



ASSESSMENT and
QUALIFICATIONS
ALLIANCE

GCE English Literature

Specification B

Guidance Notes: The Importance of Genre

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ENGLISH LITERATURE SPECIFICATION B

LTB6 - EXPLORING TEXTS

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE

Focus on genre in comparing literary texts or analysing a single piece of literary text:

Genre is important in a number of ways for the English Literature synoptic module. At the moment quite a number of candidates do not seem to be sufficiently aware of this. First of all a focus on genre is important in responding to the compare and contrast question. The first thing candidates are likely to notice on looking at their pre-release material is the genre of the piece or pieces of literary text. When they are preparing this material for the examination, they should be thinking of it in terms of its genre. The literary text or texts will be examined in relation to AO2ii and AO3. As AO3 states candidates need to ‘understand the ways in which writers’ choices of form, structure and language shape meanings’. ‘Form’ here is synonymous with ‘genre’ and where candidates are asked to compare two or three pieces of literary text, the focus is on the ways in which writers present their material differently depending on the genre they have chosen to use.

They are likely to be presented with two pieces of text to compare, such as a poem and an extract from a play or an extract from a play and an extract from a novel and so on. It is possible that all the material for the comparison could be included in the pre-release material, as was the case in the January 2003 examination. However, it is more likely that they will have to compare the literary text from the pre-release material with the unseen literary text on the examination paper, as in the June 2002 paper. They may be asked to analyse an individual piece of previously unseen literary text for form, structure and language, as in the January 2003 examination. Whether the unseen material is to be dealt with separately or as part of a comparison, candidates need to focus on its genre in order to treat it appropriately.

Recognising the purpose of the synoptic module:

It seems that at the moment not all candidates are clear as to the purpose of the synoptic module, which is to draw together all the skills they have learnt over the two years of the course and demonstrate, using a variety of texts of different kinds, that they can transfer the skills they have acquired in the study of set texts to their own independent study of texts. If they have a clear notion before they go into the examination for LTB6 of what they expect to find when faced with any given genre, they will be well prepared. Too many candidates when given Yeats’s ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’ for close analysis in the January paper, reacted as though they had very little idea of the areas to cover and questions to ask when analysing poetry and ended up giving little more than a paraphrase. If they have a check list in their minds of what to look for, such as point of view and persona; types of imagery and use of figurative language; ways of structuring through sentences, stanzas, word classes etc and keep to the forefront of their minds the question ‘What is the relationship between form and content?’ they will be likely to focus on the appropriate areas.

In comparing literary text they need to think about the ways in which writers do things differently because of the genre they are using, so they might compare the novelist’s use of dialogue with the playwright’s or the poet’s use of metaphor with the novelist’s. However, they also need to be aware that they are not necessarily going to find all their expectations fulfilled. They may reasonably expect to find more use of metaphor in poetry than in the novel, but may find that the particular poem and novel extract work the other way round. As long as their check list is a basis not something absolute, they can use it effectively.

Planning is important in writing a detailed comparison. Candidates may well find that a plan organised in columns, with one column per literary text, works well. It enables them to glance across the columns to see what is done similarly or differently by the writers they are comparing. If they have three pieces of text to compare, as in last summer's examination where there were two poems, they do not need to deal with all three texts in the same amount of detail. The focus should be on the comparison of the two major genres, i.e. in June 2002 drama and poetry, rather than on the two sub-genres, in that case two different kinds of poem.

Focus on genre as context:

Candidates are now much more aware than they were last summer that they are able to use their own wider reading as well as their knowledge of texts studied in class to answer one question on the synoptic paper. An example of this type of question from the January examination was:

The material for this examination includes examples of poetry, drama and prose. Referring in detail to some of the texts you have read over the last two years, discuss the extent to which your study of these genres has helped you to understand and appreciate the texts for this paper.

This is not a general studies question, but a question designed to enable students to demonstrate that they understand what the synoptic module is all about. It is all about transferable skills. If candidates have learnt about narrative method in relation to *Wuthering Heights*, they need to be able to use the same skill to look at other novels and determine in what ways they are similar and/or different. To answer this question, candidates need to have realised that the study of English literature is not just about learning how to analyse a few specific set texts but about the skills of analysis that will enable them to analyse any piece of text. Candidates are not allowed to discuss the pre-release material with their teachers because examiners want to read their own independent opinions and judgements that they have been able to arrive at as a result of the skills they have been taught.

Workshop task:

A classroom workshop task that helps students to make the connections between texts studied and unseen/pre-release texts: in groups of three or four students can discuss the relationship between the texts they have studied in class and the unseen or pre-release literary texts for any given paper or for a set of exemplar material. They think of one example of a text they have been taught that is of the same genre as one of the literary texts on the paper and think how they might approach the new piece of text in the light of what they have been taught in relation to the particular genre. So when faced with an extract from Susan Hill's 'Strange Meeting' they might talk about the narrative method and compare it with the narrative method they explored in one or more of the texts they have previously studied. Similarly they might look at aspects of structure, use of imagery or symbolism or any other appropriate aspect. What they need to avoid is simply comparing content.

Synoptic focus:

In completing the above task all students are doing is articulating what they should be doing with the pre-release and unseen material. Unless they are making these connections between what they have learnt and how they approach this paper they will not be making the most of their transferable skills.