and colleges than expected had equipped their candidates to address specifically dramatic methods; where this was done students wrote confident and relevant responses. There was more focus on methods in the passage-based question than in the whole-text questions, where plot details or responses to character tended to dominate the shaping of the argument. Some candidates provided impressive support across both questions with a range of aptly selected quotations precisely located and were clearly well-prepared for a closed book examination with secure textual knowledge; there were also many answers that offered very general references to the text and which, therefore, received less credit.

Question 1: *Othello*

Question 1 focused on an extract from Act 1, Scene 1 with bullets inviting students to consider the interaction of Brabantio, Roderigo and Iago and the night time setting. This question was more frequently selected than Question 2. The first bullet was, on the whole, dealt with in a relevant way and it elicited plenty of discussion about social status, style of speech, Iago's villainy, Brabantio's reaction to being informed of Desdemona's absence, and Roderigo's involvement. Students generally integrated comments on dramatic methods, such as Roderigo's less vocal role compared to Iago's and Brabantio's speeches. Many students, however, did not specifically consider the second bullet on night time setting and so did not provide as relevant an answer as they could have done; frequently, the settings of Cyprus and Venice were identified but comments were not always made relevant. Where students focused sharply, there were detailed connections made to villainy and to the use of night time settings elsewhere in the play, exploring significance to the tragedy.

It was a commonplace in some weaker answers that students engaged only briefly with the extract and then began to roam widely and in a generalised way about the play, often linking to a preferred part of the play, for example Othello's murder of Desdemona. While this could be a valid link frequently the connection was more hazy with students seeking to explain that the play is a tragedy because Iago is a villain, and a victim dies at the end. Effective links to the wider play will be made when the connection arises directly from the extract and centres will need to encourage students to create these links as they explore the possible meanings of the whole play. In particular for this question, students appeared to use the extract as a springboard into their knowledge of the play, rather than finding meanings in the extract and exploring how those meanings connect to the rest of the play.

Particularly unhelpful links to context were seen in the extract questions where rehearsed generalities were included in the answer, for example in *Othello*, Iago's referring to Desdemona as 'your white ewe' resulted in lengthy discussion of the status of Elizabethan women in general. Many students struggled to tackle race successfully, often sounding vague and uncertain when trying to explain what Elizabethan attitudes to race were. Responses were more confident in their exploration of Iago's villainy, although many answers became generalised responses to Iago where they focused solely on him rather than the way he interacts with others in the given extract.

Question 2: *King Lear*

Question 2 focused on the introduction of Lear with four bullets inviting students to consider the presentation of Lear, the contrasts between the three daughters and the stage directions as well as any other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy.

Students handled the presentation of Lear well, with plenty of interpretations about what kind of king he appears to be; weaker candidates struggled to see differences between Gonerill and Regan, and frequently Cordelia's asides were the only comment on stage directions. Clearly at the start of the scene there is some stage business with the coronet and the sennet to create the spectacle of Lear's entrance and students who discussed possible significances of this produced answers that were credited highly. Many students focused well on the way the speeches of the sisters present later dynamics in the play and discussed with some depth problems of how meanings and love are quantified. Less was said about the possible significance of the contrasts between the daughters, with many students writing about characters rather than the significance of the daughters' treatment of Lear or the way Gonerill and Regan highlight Cordelia's speech and actions. On the whole, there was more sustained focus on dramatic method in the responses to *King Lear* than to *Othello* and relevant tragic ideas of villainy, pride, flawed greatness and tragic victims were explored thoughtfully.

A small number of students approached Section A by writing line-by-line commentaries, or focused on a prepared list of tragic features or themes; some debated *whether* the selected passage was significant to the play as a whole or in terms of its tragic aspects; some explored comic elements in tragedy; still others attempted to read the passage itself as an entire tragedy. None of these approaches helped students produce relevant responses. Where students were able to *select* as element of tragedy, such as Iago's villainous nature, or Lear's pride and develop its significance in the extract and in the wider play, answers were relevant, focused and informed; the very best responses did this with impressive sophistication and perceptiveness.

Question 3: *Richard II*

Students seemed to enjoy debating this task and offered a range of views on Richard's status as tragic hero. The answers at the higher end of the mark range showed that students were adept at ranging round the play and selecting specific support referencing it precisely; these responses dealt with Richard's transformation confidently. Counter-arguments were mounted effectively and this question did not seem beset by the compulsion to apply exhaustively a classical model of tragedy to the text. There was much productive debate about how 'noble' Richard's behaviour is and whether it is possible to see his greatness or heroism. Many students wrote with a genuine appreciation of dramatic method and the literariness of some of Shakespeare's language with the best students arguing coherently in terms of Richard's tragic heroism. Weaker candidates did not engage with 'impossible' as part of the debate.

Question 4: *Death of a Salesman*

This question on *Death of a Salesman* was by far the most popular. Students were able to engage securely with Willy Loman as tragic hero. Where weaker students tended to debate whether he is or not according to Aristotle more confident students challenged the classical model and sought alternative models of greatness, with a range of interpretations about Willy. Students wrote engagingly and often with conviction in response to the task. There were some very assured responses that dealt with Miller's dramatic methods, ranging around sets, music, props, stage directions, and the use of the stage thus showing secure understanding of how method connects to meaning. At the lower end of the ability range, students were able to talk in very general terms about one or two props, and offer some rather imprecise discussion on the 'flashbacks' though they often discussed more general authorial methods, such as lexical features or imagery, or the symbolism of the seeds or of a man not being 'a piece of fruit'. Many responses omitted to discuss dramatic methods despite the explicit prompt provided on the question paper. A significant minority of answers framed the debate by suggesting other tragic heroes in the play: Biff, Linda, Happy, or Charley, and this inevitably led students away from relevant discussion. There was plenty of focused consideration as to why Willy lacks greatness with more strident arguments probing towards his possible villainy or victim status, and here links to the social context of the play's historical setting were often relevantly made, arising out of the text. Where candidates were linking unhelpfully to other 'American Tragedies' (*Of Mice and Men*, *The Great Gatsby*), there was little to credit.

Question 5: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

This question was answered by a small number of schools—students debated the victim status of Blanche du Bois with focus and engagement. Many students did not treat the text with as much awareness of dramatic method as they might (given that Williams provides so many detailed stage directions and includes a range of props and symbols) and many responded to the story of the play rather than its construction. Most debates considered Blanche’s victim status through some key plot events. There were significantly fewer answers, and only by the most able students, which included a link between ‘victim’, ‘impossible’ and ‘sympathise with’. Students with less secure textual knowledge asserted a disturbing line of argument that Blanche cannot be seen as a victim or sympathised with, because she is only getting what she deserves when Stanley rapes her. Better, more thoughtful responses explored a range of ways in which an audience might respond to Blanche in a sympathetic or unsympathetic way. Some of the best answers focused on specific scenes in some detail comparing how Blanche is presented at different points in the play and showing a structural understanding of the play, making apt use of Blanche’s past to support their points. Irrelevant contexts were less foregrounded in this text than others in Section B and the focus was on the possible gender context set up in the task.

Schools and colleges must be mindful that this text is only available for the AS exam and must not be used for A-level next year.

Looking ahead to A- level next year

Undoubtedly schools and colleges will be reading this report with an eye on how they can prepare for next year’s A-level as well as for next year’s AS exam. There are clear messages here that will help all students. Fundamentally, students should:

- focus exclusively on the questions set
- know their texts well, selecting wisely from them as they construct their arguments—this will be particularly important in the A-level Paper 2s where the generic conventions are not clear cut
- be able to think about interpretations that arise from aspects and elements of the genre they will be writing about
- understand that the ways that writers shape meanings is not just the use of single words and that writing about larger structural issues will be more beneficial

- make telling choices in the material they select
- work at constructing debates and interrogating key words
- be confident in thinking and writing independently and developing their own voices

A reminder on the rubric for A-level Paper 1

Given that schools will have studied four texts this year, they must ensure that the rubric is not contravened when students are only writing about three texts next year in Paper 1. Two drama texts must be written about in the A-level Tragedy and Comedy papers plus one other text. If students are writing on Comedy, then the choice of the third text is not a problem, but if students are offering Tragedy and one of the texts is *The Death of a Salesman*, then their third text must be *Richard II*, *Keats* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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