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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2B Texts and Genres: Elements of political and social protest writing  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

This is the first year of the new A-level examinations for LITB and it is very pleasing to report that the papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen on all four papers. 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; and some students seemed to think that they needed to write for the full three or two and a half hours that were allotted to the examinations regardless of whether they had anything new to say. Students need to think about the questions and what they are saying rather than just writing.

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 (just as the four papers are in AS). They share the same philosophy, the same 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.

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 answering the questions set in all their details**

In all AQA courses for Specification B, in all official communications and in all our support materials on the website, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the single most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess. When they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are not required by the question. Although students are studying the genres of tragedy and comedy, the tasks do not require them to write everything or anything known about the genre including what Aristotle, Hegel and other theorists have said. They have to write about the specific aspects or elements of the genre that are set up in the questions or those which are evident in the passages in Section A. If students subvert questions they get into a muddle. What they need to do is construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In the 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 passages and see what specific features emerged 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

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in the questions, for example Iago's villainy in *Othello*, marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the process of detection in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### **The importance of students knowing their texts and then reading them through the lens of genre**

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, its story and the narrative arc must have priority before other work can begin. 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. Although this might seem obvious, they need to know what happens and how the story ends. They also need to be able to write relevantly about specific parts of the text and have ideas about what can be analysed in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations, though knowing quotations and using them judiciously always helps. Students who had a secure understanding of the chronology and characters of their stories could make good choices. They could focus on particular events, use appropriate details and write in an informed way. Making good choices is crucial.

The student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. Having secure textual knowledge gives students confidence; it is the base from which all else springs. Some students made poor choices that led them away from the task. These poor choices were often made because of inadequate textual knowledge and this resulted in students struggling with the tasks, often writing in a general, vague and inaccurate way. Several students tried to disguise their lack of knowledge by making things up, particularly quotations, and they then wrote about their invented words as if the words belonged to the authors. Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from students' arguments. If students do not know quotations then they would be best advised to simply explain their ideas using their own words and, providing that their explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, they will be credited.

Clearly it is imperative in this specification that students also have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how the texts connect with a traditional pattern and how they may 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. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

### **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 or comedy where students are invited to explore a view. 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.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive.

Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used 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 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.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are 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. 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. In all cases 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 important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic and narrative development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the passage 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 though, of course, other parts of the play do need to be discussed.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. 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.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and 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.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. 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 detached analysis of single words. A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not understand. This was particularly true of iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play. It was surprising how many students did not know what the terms mean and ended up writing inaccurately. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Fortunately fewer students this year were writing about punctuation, but there were still some who tried to find meanings in commas, exclamation marks and full stops.

### **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 crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

### **'Shocking'!**

Examiners across all papers reported the rather strange and prolific use by students of the word 'shocking' (or 'shocked') in relation to how students imagined audiences and readers of different times would have reacted to narrative events or language used by writers. 'Appalled' and 'horrified' were other popular words attributed gratuitously to audiences of former years. There are a number of issues to raise here. Firstly it is unwise for students to claim that audiences of any past time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Secondly, students need to think more about what they are actually saying. Would an audience (all the people in the theatre – or even any person) viewing *Othello*, for example, on any particular day – or all days – really have been 'shocked' when they heard the word 'devil' or when they heard Katherina or Gonerill speak out against men? Are students aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex and to feisty and outspoken women? Are they aware that audiences were and are different human beings with different ideas, thoughts and human appetites? Unfortunately the claim that audiences would have been 'shocked' was not just made about drama and the Elizabethans and Jacobean. There were also assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and those 'enlightened' readers of today. The answer to this is simple. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. At no point is there a 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?'

## **Writing skills**

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

## **Freeing students up and giving them ownership of their writing**

Too often, some students were burdened with material they felt they had to include. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but there was also the unnecessary insertion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology which may not have been understood. This terminology often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if as many as possible appeared in their writing. It is very rare that words like anagnorisis, stichomythia, and zeugma, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence. Often English, rather than Greek or Latinate, expressions would make much more sense and be understood more by those who are using them.

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, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Too many 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.

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

## **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. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. They need to approach the paper and questions without any preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded.

## Section A

Students tackled this question in a focused way and showed a clear understanding of how protest writing operates as a genre. At times, general prefatory comments about genre obscured more precise comment about the structure and trajectory of the extract. Overall, the passage was accessible for many and produced some accomplished responses that embraced the cultural ideas suggested by book-burning and authority. Some students also ventured into psychological studies of authority and into philosophical discourse about moral imperatives, the nature of freedom, individual identity and the effects of socialisation. Such ambitious engagement captures the spirit of this unit, inviting students to derive meanings from their cultural and social experience as well as the knowledge they possess about their texts.

It is worth highlighting the importance of making good choices about which elements of genre to select in the extract. Many responses focused on individual details that occurred at the start of the passage: ‘the firehouse trembled’, ‘the black morning sky’, ‘jet planes whistled a single note’. In most cases, these preliminary comments were a ‘way in’ to an unfamiliar extract and discussion moved on to more significant elements such as the confrontation between Montag and Beatty. Some students though spent so long on single images that they didn’t reach the more significant material in time to deal with it in any detail. More successful answers were those that established an overview of the extract and discussed two or three selected genre elements arising from the extract’s narrative. These responses integrated method and genre to show how the passage presented its ideas. Where centres had seemingly prepared candidates to work through a ‘genre checklist’, students often made poor choices, or were unfocused because they were not able to see genuine connections between the learned ‘checklist’ and the extract.

## Section B

Questions 2-9 invited students to construct a debate about a single text and many responses were clearly focused using textual detail aptly to present a range of ideas. This was exemplified especially where students were writing on Harrison or Crace and debating all the task terms without getting distracted by some ‘set pieces’ of rehearsed material that seemed particularly to afflict writing on Blake’s poetry, or Atwood’s or Hosseini’s novels and which invariably included elements of political history that were not clearly linked to the task. Students answering on *A Doll’s House* provided some very cogent responses engaging with ‘the principal cause’ in precise and detailed ways, with the best answers suggesting interconnected causes. Insightful answers also accounted for Helmer’s oppression by society to show the bleakness of the play’s world. These discussions reflected deeply on how gender identity is constructed and the way society shapes the individual and students clearly relished the opportunity to discuss issues they could see as relevant to themselves. This was similarly evident in *Hard Times* where students clearly identified and often condemned the institutions that shaped narrative outcomes such as Stephen Blackpool’s death or Louisa Gradgrind’s separation from Bounderby, writing sensitively about the plight of the individual set against bigger powers.

Section B affords students the opportunity to engage with critical ideas as part of their view about the debate, and students achieved this very successfully particularly on *Harvest* and *A Doll’s House* highlighting links that they found between critical ideas, such as Eco-Criticism and Marxism, as ways to interpret both the text and genre.

Students discussed structural features of method, such as voices and speakers to particular effect in Harrison and Blake. The use of the voices provided fruitful discussion about methods and meanings in *v.* and in ‘Them & [uz]’ where students were clearly animated about the treatment of

the schoolboy. In Blake, effective writing on the use of child speakers, the figures of the Piper and the Bard and some of the recurring imagery in the collection created thoughtful responses. On the other hand it was difficult for students to write meaningfully about rhyme schemes or to link them to the task relevantly, so often such points had little impact. Where students commented on settings or the events of the text, credit-worthy material was produced; this was well exemplified by responses to *The Handmaid's Tale* where setting and narrative perspective were linked to genre seeing Offred's reflections as shaped by Moira's influence.

Work on the drama texts for Paper 1 had prepared students well to deal with methods for the drama texts especially *A Doll's House*, with many responses commenting on Nora's costume, the links between her entrance and exit in the play, the use of props and staging. Students responding to *Henry IV Part I* wrote relevantly and thoughtfully about contexts that arose from the text in order to debate resistance to authority in terms of honour codes, systems of government, military values and the ways in which the play's structure uses these ideas. Many of the answers were enthusiastic about the power of the rebels and clearly elucidated ideas about why their actions were admirable. There was an impressive command of the text in the best answers with support being detailed, well-selected and thoroughly discussed conveying earnest views on what monarchy can expect from its subjects.

## Section C

In this section, students need to exemplify an element of the genre and reflect on its possible significances. Effective choice-making is crucial here, both on the selected texts and the moments within the text. To engage with significance, students need to write about episodes that connect to the overall structure of the text and the meanings produced. Only the more able students achieved this effectively. Some students opted for a comparative approach to discussing the two texts required for this section, and where this occurred answers were often forced and lacking clear focus.

For question 10, students were invited to write about the significance of types of force and a surprising number made the task more complicated by overlooking the most obvious inclusions of physical force and violence. Many searched for 'force' in colour choices of clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* or the political force of the Taliban in *The Kite Runner* shown by their banning of kite-flying. While both of these ideas have potential relevance, they were not handled well in many responses with discussion frequently moving on to the symbolism of red in *The Handmaid's Tale* or of the kite in *The Kite Runner*. Work on *Henry IV Part I*, *Hard Times* and *Harvest* showed focused engagement with force in very explicit ways and was not beleaguered by some the unhelpful choice-making of the more common texts. Students who wrote on Blake in this section presented more sharply developed ideas without the imprecision sometimes evident in Section B responses on *Songs*, perhaps because of the reduced time available for each text in Section C.

Students who had taken time to consider what may be termed "force" opened up perceptive debates about political and military force, the force of social attitudes or gender stereotypes, moral force, coercion, or psychological aspects of force and responded imaginatively to the question. This task included a quotation to help students define 'force'. A significant minority of students sought to construct a debate about what social and political protest writing 'focuses' on, rather than engage with the 'significance of types of force'. In most responses where an unnecessary debate was constructed, the student moved away from the central task of 'the significance of types of force'.

For question 11, there was some perceptive analysis of roles in the texts, such as ‘The Commander’ and Baba with many responses considering the different ways in which their authority was presented as benevolent as well as oppressive. Responses that engaged with the ambiguity of authority figures also showed insightful and astute understanding of their texts, and here students writing about *Harvest* engaged particularly well. Responses showed much careful consideration of method, particularly structure, in the ways the introduction or presence of an authority figure might shape narrative outcomes or meanings, such as the arrival of Master Jordan in *Harvest* or Hal’s game-changing role on the battlefield at Shrewsbury in *Henry IV Part I*. This question also seemed to enable students to move through their texts freely, particularly in *The Kite Runner*, *Hard Times* and *A Doll’s House* where students interpreted significance in the shift between figures who gained or lost authority as the text developed and responded in thought-provoking ways with a genuine personal voice.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this series has seen some outstanding work and a very committed level of engagement from students of all abilities. Section A presented opportunities for independent thinking and this was carried through into the ways ideas were debated in Section B. In Section C, exploration of the genre element in the text was often systematic and effective. It is rewarding to see so many students thinking with breadth and depth about this unit and writing about it with such interest.



**Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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