



AS

English Literature B

7716/2A

Report on the Examination

June 2025

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Summary

Areas where students excelled

- When there was a tight focus on the question asked and no veering from it.
- When students had excellent knowledge of their texts, engaged with the stories being told and could range around them for relevant details.
- When students made good choices of poems and sections of texts to answer the questions set.
- When students clearly were able to think for themselves and think naturally.

Areas where students struggled

- When students had their own agendas and largely ignored the questions set
- When textual knowledge was insecure so that ideas couldn't be supported
- When students wrote about general external contextual material instead of the story and text
- When students felt that they had to incorporate learned material regardless of questions and relevance

Introductory comments

Although the entry for AS English Literature B was small, some very good work was seen across all four papers. For those centres offering AS, it is clear that the students enjoyed their course and saw the value of reading texts through the lenses of Tragedy and Comedy.

All papers have the same format where students write discretely about two texts in 1 hour and 30 minutes and most students seemed to work well with this structure and managed their time sensibly.

This year's AS report will focus on four specific areas to try to help teachers in preparing students for future exams. These areas are: i) Answering the question set: knowing what this means and what it doesn't mean; ii) knowing how to effectively deal with 'significance' questions. iii) knowing the texts in detail and responding to the texts as stories; iv) understanding the perils of including and focusing on external contextual material.

i) **Answering Questions**

Answering the question set is the mantra for Spec B. Although much has been said about this in previous years, it remains the key concern of examiners. Marks can only be given for relevance to the question so students must focus exclusively on what is being asked. This means they must not subvert the question or ignore it and write about something else. However interesting the 'something else' is, students will only be given marks if their comments are relevant to the question. Teachers can help their students by telling them clearly during teaching and practice essay writing that only question relevance will be rewarded.

In the 'Explore the view questions' a debate is set up for students to think about - and 'thinking' is vital. Before they start writing, students need to ascertain what exactly they need to focus on, what debate is set up and, importantly, what the question isn't inviting them to do. The premise of the question is never a trick; there will always be a genuine line of argument students can pursue whether they agree or disagree with the given view. Question setters have ensured that there is plenty of material in the text to support the given view and plenty too for a counter argument. When students choose to disagree, some careful thinking is needed to ensure that what they write is still on task. They need to be sure that their challenge is legitimate in terms of the grammatical structure of the given argument. For example, in the question on *The Great Gatsby*: Explore the view that Tom and Daisy are villains who are as bad as each other, the counter argument is that they are not as bad as each other and students might argue that either is worse than the other. A viable counter argument, however, isn't that there are alternative villains which students can choose to write about; neither is it an invitation to say that Tom and Daisy are both victims of the American Dream and then write about that.

During revision time in centres, it would be really useful for teachers to spend time with their students looking at a variety of past questions (even those on texts their students are not studying) and asking students to think about what precisely is being asked, where the debate is and what isn't being asked. For many students, particularly those who are less confident in countering arguments, it would be sensible to advise them to agree with the given view as

there will always be plenty to say and if they agree, then at least they will not produce writing which is unfocused and irrelevant.

The best answers on the 'Explore the view questions' this year seen were from those students who pinned down what the question was asking, then went straight into the debate set up by question, stated their view and supported their ideas with close reference to specific parts of the texts and their stories. These students engaged with the text as a developing story and linked their references and quotations to events in the story's narrative trajectory.

Students should be reminded not to spend precious exam time writing ineffective introductions and repetitive conclusions.

ii) Dealing effectively with 'significance' questions

Significance questions offer a different way for students to explore meanings in texts.

Significance is a key word in several questions and it is followed by either an extract from a Shakespeare play or an aspect of tragedy or comedy or a topic that students need to explore in relation to tragedy or comedy; for example 'Explore the significance of places to the tragedy of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.' Significance is about what is signified - what meanings arise in terms of values and ideas and how these meanings are produced by what writers do and the methods they use. Significance invites students to think about the narrative (and in the above example, the drama); it also invites them to think about the characters, as well as the cultural, moral and social contexts that arise from the text.

The best answers to the significance questions were by those students who, at the start of their answers, pinned down what they were asked to explore the significance of. So, in Paper 1 Section A, they pinned down the story of the extract from its beginning to its end; and in other significance questions, they pinned down the specific topic they were asked to write about (for example 'journeys' in *The Remains of the Day* or 'acting and performance' in *Wise Children*). The mark schemes give precise details of the tragic and comedic trajectories of the extracts and if students pinned these down, they were rewarded. Similarly in the other 'significance' questions, there are precise examples in the mark scheme to suggest what students might have focused on.

A good strategy for students is to begin by immediately identifying an example of the topic and then developing ideas about it. Having done this, they can then move on to another example and write about that and continue in this way to the end of their answer. If they do this, students can easily accumulate marks. So, for example, in Question 6 Paper 2A, they could pin down, at the start of paragraphs, Stevens' physical journey from Oxford to Cornwall, his emotional journey to realise his personal mistakes, his metaphorical journey towards understanding as he acknowledges Lord Darlington's deceit. After establishing the precise journeys, students could then develop detailed ideas about the significances of those journeys and in this way shape their writing.

When students did not respond as successfully on significance questions, they either didn't engage with the story of the extract or they wrote vaguely and generally about the question topic without being specific. Sometimes they subverted the topic altogether and claimed that what was asked wasn't significant and then they wrote about something else. This type of question does not invite students to say that the extract or topic is not significant.

iii) Knowing texts and stories

The most successful responses were seen by students who knew their texts and the stories of those texts very well and then selected appropriate details. When students engage with stories, plots, events and characters they naturally connect with genre and tragic and comedic narratives (in drama, prose and poetry). When they engage with the stories of their texts, they also find it easy to respond to the set questions and authorial methods. The text and its story are the body of knowledge that English Literature student need to have; it is the foundation for assessment. There is nothing outside the text that students must know. So, they cannot sidestep the text and if they do not know it in a detailed way then they are seriously disadvantaged when it comes to answering questions.

Students struggle when they only know bits of the text or random quotations, with little familiarity of where the quotations occur in the story. Students need to see that in texts and stories events happen and things are said, which affect how other characters behave and speak at the particular time when they are said. Speech is rarely random. What Othello says when he is confessing his love for Desdemona in the Senate in Act 1 is dependent on the contextual situation at this point in the play, so it is ineffective for students to quote Othello's words without providing their dramatic context. Othello could not speak in the same way at the end of the play.

In all stories, the situations and the characters at the end are not the same as they are at the start. In drama texts, students have to imagine the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now with the potential for a variety of outcomes. In all texts, characters develop, and readers' and audiences' reactions and feelings are also altered during a story. This is true of extracts as well as whole texts. What a character says at the start of an extract could only happen at that point in the story; 50 lines later and the same things could not be said. So, for example, Katherina can only say 'Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun' after Petruchio has come towards the ending of his debilitating taming of her and after he has insisted that the moon she looks at is the 'blesséd sun'. Similarly, Iago can only call Emilia a 'good wench' (a term of endearment) at the point in the play when she is suggesting she has something that he wants (Desdemona's handkerchief). Once Emilia has handed it to him, she is of no further use and so he again abuses his wife, making disparaging comments towards her and instructing her to leave him alone. This is why students need to establish the tragic and comedic trajectories in the extract questions.

In the light of the above, it is therefore unhelpful for students to learn a bank of decontextualised quotations said by Iago or Emma or Daisy which they churn out when writing about a character, as if the characters are fixed and unchanging and could say what they say at any point in the story. References and quotations must be contextualised if they are to be meaningful and if they are to support meanings. Students need to be taught to contextualise briefly and succinctly. For example, in the *Gatsby* question, a student might say that Tom's villainous tendencies are foregrounded from Fitzgerald's first introduction of him and that when Nick first visits Tom and Daisy at their home in East Egg, Nick describes Tom's body as being 'capable of enormous leverage - a cruel body' and that when they later have dinner Daisy shows Nick her black and blue knuckles which she says were caused by Tom, the consequences of her marrying 'a brute of a man'.

If students have sound textual knowledge, then they are in the best position to answer the questions in the ways outlined above. When students have insecure textual knowledge then their chances in the exam are significantly impaired. Insecure knowledge leads students to write in a generalised and vague way.

iv) Understanding the perils of including external contexts

One reason perhaps why students do not know their texts well or the stories or details of texts is because they think they need to know other things instead of the text, for example external contextual material. This is a mistake for those doing Spec B. We are only interested in contexts that arise from the text itself.

Examiners frequently note that when students move away from the text and write about external contexts, they lose focus on the questions and write irrelevantly. No credit is given for generalised and sweeping contextual material which often takes the place of any engagement with the text itself.

As has been pointed out before, it is irrelevant for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives or to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods. Teachers should tell students not to write about Aristotle, or the 16th century or the Romantics or patriarchies in the real world. Writers might well represent patriarchy in their stories, and it might be relevant to write about the representation. But it is not relevant to write about the patriarchal situation of the 16th century or the 19th century as if it is one and the same thing for the whole century and in the whole of any particular country. The 16th and 19th centuries, of course, span a hundred years and one play or novel or poem can hardly be claimed to speak for an entire century - or even a bit of it, and for students to draw conclusions about 16th century society (or Elizabethan England) or people's attitudes from one play of Shakespeare or one Hardy novel is clearly unwise. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Gonerill and Viola and Bianca, so it makes little sense for students to claim that in the 16th century women were all passive or submissive or dependent on men. It also makes little sense to claim that Desdemona is just a passive representative of 16th century women either. She may be submissive at her death (but even then, she begs to live another day), but she is not submissive when she defies her father, when she insists to the Duke and her husband that she goes to Cyprus or when she repeatedly appeals for Cassio's reinstatement.

Students clearly need to think about the subtleties of their texts and the subtleties of character creation. Desdemona and Emilia are created with nuance; they are characters who change as events develop. They are not just representative women of the 16th century. Some students too readily, and without thinking, claim that Emilia and Desdemona, like 'all women' of the time, have no power, have to obey men and have no agency. While it might be relevant in the *Othello* extract question, for example, to say that at this point in the play Emilia is excited to find Desdemona's handkerchief as she wants to give it to her husband (who has a hundred times wooed her to steal it) to please him, it is not relevant to say that Emilia represents all women at the time and that no women had power and all women were abused by men. Significantly, if Iago has wooed her a hundred times before anyway, it's taken her a while to comply and even now she doesn't 'steal' the handkerchief, but 'finds' it.

When students start writing generalised contextual material it is always a sign that they will leave the text - and invariably the question. So, the solution is easy. Teachers need to tell students to focus on the story itself, and the characters within it, who are often created as multidimensional and interesting and whose fates engage readers and audiences.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked. Marks are awarded for ideas about the texts (as required by the question) - and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and the ideas should be developed by students using detailed knowledge of the text and its story.

Specific comments about 2A

Responses were seen to all three poetry texts with about half the students responding to *The Great Gatsby* and half to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. As was the case last year, there was only one response to *The Remains of the Day*.

Good answers were seen on all texts when there was a tight focus on the question set, when students understood where the debate was to be had and when they had good textual knowledge to support their ideas. The best answers were seen by students who were thinking freshly and naturally and not forcing learned material into their answers.

Most students were able to integrate comments on authorial method - seamlessly done in the poetry texts since students were asked to write about endings and this enabled them to automatically engage with narrative structure. Structure comments were also incorporated well in answers on the prose texts when students were ranging round their texts as they discussed Tom and Daisy as villains who are as bad as each other in *The Great Gatsby* and in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* whether men and male power cause Tess' tragedy. Other ways that authorial methods were seamlessly integrated were when relevant comments were made about narrators and authorial voices and when comments were made about the settings where events take place.

When students didn't perform well it was usually because of the lack of question focus, when textual knowledge was insecure or when students wrote about the authors' lives and external contexts. This was a particular issue with the Keats and Hardy poetry questions.

Section A Poetry

When answering questions on poetry, students must focus on a printed extract as part of their answer. This is one reason why they must know their texts well as there are no short cuts; students must write about a given part of a specific poem. If students have chosen not to study or revise certain poems, then they will invariably struggle if the extract is from that poem. The questions this summer for all poetry questions asked students to explore the significance of the endings in relation to aspects of tragedy. In order to do this well they needed to engage with the tragic story that leads up to the ending to show why the ending is significant. Students had to write about the ending of a given poem and then choose an ending of a second poem and tease out its significance in relation to tragedy.

Each ending, of course, operates in its own specific way according to how the poet has constructed ideas and students needed to work with the story and the poem to see what the poet is doing at the end. Even though the ending concludes the tragic narrative, in each extract there is still narrative development and change. The students who tracked the story of the extract were those who performed the best especially when they made valid connections with the wider poem, a poem which they had in front of them in their open book exam. The issue for the students who struggled was that their understanding of the extract and the poem from which it was taken was so slight that what the students wrote often did not make sense. In some lower-level responses students just picked out a few words and wrote about those with little sense of what is taking place. This is why so much emphasis has been placed in the introductory comments on students knowing their texts well.

The choice of the second poem and its ending clearly gave students some freedom to choose a poem they liked and knew best, one where they could really work with the ending. The best responses did just that; the less successful answers were often vague.

Question 1: Keats

In this question, students were asked to explore the significance of the last three stanzas of *The Eve of St Agnes* in relation to the wider tragedy. The extract begins after Porphryo has entered Madeline's dream and she has experienced despair before confessing her love for him. He has expressed some urgency and desire to take her away from the family home and the couple now hurry away through the guarded mansion and out of the door. In the final stanza, Keats jumps forwards in time and somewhat ambiguously tells us of the lovers' fate: long ago, he says, they 'fled away into the storm'. Meanwhile Madeline's father has nightmares and Angela, and the Beadsman die. The students who engaged with the details of the ending as the story develops performed well and they were able to tease out all kinds of significances. Some good work was seen by those who dealt with the ambiguity of the ending. There were insightful comments on the contrast of the potential happiness of the lovers and the grim fates of those left behind. There were also good comments on the settings with appropriate links to the beginning of the poem. The less successful answers were by those students who seemed to be unfamiliar with the work and just produced some general writing.

The discussion of the second poem - the students' own choice - was best when the focus was on the details of the story. Good work was seen on *Lamia* and *Isabella*. Those who chose *La Belle Dame* wrote well if they understood the poem's chronology. However, many didn't and got into a muddle by saying that the faery child finds the knight on the cold hill side and takes him away and then returns him at the end. If students use this poem, it really is important that they understand the knight is in the same position at the beginning and ending of the poem (on the cold hillside) and that he tells a retrospective story to an unknown narrator, of a happier passionate time that he spent under the faery's influence. The progression of the story isn't that the knight's situation has changed but there is change for the narrator who now knows why the knight is palely loitering in a barren landscape.

As in previous years, there was again material on Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne. Students really must be told not to include this material as they will not be credited for it.

Question 2: Hardy

The Hardy question was popular and there were some good answers although several students had little idea of what happens in *The Going*. Several students wrote about the Emma poems as a group and never engaged with the specifics of *The Going*. These students seemed to have preset ideas about the stages of grief and just tried to apply them to *The Going* without any sense that this poem's story is specifically about the suddenness of Emma's death and the questions and emotions provoked in the speaker.

The ending of *The Going* is the last of the three questions the speaker asks his departed wife with a final reflection on himself and the sad and tragic situation he is in without her. The speaker wants to know why, in their later years, they had grown apart and did not speak. He wonders why they hadn't tried to rekindle the love they had by visiting the places where they had once been so happy (Beeny in springtime is mentioned in an earlier stanza so students could have made a clear link with the rest of the poem if they had focused on this). In the final stanza the speaker seems resigned, realising that it is now too late and nothing can change. He contemplates his own mortality and his utter loneliness knowing that Emma will never

know how he feels. The students who pinned down the story of the extract were able to engage with significance easily. Several wrote about the tragic aspects of death and loss and how these ideas are sharpened by their being foregrounded in the tragic ending. Some students focused on the significance of fate ('no soul' could have foreseen how the speaker would have been made so utterly wretched).

When students were thinking and knew their poems well, they made good choices for their second poem. There was particularly good work seen on the endings of *A Sunday Morning's Tragedy* and *The Newcomer's Wife*. In these instances, students engaged well with the interesting stories that precede the tragic endings. Choices which worked less well were when the student simply picked another Emma poem and replicated the same ideas as they had raised in discussing *The Going*, as if all the Emma poems were interchangeable.

Question 3: Poetry Anthology: Tragedy

There were several responses to this text, too, and although students seemed to enjoy engaging with the poem of *The Convergence of the Twain*, few responded successfully to this poem, because they wrote about the ending of The Titanic rather than Hardy's poem on it. Very few students seemed aware that the ship is already at the bottom of the ocean at the start of the poem and that the ending just takes us back to the start. A few students did focus on the poem's story at the end and the dual growth of the ship and the iceberg and how Hardy brings them together in a climactic collision. When students wrote about the ending Hardy wrote, they did well and saw significance in Hardy's focus on fate and nature's power. Those who just wrote about the ship and the death of the people on board clearly did not know the poem since Hardy deliberately does not focus on the human victims.

The choices made for the second poem often led to better discussion. *Miss Gee* was a popular choice, as was *Jessie Cameron* and generally when these poems were chosen good links were made between the endings and the earlier events in the tragic stories and there was good engagement with significance.

Section B: Prose

When writing their responses to the prose texts students needed to look carefully at the questions, decide on a line of direction and then choose which parts of their novel would best help them to construct their argument. Given that students had their texts in front of them, they needed to quickly find key parts of the text that would enable them to produce a detailed evidenced argument. As with poetry, the choices that students made in selecting appropriate parts of the text on which to base their arguments were crucial.

Question 4: The Great Gatsby

This question was well answered and those students who were writing on *The Great Gatsby* seemed to enjoy the question and really engaged in the debate about Tom and Daisy being villains 'who are as bad as each other'. Many students agreed with the premise and used the quotation from Nick which heads the question to steer their arguments. On the whole, good choices were made on the parts of the text used to support ideas and in the best answers the material came from both the beginning and ending of the novel. Some students challenged

the premise and most who did, argued that Tom is worse than Daisy since, whilst she is a villain in some respect, she is also a victim of Tom's brutality and of Gatsby who makes unrealistic demands of her.

When students didn't perform well, it was generally because they didn't know the novel well enough to range around it for details. Several students only seemed to know the first few chapters and ignored Tom's part in inciting Wilson to murder Gatsby.

Question 5: Tess of the D'Urbervilles

This was also a popular text and on the whole students seemed to have good knowledge of its story and Tess' tragic arc. There are a variety of male characters that students could write about in terms of their contributions to Tess' tragedy and there was plenty of good discussion of Alec, Angel and John Durbeyfield. Some students challenged the view and blamed Tess' mother and the women who abandon her to Alec on the night she is raped.

When students didn't perform well it was generally because they were not specific about 'men' in the novel - and wrote instead about Victorian society and the patriarchy. In those cases, comments were general and sweeping and did not throw any light on what Hardy does in the world of this novel. A number of students challenged the question and blamed Tess herself. These arguments generally did not work well, largely because students were not thinking in a straightforward, every day way. Some, for example, said that Tess caused her tragedy because she wore a red ribbon in her hair and because she ate some of Alec's strawberries. It would be hard to think that these students would say the same about such things in their everyday lives.

Looking forward

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently. Students should be encouraged to think for themselves and not to rehearse the opinions of others.

The best responses were seen by students who looked at questions thoroughly and creatively; these students focused on the key words, stayed on task throughout and responded to their texts as stories which develop. Such responses were a joy to read.

Teachers who are also teaching A-level English Literature B will notice that the A-level report on the examination contains the same messages that are given here. This consistency should be reassuring as preparations are made for 2026.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [results statistics](#) page of our website.

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

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