

AS-level

English Literature B

Paper 1B: Literary genres: drama: Aspects of comedy
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 1B

The entry for this paper was almost 1,100 and all texts were studied. This makes it possible to report comprehensively on student performance. The most popular texts were *Twelfth Night* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Some centres chose *The Taming of the Shrew*, with fewer

centres looking at *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Educating Rita*. There was some very good work seen on all questions but some students did not always see the texts through the lens of dramatic comedy. Those who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded. In the best responses in questions 1 and 2 students were able to use specific parts of the extract to illuminate aspects of comedy and they were able to link these to other relevant aspects of dramatic comedy in the wider text. In questions 3, 4 and 5 successful students were able to debate the targeted aspect and explore literary texts informed by different interpretations. They were also able to explore the authors' dramatic methods.

Often students wasted time in their responses by writing unnecessary introductions or conclusions. Some students made overt comparisons to the other comedy text chosen and this was not required. Often such comparisons are unhelpful and obstruct the argument.

Question 1: *The Taming of the Shrew* – William Shakespeare

The selected extract allowed students to explore Petruchio's taming methods and Kate's response to him. Successful answers had a strong sense of the staging of this sequence, and knew how this section links and connects to other core sequences in the drama. Where candidates considered the absurdity of the taming strategy, they were well rewarded.

Many students, however, approached this task without considering the extract in terms of dramatic comedy; these students tended to write rather generally about the characters in the play. Several students also offered unnecessary and detached feminist interpretations of the text and this approach did not work well. Primarily, the comedy created in this extract is verbal, and so relies on wit and repartee, and the best answers explored this as Shakespeare's dramatic method. In this sense, the extract's structure, details of language, the use of puns and imagery are very important in generating comedy. When students were focusing on the drama they were able to write effectively about how comedy operates both here and in the wider play.

Question 2: *Twelfth Night* – William Shakespeare

The extract involved the sequence where Toby Belch, Andrew Aguecheek and Feste are celebrating into the small hours, when they are interrupted by the steward Malvolio. Answers which only gave accounts of characterisation, rather than the specifics of the dramatic effect of Malvolio's entrance were less well rewarded than those who saw the extract in terms of the comedic genre.

Good answers also looked at the economic context of servant and master relations and the resultant subversion caused by Malvolio's criticism of the knights. The impact of the songs and singing was explored in stronger work.

Many students successfully applied concepts of comedic theory to the extract, including critical terms such as Inversion Theory, allowed fools, natural fools, festival, Lord of Misrule and Old Word / Green World / New World concepts. Such answers thoroughly examined the extract through a comedic lens. These were supported by specific textual examples, with good awareness of links to other moments of dramatic comedy in the play. The best answers were able to conduct a debate fully aware of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

A number of students, however, were unable to examine how precisely comic disorder is created in the extract, preferring instead to solely write about Malvolio's influence in the play. Some students also wrote very generally about character instead of concentrating on how comedy is achieved and some failed to notice the role and function of Maria in the extract.

Question 3: *She Stoops to Conquer* – Oliver Goldsmith

There were some excellent responses to this text from students who had fully considered various interpretations of Tony Lumpkin. These students were able to show both his foolish behaviour as well as his intelligence, using specific textual examples to demonstrate that this is an essential part of Goldsmith's comedy and his dramatic method. In the best answers students used appropriate details from the text and ranged around it widely. Often comedic connections to other characters in the play were understood and analysed.

Question 4: *The Importance of Being Earnest* – Oscar Wilde

This question invited debate over how disguise and false identity are used in the play. Most students were able to pick out the more obvious aspects of disguise but more successful answers considered the intricacies of the ways false identity operates in the play—and in particular, their comedic effect. Such answers went beyond the main characters alone and examined, for example, Miss Prism. Recounting the plot alone rarely gave students high marks here. Some students made unnecessary forays into Wilde's biography or his other works. The best answers were able to show how disguise and false identity contributes to the structure of the comedy, exploring the pattern of initial confusion and then resolution. Often this debate was conducted with an eye on how the

genre of comedy of manners operates. There was generally good relevant contextual awareness here of how Wilde's aim was to satirise the society which the play depicts. Many answers were also able to widen the debate and explain how disguise and false identity are central tenets of dramatic comedy.

Question 5: *Educating Rita* – Willy Russell

Fewer students responded to this text. Although the main setting for the play is Frank's office, some students were unable to see how Russell constructs other comedic settings for the drama via monologues, imaginative dialogues and projections of past experiences. Some students were able to explore this, however, as part of Russell's economic dramatic method, and they used this as an opportunity to show how, for example, the location of Liverpool, the university and other imagined locations in the drama, help to create comedy. Interpretations of setting could be quite open and imaginative ranging from ideas about working-class and academic settings to notions of place such as Australia and France. Students who focused on the other settings were generally confident in discussing the various constructions of settings that Russell has assembled in the drama, and were able to explore them in considerable depth.

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.