

AS

English Literature B

Paper 2B: Literary genres: poetry and prose: 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 2B

The entry for this component was smaller than its sister paper on Tragedy, but examiners reported reading some excellent responses by students on all six texts. The *Poetry Anthology: Comedy* proved by far the most popular text in Section A, with the three prose texts being equally

represented in Section B responses. The philosophy of the specification as a whole, and more specifically, the understanding of the way comedy operates in prose and poetry texts in Paper 2B, has been grasped expertly by some schools and students. Schools and colleges are to be congratulated on preparing students well for this paper, yet there are areas where students can improve their approach to the paper.

Question 1: The Nun's Priest's Tale

Students tended to write well about Chaucer's comedic text. Perhaps the initially challenging nature of the language encouraged students to commit to learning the text well, and this in turn led to some thoughtfully selected supporting details. The task itself revolved around two key aspects in comedy—the representation of the comic hero who succeeds in the end, and the idea that weaknesses can be a source of amusement. The best responses grasped that protagonists in comedies can be both laughed at and/or cheered, and offered a view as to whether or not Chauntecleer's weaknesses outweighed his heroic qualities. Less successful students tended to write a thinly veiled character study of the cockerel, or write about his foolish behaviour, rather than engage with the debate.

The extract itself was rich with possibility, focusing on the very moment in which Chauntecleer is captured. The best responses dealt with method at a structural level, seeing this moment as a climactic point in the narrative and looking at the way in which the narrator draws attention to the ridiculous spectacle of the cockerel proudly stretching his neck. Most students related this part to the comedic set up earlier in the text, noting the idea that the reader has been prepared for the cockerel's fall, and they also looked ahead in the story to the (possible) heroic manner in which Chauntecleer escapes the clutches of the fox. While it was possible to say some relevant things about the individual words used to describe Chauntecleer's physical appearance, more perceptive answers looked at the way the tale was structured, making the point that part of the joy of comedy is the obliviousness of the characters and how the arch voice of the narrator lets the audience in on the joke. The ways in which the reader is invited to laugh at the protagonist's folly was a profitable aspect of method to explore in relation to the debate.

Question 2: Poetry Anthology: Comedy

The Poetry Anthology task included an extract from *Mrs Sisyphus* and focused on the comedic representation of men as weak and foolish. Several links to genre are found here, one being the idea that in comedy, humour often comes from the representation of gender and the stereotypical way in which, in this case, men's actions can cause amusement. Answers which focused upon 'men', 'weak' and 'foolish' were therefore likely to succeed.

The debate was triggered by the word ‘always’ which invited students to take issue with, or support, the given view. The best answers therefore engaged with this debate and offered a response to it. As ever, there is no preferred answer—some students argued that Sisyphus is not physically weak, but weak-willed and definitely foolish for ignoring his wife in favour of work. Others argued that he is in fact not weak, but strong because of how he appears to resist his seemingly demanding wife and how his resilience could be an indication of mental strength. It is possible to make the case that the speaker in *The Flea* is far from foolish given his witty argument, or that the protagonist in *Tam O’Shanter* is weak in terms of his succumbing to the lure of alcohol and young women, and definitely foolish for putting himself in danger. One witty student ventured that perhaps Tam’s desire to stay out late was understandable given Kate’s character, and perhaps Tam was a strong, yet foolish husband to risk the wrath of his wife’s stormy temper. Being able to think and say thoughtful things about the focus of the task is always valued—examiners enjoy reading answers which have a clear personal voice.

In terms of method, good points were made about the narrative voice of Mrs Sisyphus and the way in which the insults directed at her husband represent his foolishness. The reported words of Sisyphus (her recreation of his defence about the perks of his work) and the frustration engendered by his seeming obliviousness were generally effective. Resisting the urge to say unconvincing things about line length and rhyme scheme is to be encouraged - the idea that dots above the letter ‘i’ represent the boulder, or that the irregular structure represents their irregular relationship never really work, and more importantly, have little to do with the focus of the task.

Most students made sensible choices of other poems to bring into their argument, yet there were some choices which seemed less obvious and often (but not always) less effective: the sparseness of the male role in *My Rival’s House* and *Sunny Prestatyn* made for less fruitful choices than *Not My Best Side*, *Tam O’Shanter* and *The Flea*. Students should resist the desire to write about their favourite poem and instead, opt for the one(s) which help them construct the best argument. Likewise, for some students, sticking to the focus of the task was problematic. Although it is reasonable to argue that seemingly powerful female narrators can make the male characters seem weak, answers which warped the task by arguing that *women* were weak and foolish were in danger of becoming irrelevant—the debate here was about *men* and whether they are *always* presented as weak and foolish. Encouraging students to read questions carefully, identify the heart of the debate and focus sharply upon it is essential.

Question 3: Betjeman selection

The Betjeman task asked whether death and ageing were ‘always presented in a light-hearted way’, so the extract from *Late-Flowering Lust* offered plenty of comically grotesque moments from which to shape an answer. The poetry tasks clearly ask the students to refer to other poems or (in the case of Chaucer) other parts of the poem. It is here that choice is important as there are clearly some choices which work better than others. *Senex* offered lots of scope to deal with death and ageing, whereas *Slough* (although it mentions death) was often less tractable.

Students did best when they focused on ‘death’ and ‘ageing’ (rather than just one of them), and also ‘light-hearted’. Understanding that comedic entertainment comes in many forms is useful knowledge for students exploring this genre, so being able to distinguish between darkly comic ideas and lighter forms of humour provided a good route into this task. Weaker answers tended to treat ‘light-hearted’ as simply meaning ‘funny’ and in doing so, closed down opportunities. A lot of students argued convincingly that while Betjeman’s treatment of death and ageing could be seen as humorous, ‘light-hearted’ wasn’t always an appropriate description. One thoughtful response posited that the macabre nature of events in the extract and elsewhere in the collection brought the subject matter closer to tragedy, offering the idea that comic events usually have tragic potential in them.

When writing about method, it was possible to say useful things about rhythm and rhyme—this was a task in which the light-hearted, often jaunty feel of Betjeman’s verse was relevant to a task about the light-hearted presentation of morbidity. Narrative voice was also well-handled, but only a few students picked up upon the poem’s title—an often overlooked structural device. The multiple significances of the words in the extract poem’s title and their connection to death, or the irony of the title *Senex* (given the actions and thoughts of the aged narrator), could have been good areas to explore.

Question 4: *Emma*

Emma was a popular choice and students frequently displayed excellent knowledge when writing about this text. The comedic focus—‘misunderstandings arising from courtship’—was handled well in the main, with many students writing confidently about the misunderstandings between the heroine, Mr Elton and Harriet, and also the incident at Box Hill, amongst others. When students faltered it tended to be because they overlooked the debate—whether these misunderstandings were ‘*always comic*’—and instead, produced a response which just provided an overview of the misunderstandings. A further area of difficulty for some students was not to draw too much upon pre-learned material. It was clear that some students were partly rewriting an essay based upon

the Austen task in the sample materials on self-discovery, or an essay about marriage. As ever, responses which chose relevant parts of the text and provided an answer to the debate in the task succeeded.

There were some perceptive comments about narrative voice in *Emma*, and especially about the way in which the reader was made aware of Emma's shortcomings. This worked well when it was made relevant to 'misunderstandings' and particularly when students could show how comedy is generated by the gap between the reader's awareness of Emma's misunderstandings and the character's own obliviousness. Focusing on these structural aspects of method worked better than writing about minutiae. Some less successful responses offered sentences such as "Austen tells us that Mr Elton made 'violent love' to Emma. The word 'violent' shows that it was aggressive and therefore wasn't funny." While there is something to credit here, it hopefully demonstrates how writing about individual words can be limiting rather than illuminating.

Question 5: *Small Island*

The very best answers on *Small Island* were by students who ranged widely around the text in order to construct their argument. The task itself was based on the idea that comedic texts can often depict marriage as both a satisfying and a dissatisfying institution, and there was plenty of material to draw upon. A popular argument was that Queenie and Bernard's union was dissatisfying, whereas Gilbert and Hortense's relationship developed into a satisfactory marriage. In order to demonstrate this, students needed to select relevant examples from different parts of the text, and this is where excellent text knowledge and the ability to locate precise references in the novel came to the fore. Knowing how to use the text in an open book exam is a valuable skill. Precise references are expected given the fact that the students have the texts with them, so knowing the sequence of the narrative and the physical place of events in the book is helpful, and in practical terms, saves students valuable time.

The task itself was generally well answered. Some students neglected to explore the final part of the tale, but the ones who did often made telling comments about the significance of the new house, the baby and the intimacy which emerges. More subtle answers explored the idea that some personal growth appeared to have occurred in Bernard which may suggest grounds for optimism in his marriage, and likewise, the apparent satisfaction in Gilbert and Hortense's union was questioned by some students.

In terms of method, much was made of Levy's decision to use multiple narrators, but this was only really relevant when it was mentioned in relation to marriage. There was much thoughtful exploration about the symbolism of the ending and some students pointed out that unlike some

comedic narratives which end with marriage, *Small Island* starts with two marriages of convenience and goes on to contrast the development of the marital relationships and their relative fortunes. References to key events in the plot and their effect upon marital satisfaction were generally well chosen. Some students got sidetracked by writing largely irrelevant paragraphs about the Windrush generation or race, rather than focusing squarely on the debate.

Question 6: Wise Children

Students writing about *Wise Children* were asked to focus on the ending of the story (where comedy normally resolves happily) and consider whether the ending was not only ‘celebratory’ (as comedic endings can be) but ‘*entirely* celebratory’. While it is useful to show how some of the problems in the narrative are set up earlier in the text, making sensible choices from the *ending* of the text is what helped the better responses to succeed. Some students chose to write about anything from anywhere in the text which might be deemed ‘celebratory’ rather than choosing events from chapter 5. The sample materials task also made its way into the essay, with some students wanting to write about the celebration of old age, rather than the resolution of the narrative.

There were some very impressive answers which really got to grips with the complexities of the ending and the idea that Melchior’s recognition of his daughters may be hollow, or Dora and Nora’s acquisition of the twins may be a symbol of new life, but may also give cause for concern. Method was generally handed well, and given the fact that the task itself deals with a structural aspect—resolution—then issues arising from the tying up (or otherwise) of loose ends made for some thoughtful work.

There was a tendency for students to get burdened with extraneous material, possibly given the complex nature of the story and the intertextual elements of the narrative. There were some essays which completely lost sight of the task and gave a rundown of the links between Shakespeare’s plays and the novel, or wrote largely irrelevant paragraphs on Bakhtin, or Carter’s battle with cancer. As is often the case, when this material appears, the task disappears. Nonetheless, there were some very impressive responses on this text which got to the heart of the question and the issue of comedic endings.

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

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