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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 2A Literary genres: Elements of crime writing  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

This is the second year of the new A-level examinations and there is a growing confidence in schools and colleges about how to approach the exam. Many centres have acted on the advice given by AQA in official courses and in materials that are available on the website. Where this advice has been central to teaching, students have clearly benefited. It makes sense that all centres look at the materials available and build the central information into their teaching. The two key essentials for success are:

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

There are several teaching suggestions in the course materials on the website to help centres to foreground these necessities.

All four papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen by examiners. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management. Students need to think carefully about the questions and plan what they are going to say, before starting to write.

As with last year, 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. They share the same philosophy, the same levels of response mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (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. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours. Both papers were marked as paper scripts.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts.

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, understandably, very similar.

## **The importance of students knowing their texts**

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. 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

and organised their ideas to shape meanings. When students have good textual knowledge they are able to address the questions confidently and to 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. The very best answers were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the point they were making, rather than those who used what they could remember and then shaped their argument around that. When this happened, students often drifted from the task. Being equipped with good textual knowledge also helps students to be specific and accurate. It should be noted that Band 2 of the mark scheme has a headline descriptor of 'generalised' – and even here it has to be relevant to the task - so if students are aiming to gain marks in the higher bands they need to be precise and accurate.

Some students gave inaccurate responses. Examiners noticed this with quotations, some students created their own and then analysed their own version of authorial method. Inaccurate quotations and textual details detract from students' arguments – often because they lose any sense of the author's subtlety or creativity in choice making. Students should understand that close textual references in support of relevant arguments are perfectly acceptable – and quotation marks should only be used when students are certain that they are accurate.

Knowing texts is more important than citing critical reading or knowing background information about writers' lives and times. Some students were much happier writing about what they thought was relevant context about racial attitudes in Elizabethan England and Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne, than writing about the texts themselves and what is revealed within the texts in relation to the tasks.

Part of 'knowing' texts also involves students understanding their texts in terms of genre, although the text's story and the narrative arc must have priority before work on genre can be made meaningful. Students need to know how their texts connect with what might be regarded as traditional generic patterns and how they disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. It is worth reminding students that genre is a loose set of conventions and these conventions are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

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

Once students are equipped with secure textual knowledge, they have to be trained to answer the questions that *are set* in all their details and not partially address them or respond to their own questions. In order to be successful students must answer the questions set taking account of all the words in the question. 'Answer the question' is an important reminder for 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 use extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question. What students need to focus on is to construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passage, firstly in terms of its mini narrative and then see what specific features were evident and which opened up meanings. In

Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Emilia as victim in *Othello*, Sir Toby as a riotous festive figure in *Twelfth Night*, atoning for crime in *Atonement* and the rejection of authority in *Henry 1V Part 1*.

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

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy, comedy, crime or political and social protest writing and students are then invited to explore a view or explore the significance of an aspect. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word ‘significance’ is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings. Unfortunately some students thought that the word significance itself was up for debate and some tried to argue that extracts and ideas were not significant. This was an unhelpful approach and led many students into a dead end.

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 can be valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who argued with personal voices and wrote relevantly were duly rewarded. 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 and sensitively. For some, however, it did not work. Some students used critical material, including the Critical Anthology, that was not clearly understood and they tacked it on to arguments, often subverting questions. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used specifically to further the student’s argument, they are best left out.

### **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 an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail. A specific skill is required here which is to work closely with text in an independent way, tracking its narrative trajectory and seeing its relationship with the genre to which it belongs. Bringing in material that is not closely connected to the printed extract does not help students to answer the question successfully.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding, in a tight and detailed way, to a section of a play that they have studied and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. The connections to the wider play need to be sharp and obvious. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. It is worth repeating advice that was given last year.

*In all extract based questions, students need to read – or reread – the extracts 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, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.*

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is very helpful if students establish an overview of the extract taking note of its shape and the dramatic and narrative (and tragic or comedic) 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, climax or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. It would be a useful teaching exercise for teachers to spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways so that they have an anchor for the rest of their discussion.

Clearly students need to know the play well though so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come *immediately* before and *immediately* after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages, but if students do have a secure sense of the whole they will see the benefits of writing about the extract as drama. As long as the extract is the *central* focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play. Although it is important to refer to the wider play, the comments must connect directly with the extract. Some students for example in their writing about the *Othello* extract unprofitably wrote more about Othello, who does not appear in the extract, than Iago and Roderigo, who do.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to think about the drama itself and the playwright's construction of the play. They 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, which is rarely productive and invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

Students need to see that the skills for Section A questions are quite different from the skills needed for Section B questions. A number of students thought that they needed to debate whether the passage was or wasn't significant and several thought they should construct their own debate like those in Section B.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to see that these questions are different from those elsewhere in the paper. Students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and work with what is *there*. Although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed and how the mini story being told at this point is being shaped.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial or dramatic methods. 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 did not respond to the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analyses of single words.

A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not fully understand. Last year advice was given about students writing about iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play and although there was a little less inaccuracy this year, there was still some unhelpful discussion and some comments which were wrong. The same was true for several students who wrote about metre in the poetry questions. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Students can generally write about these features sensibly and confidently.

### **The significance and influence of contexts**

There are still some students who think that they have to include material that exists outside the text and work it into their writing, often taking the place of analysis of the text itself. The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts, those which are set up in the questions and those which relevantly form part of their argument. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and naturally. Some students, unfortunately, still thought they had to include all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was not well understood. In the weakest answers there were generalised – and often inaccurate – claims about women and patriarchy, society, class and race and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the question.

Although there were fewer claims this year that various audiences and readers in past ages 'would have been shocked', this still existed in some responses. Examiners across all papers reported that students were still asserting that audiences of the past would have been shocked by characters' behaviours or the language writers used. It is worth ensuring that students know what the word 'shocking' means and then reminding them that it is unwise to claim that audiences of any time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Students also need to think more carefully about what they are actually saying. They need to think what a Shakespearian audience comprised (different people with different views and proclivities, like those in their own literature classes, experiencing drama in a theatre probably not for the first time). Would all those people viewing *Othello*, for example, really have been 'shocked' when they heard Emilia disobey Iago? Students need to be made aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex, to social order being overturned and to feisty and outspoken women.

There were also some assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and 'enlightened' readers of today. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. There is no requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To

what extent do **you** agree with this view?’ and students need to be prepared to commit themselves from their own perspectives. Their voices are what examiners want to hear.

There were also some students writing and making claims about the effects of pronoun use, particularly the use of ‘I’ and ‘me’ which many students said showed arrogance and selfishness. When speech is used it is natural for pronouns to be used, so students really do need to think more carefully before making claims about what ‘I’ reveals.

Another increasing trend is the way that students, regardless of the task, are becoming fixed on the ‘issue’ of women and how appallingly they were treated in previous ages. While students are to be congratulated on using their Critical Anthologies to open up ideas about texts (and here specifically feminist theory), they have to be careful about making sweeping statements and forcing material into answers that does not relate to the question. The ‘issue’ of both women and men is important, but the texts offer so much more to think about than the single concern of gender inequality. Sometimes readings are imposed on texts that are not supported by evidence in the texts themselves and have no bearing on the question set. There needs to be some subtlety in the application of theoretical concepts.

### **Writing skills**

When students are debating and discussing meanings, it is important that they try to express themselves in clear and logical ways. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. It is not necessary for writing to include an excess of critical, tragic and comedic terminology, perhaps using that terminology for its own sake and not fully understanding it. 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. Some students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty.

### **Removing burdens and giving students ownership**

Some students seemed to be burdened with material they felt they had to include. Apart from contextual material and terminology, 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, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Some students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references 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.

### **The importance of clear and independent thinking**

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Students need to be able to look at questions on the day of the exam with a clear mind. They need to approach the paper and questions without any

preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully. Students should remember that if the question does not ask for something, then they are not required to include it.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were, of course, rewarded appropriately.

### **Specific comments**

Overall it was felt that the paper produced some successful responses and allowed students of all abilities to show what they had learnt about the genre and the set texts. Many students had obviously enjoyed studying the genre and responded enthusiastically to many of the question topics. There were, however, certain key characteristics of the best responses and ways in which some students could have improved their performances.

As ever, the best answers were fluently written and enjoyable to read. The argument was clearly and coherently organised and there was usually evidence that students had taken time to plan their work. As previous reports have stated, question focus is essential to success and if well-written answers do not actually answer the question they cannot score highly. If ‘answer the question’ is the mantra for this specification, perhaps we should also add ‘take time to think’ as its follow-up. This is a long three hour examination but students are not expected to write solidly for three hours. Built into that time should be space for thinking and planning. It is worth observing that while some scripts ran into their second and third, even fourth, booklet they rarely scored high marks. The majority of band 5 scripts kept to the confines of the twelve page booklet. Less was more in many cases.

As stated above, question focus was crucial to success and it was worth students taking time to unpick all the question terms and ensure they were all addressed to some extent. In question 4, for example, there were three terms in the question: ‘detective’, ‘victim’ and ‘heroine’. Many students failed to address all three terms, usually overlooking ‘heroine’. While they did not all have to be addressed equally, the best answers did acknowledge them all in some way. In responses to question 8 students sometimes overlooked ‘the appearance of respectability’, honing in on ‘corrupt and dishonest’ thereby limiting the depth of their answers.

It is also vital to pinpoint the question topic accurately. For example, in question 11 students were asked to ‘explore the significance of the innocent’ so students who only wrote about suffering were not actually answering the question and consequently did not score very highly. Debates should have focused around innocence and it was not enough to simply assert the innocence of Rose, for example, or the Mariner’s crew and to describe their suffering at considerable length, without discussing why they could be considered innocent. The best answers always teased out the subtle implications of the question such as that set up by the word ‘unlikely’ in question 4 or the differences between ‘error’ and ‘intention’ in question 9.

While it was evident that many students had an excellent grasp of the conventions of the genre, it was occasionally surprising to see some answers where students seemed a little uncertain about the actual meaning of some of the associated terms. In question 5, for example, it appeared that some students were not entirely sure of the meaning of ‘atonement’ and seemed to regard it as just having something to do with forgiveness or to be a synonym for it. Careful thinking about definitions makes for sharper answers. The best answers to question 2 explored the actual meanings of ‘societies’ and did not just make general references to other people.

Similarly some answers could have been improved if they had been based on more careful reading of the texts themselves or indeed, a better textual knowledge. Assertive readings of the suicide of Pinkie and Ophelia seem to overlook more subtle implications in the texts which could have been fruitfully debated. It is also essential that students actually refer to the texts and do not use film versions as a substitute for reading them, as sometimes seemed to be the case in question 7. This is an open book examination and students are expected to use detailed textual support for all their arguments, even if the text itself is quite lengthy. This was particularly evident when students were answering question 6 on *Oliver Twist*. Generalised answers with few actual textual references were unlikely to score more than band 2.

There were some answers where there were more citations of critics' views than textual references. Critical views could help an argument where they were relevant but quite often these views were forced into the argument where they were not appropriate and they did not actually add anything to the answer.

Likewise, contextual references should be used judiciously and integrated into the argument in a relevant way and not 'bolted on'. It is important that contextual points arise from the study of the text and are accurate. Question 3 often seemed to give rise to quite a lot of inaccurate or very sweeping, generalised contextual assertions about Christian beliefs, pantheism and romanticism. There also seemed to be some confusion in question 1, for example, where, although the text was published in 2011, some students seemed to think the Russian Revolution was a recent event. There were also countless references to imprisonment being an unjust punishment for Wilde's homosexuality in question 10. Unfortunately lengthy discussions like this could gain little credit as this fact is never mentioned in the actual text.

The best answers to question 1 (unseen extract) were where students adopted an analytical approach firmly rooted in the extract. Students were asked to explore the significance of crime elements in the extract given. It is therefore imperative that they start from the extract and look at that in detail. They should not approach the task with a checklist of generic conventions in their heads and try to impose these artificially on the extract. If tackled in this way answers descended into futile negative observations at best or, at worst, unsubstantiated speculations about what might happen in the rest of the novel. Whilst it was absolutely valid to make structural observations about the extract and what it established as the opening of a text, it was pointless to speculate about what was going to happen which cannot be known from this piece of text. There were wild speculations about the narrator. The introduction described him as a lawyer but many students went on to speculate that he was a 'detective' or a 'criminal' and what he would go on to do when there was little reasonable evidence in the extract to suggest any of it.

Some also tried to impose a sub-genre on the extract. For example, he was often described as 'hard-boiled' on almost negligible evidence. Such efforts to impose this on the character usually lead students down unproductive avenues at the expense of interesting points which were actually in the text. Students should look at what is there in the text in front of them. The best answers did explore the subtleties of the passage – its tensions, ambiguities, ironies, symbolism, narrative perspective and use of the second person addressee (not always accurately identified as a fiancé).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that students need to remember the rubrics for the paper. Some students answered two questions in Section B and none in Section C. Only one question in each section can score marks. It is important that students read the instructions on the paper carefully and follow them accurately. Such infringements meant that students may not have gained the mark that they could have attained.

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

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