



A-Level English Literature B

7717/2B

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Areas where students excelled

- When they focused on the Question set through the entirety of their answer.
- When they had excellent knowledge of their texts, engaged with the stories being told and could range around them for relevant details.
- When they made good choices of which parts of texts and which poems to use to best answer the questions.
- When they were thinking clearly and independently in the construction of their arguments.
- When they wrote tightly controlled concise responses.

Areas where students struggled

- When they had their own agendas and largely ignored the questions set.
- When textual knowledge was sketchy so that errors of fact were made and ideas couldn't be supported.
- When they included generalised external contextual material and wrote about that instead of the text itself.
- When they incorporated material that had been learned or partly learned with little regard for question relevance, for example material about the 1980s and critical views.
- When they produced over long, loose and vague answers which often contained irrelevance.

Introductory comments

Examiners across all four papers have reported seeing some excellent work this year which suggests that students and teachers are enjoying English Literature Specification B.

Although the comments made and teaching guidance given in previous reports are still relevant, this report will focus on four key issues: 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 the issue has been raised 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 relevance to the question will be rewarded.

In the 'To what extent 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 make certain 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 *Othello*: 'Othello is presented as having no moderation: he loves and hates with the full force of his emotions', the counter argument is that Othello does have moderation. A viable counter argument isn't that Othello's emotions are a result of his insecurity or his race or Iago. Neither is it valid to argue that it is Iago who has no moderation and not Othello and then write about Iago.

During revision time in centres, it would be 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 importantly 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 - providing they keep to the question.

The most successful answers on the 'To what extent 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

well-chosen and specific parts of the texts. These students engaged with the text as a developing story and linked their references and quotations to events in the story's narrative trajectory.

When they construct their arguments, students should be reminded not to spend precious exam time writing ineffective introductions and repetitive conclusions. Neither should they complicate questions by adding additional clauses. For example, in the *Othello* question cited above, some students added something in their introduction like, 'Othello is presented as having no moderation: he loves and hates with the full force of his emotions,' *and this is linked to his insecurity*. Over-complicating arguments usually got students into a muddle.

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, an unseen extract or an aspect of tragedy, comedy, crime writing or political and social protest writing or a topic that students need to explore in relation to the genre: for example 'Explore the significance of prejudice in two political and social protest texts you have studied.' 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; it also invites them to think about the characters, as well as the cultural, moral and social contexts that arise from the texts.

The most successful 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 the Shakespeare extract questions on Paper 1, they pinned down the story of the extract from its beginning to its end; in Paper 2 Q1, they gave a clear sense of what takes place in the extract, seeing its trajectory from the start to the end and in other significance questions, they pinned down the specific topic they were asked to write about (for example 'secrets' in *Atonement* or 'murder and killing' in *King Lear* and *Othello*). The mark schemes give precise details of the trajectories of the Shakespeare extracts and the unseen extracts for Paper 2 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 answering significance questions in Sections B and C, 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 7 Paper 2B ('Explore the significance of Falstaff to the political and social protest writing in *Henry IV Part I*'), they could pin down, at the start of paragraphs, Falstaff as a representation of those who reject authority; his being an agent in transforming Prince Hal into a capable future monarch; and his challenging authority by mocking the king and taking the credit for the death of Hotspur. After establishing some precise significances of Falstaff, students could then develop detailed ideas about them and in this way shape their writing.

When students were less successful 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. The significance questions do 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, comedic, crime writing and political and social protest writing 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 no sense of where the quotations occur in the story. Students need to see that in texts and stories writers construct events to happen in a particular order with characters operating and developing in tandem with those events. The speech they are given reflects the developing situation and what one character says affects how other characters speak and how they behave. In stories, most writers represent interactional dialogue. Speech is rarely random (unless the writer has a purpose in doing this). What Othello says when he is confessing his love for Desdemona to the Senate in Act 1 ('She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her, that she did pity them./ This only is the witchcraft I have used') is dependent on the contextual situation at this point in the play (he has been accused by Brabantio of practising upon her with 'spells and medicines'). Shakespeare shows Othello as alert to the circumstances he is in. Othello is keenly aware of his onstage audience; his words have a particular purpose. It is therefore ineffective for students to quote Othello's words without providing their dramatic context. Othello could not speak in this way at the end of the play. It is also the case that in extracts, 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 because the story has moved forward.

In all stories, the situations and the characters at the end are not the same as they are at the start. Stories involve change and in drama texts, that change takes place as we watch since we are imagining the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now with the potential for a variety of outcomes. And, just as characters change and develop, so too do the reactions and feelings of readers and audiences.

In the light of the above, it is clearly unhelpful for students to learn a bank of decontextualised quotations said by Iago, Emma, Daisy, Nora, or Claudius 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 in students' arguments. Students need to be taught to contextualise briefly and succinctly.

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 in sufficient detail is because they think they need to know other things instead of the text, for example external contextual material and the random views of critics, particularly 'feminist critics' about which much is asserted. This is a mistake for those doing Spec B. We are only interested in contexts that arise from the text itself and critical views if they are specifically used in arguments related to questions. But we are more interested in what students think.

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 19th century or the Romantics or the 1980s or patriarchies in the real world. Writers might well represent patriarchy in their stories, and it might be relevant for students to write about the representation. But it is not relevant to write about the patriarchal situation of the 16th century as if there is a single view that applies to the whole century and to 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.

It is even more unwise to impose loose contextual material onto texts. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Regan and Gertrude 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, or that men were all misogynistic. The texts themselves tell us that there were dissenting voices to such views and plenty of political debate too. Hardy, for example, foregrounds this dissent in the creation of Angel Clare who challenges conservative views and Bolingbroke clearly does not believe in the Divine Rights of Kings.

It reduces the power of the text if Desdemona is discussed just a representative of 16th century passive women. She is a character in a play created by Shakespeare for dramatic purposes. She interests us because her character changes. 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 the war zone of Cyprus or when she repeatedly appeals for Cassio's reinstatement. In his saner musing during Iago's manipulation of him, even Othello refers to her depth of character ('O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear! Of so high and plenteous wit and invention').

Students 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. Some students were all too ready to claim that Emilia and Desdemona, like 'all women' of the time, have no power, must obey men and have no agency. While it is relevant in response to the *Othello* extract question, for example, to say that at this point in the play Desdemona is subdued and desperate not to displease her husband, it is because of the dramatic situation that Shakespeare has created. Othello has just hit her in public; his behaviour is unfathomable to her; she is young and terrified. Her response is a very human one and to shift the argument to one about 16th century women is a reductive way to respond to the intense dramatic scene in front of us.

Another reason why students' incorporating external contextual material into answers should be avoided is that it is a sign that they are leaving the text - and the question is invariably left behind too. So, the solution is easy. Teachers must tell students to focus on the story itself and the characters within it who are often created as multidimensional and whose fates engage and interest readers and audiences.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked. Marks are awarded for ideas (as required by the question) about the texts 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 2B

Overall, examiners were genuinely impressed by many of the responses to this year's paper. Students frequently responded to the unseen extract with sensitivity and thoughtful understanding of how the text was operating both as a political and social protest piece and as a dramatic work. The best responses on Section B often had a personal voice and demonstrated students' in-depth knowledge of the texts they had studied and their genuine engagement with the topics that were examined. Likewise, Section C produced insightful and analytical responses that showed students to be adept at managing multiple texts and exploring salient issues perceptively. Political and social protest writing is perhaps more relevant today than it ever has been and students showed their enthusiasm and personal engagement with the genre in often original and articulate ways across the paper.

Moreover, students consistently achieved well when they maintained a sharp focus on the question rather than regurgitating previous essays, subverting the task or offering a more generalised lit-crit response. The questions are deliberately set up to enable students to engage with central aspects of the genre and consider the different ways in which meanings are created. In the very best responses students often engaged with the different words in the question such as 'silenced' and 'ignored' recognising the subtle difference in these terms. They opened paragraphs with apt points that employed the key words and consistently linked their analysis back to their central point throughout their writing and at the ends of paragraphs.

Where students achieved less well, it was often because of losing sight of the task or offering an analysis of a moment or part of a text that was disconnected from the central question.

It is also worth keeping in mind that the central context for Specification B is political and social protest as a genre. However, there is no need or expectation to make direct links to other texts in the genre that can often distract from the flow of an argument. Likewise, where students included copious amounts of extraneous historical or biographical details often isolated from either the text or task, it was difficult to see how this was relevant and often resulted in a loss of focus.

The best responses consistently demonstrated very secure text knowledge and a clear understanding of the narrative trajectory. Specification B has always been about stories – how they are told and structured, how they begin and end, where and how they reach moments of crisis or climax. Students who had a clear sense of the narrative and how the story illuminated a particular idea or concept were quickly achieving well. Students achieved less well when they generalised about events, were limited in scope to discussing only the opening chapters or scenes, or selected random quotations that were not contextualised in terms of their place in the narrative.

Given that this is an English Literature A-Level, there is also an expectation that students write accurately and clearly. There were some students whose handwriting and/or expression hampered an examiner's ability to understand their meaning. In particular, there were several students who completed multiple booklets, but where the legibility of their writing was problematic. Whilst we know that students must write at speed in exam conditions, this should not come at the cost of the accuracy, fluency or legibility of their handwriting. It is also important that students ensure they write accurately in terms of spelling and grammar. In some cases, students were so carried away with an idea that sentences covered multiple lines and they lost the thread of their own argument. The best responses were, in keeping with band 5 criteria, 'assured' in style and had 'mature' and 'impressive expression'.

Finally, it is worth reminding students that this is a paper where choices are important. Students need to carefully consider which text to cover in Section B, which question to address in Section C and which poems or key moments to write about in both of these sections. Although it is always tempting to rush in and start writing as soon as possible, careful thought, planning and judicious selections based on the student's knowledge, skills and the texts that they have covered, are essential.

Section A: the unseen extract

This year's unseen passage was taken from a drama by David Hare called *Racing Demon*. Many students tackled this unseen extract incredibly proficiently and there were a range of astute responses that showed sensitivity to meaning and the issues that the author addressed within the passage. It was also clearly accessible to students of a range of abilities. Some of the best responses demonstrated insight regarding tone offering thoughtful interpretations of the central conflict between Harry and Tommy and perceptive engagement with the quieter and more subtle protest offered in Harry's following soliloquy.

As has repeatedly been stated in previous reports, students who outlined the narrative of the passage and conveyed a clear sense of what is occurring in terms of the story were

immediately scoring marks. The best responses often began by pinning down the story in terms of the passage rather than simply reiterating the introductory blurb or listing features of the genre that they were possibly going to explore but remained unrelated to the events of the extract. The students writing the best responses were often able to engage structurally with the passage, recognising the way in which the interaction between Harry and Tommy builds towards the climactic revelation of Ewan's name and commenting on the ambiguity of the first scene's conclusion.

As this was an extract from a drama, there was an expectation that students, who have across the course encountered several different plays, would engage with some elements of dramatic methods and write about the text as a drama. There was plenty here for students to explore in terms of setting, lighting, stage directions, the use of monologue and proxemics. Many students integrated these features into their responses explaining their effects thoughtfully and in relation to the point that they were making. Whilst there was often a great deal made of Tommy appearing in 'shadows' and 'smoking a cigarette', when students then related this to his bullying and intimidatory nature, they were immediately doing well.

A central part of this question is the final statement: 'Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways the author has shaped meanings'. Whilst language choice does play a part in this, students who were able to consider a range of methods particularly in terms of tone, the repeated interrogatives and declaratives, the use of Harry's flashback to a time of youthful happiness were engaging in how the author creates meanings in a more sophisticated manner.

Likewise, students who considered the shifting power dynamics between Harry and Tommy also often achieved well. It is important for students to recognise that characters are not static and that, even within a short passage, there can be subtle shifts. Those who were able to recognise the nuanced changes in the power dynamics and particularly the way, given the fears he expresses in the second scene, Harry is assuming a façade of confidence, often achieved highly. Students who were less successful tended to read the passage in a more binary way with Tommy as the villain who dominates and oppresses throughout.

This year's extract was also slightly unusual in that it included two scenes from a play. As a result, many students made insightful points that connected the two scenes commenting on the contrast in Harry's presentation, the repeated motif of darkness, the differing settings and the ways in which the second scene illuminates the impact homophobia and oppression has on Harry. However, several students did not get as far as the second scene and therefore did not fully engage with the extract as a whole. It is always worth reminding students to cover the passage in its entirety and to consider the importance of openings and endings in particular.

Students who wrote on the passage most successfully were often those who were judiciously selecting detail and consistently linking all they said back to the extract. Where students were less successful, it was often because of generalising about elements of genre without pinning these down in the passage. Given the evolving and diverse nature of genre, it is always worth avoiding sweeping statements about 'all political and social protest texts' doing something. Likewise, students who were less successful often included long sections about the context of the 1990s (sometimes erroneously) that were not directly related to the extract or relevant in

revealing the meanings created by the author's choices. There is no expectation, particularly with an unseen passage, that students include context beyond that of the political and social protest genre and, at times, this can get in the way of fluid engagement with the text itself.

Finally, it is always worth reminding students to take their time when initially reading the extract and to focus on a small number of key elements that they can explore in depth. While it is often a good approach to track through the passage to pin down the story, students have to take care that they don't just produce character studies and a commentary; they need to engage fully with elements of the genre. Similarly, where students listed or generalised about elements of the genre without really exploring their significance or how they were operating or being conveyed in this passage as opposed to political and social protest writing more generally, were less likely to score highly.

Overall, we saw some incredibly impressive and perceptive responses with the passage clearly giving students much to consider. However, they should always remember to remain focused on the extract, to select details with precision and engage with the story across the whole passage rather than cherry-picking bits of text that are taken out of context. They should be advised to respond to the passage in front of them, reading meticulously before putting pen to paper rather than speculating or making assertions about what they hope to find or aspects of genre. A small number of well developed, aptly supported and thoroughly interrogated ideas are always more likely to achieve well than randomly selected quotations where comments go little beyond the author's choice of language.

Section B

As always, examiners were incredibly impressed by the often passionate, original and thought-provoking responses that many students produced in the time constraints of the exam. The best responses included detailed engagement with the text often showing impressive knowledge of the narrative through ranging around the texts to cover several events. These students frequently began by crafting a careful plan, setting out their argument in the introduction and then making judicious choices in terms of the poems they covered and the key moments they chose to examine.

Students who were less successful often either struggled to engage clearly with the task, or engaged with the narrative in broad brushstrokes often writing about the text in a very general way or making assertions that were unsupported. Knowing the texts and placing the question at the centre of a response by opening each paragraph with a sentence that addresses this explicitly, is the key to success across this paper.

Question 2 on Blake was one of the most popular choices for students. The task asked students to consider whether rebellious voices in Blake's poetry are always silenced or ignored. There were some superb responses here with many students writing on Blake with insight and enthusiasm. However, students should be reminded to think carefully about the choices they make in terms of the poems they write about – not all poems will work for all tasks. There were plenty of obvious choices for this question such as *The Nurses' Songs* and *A Little Boy Lost*. However, several students still opted to write on poems where there were no clear rebellious voices and therefore struggled to engage directly with the task. As a first step, students needed to pin down a rebellious voice and in so doing were immediately engaging

with the question. Where they were vaguer about who the rebellious voice was or what they were rebelling against, they often struggled to make relevant points.

The best responses were by students who were then able to engage in some interesting debate often distinguishing between voices that are silenced entirely or simply ignored as in *The School Boy*. However, students were less successful when they lost sight of the task with many writing at great length about the subjugation of the population in *London* as this was the poem with which they were most familiar, but without clearly identifying a rebellious voice and how the voice is silenced or ignored. Given the richly symbolic nature of Blake's work, students who engaged with meanings linked to imagery going beyond language choices often achieved well. However, whilst comments on elements of form and structure such as Blake's use of rhyme can be useful, too often students were bolting these details on at the ends of paragraphs. Whilst Specification B always encourages students to engage with methods and meanings, these should still be relevant to the task and connected to the point that students are making.

There is no set number of poems that students are expected to cover in a response to Section B. However, those who only wrote on one or two were often more limited than those who engaged with, and ranged around, the collection, often making links and comparisons or alluding to another poem to illuminate or enhance a point. This thereby demonstrated confidence in their knowledge of the text, which is crucial in achieving the higher bands. Likewise, students who retained a sharp focus on the task and drew their essay to a purposeful conclusion that had a sense of argument, rather than simply reiterating their prior points, were often showing higher band skills.

Question 3 asked students to consider if highly educated individuals and those with authority always look down on the working class in Harrison's poetry. It was pleasing to see an increasing number of responses to Harrison with many students engaging perceptively with the debate and considering different ways in which the working class are demeaned or patronised including by the poet-speaker. Many students wrote confidently and articulately incorporating comments on Harrison's methods seamlessly. As with Blake, it is important for students to ensure that comments related to method particularly regarding form and structure are integrated into their responses, so they inform their arguments rather than being bolted on for the sake of inclusion. Those who achieved most highly demonstrated detailed knowledge of Harrison's works, judiciously selecting apt details that were integrated into their response and fully explained. Those who were able to recognise the nuances within his poetry and the different ways in which those with authority look down on or elevate, sympathise with or speak out for the working class, often achieved well. Students who were less successful were limited in their choice of poems or struggled to clearly pin down those with authority or those who are being looked down upon.

Question 4 on *The Kite Runner* was, as always, a popular choice with many students demonstrating impressive in-depth knowledge of the narrative. Students were asked to consider whether those who 'use power to oppress others' 'ultimately succeed'. Students who achieved particularly well were able to comment on different kinds of success or failure such as Amir's success in removing Hassan from the family home but his feeling subsequent guilt. They often considered a range of forms of oppression rather than being limited to chapter 7 with many commenting astutely on the novel's ending. Students were less successful where

they only addressed oppression and struggled to engage with whether this was 'ultimately successful'. There were some particularly insightful discussions around Baba's failure to oppress Amir and General Taheri's failure to oppress either Sohrab or Soraya. Those students who focused on key moments in the narrative and explored these in depth with a clear focus on the task were quickly achieving well. Students who were reliant on a limited number of moments where oppression occurs without a real sense of their overarching place in the narrative were often less successful. Likewise, where students spent a long time on contextual material, they often lost sight of the narrative and the specific events in the novel that would have illuminated their argument more effectively.

There were very few responses to the *Harvest* question. Students were asked to consider whether Mistress Beldam's 'rebelliousness and resilience' makes her 'an entirely admirable figure.' Those who did respond to this task, often wrote enthusiastically and insightfully on the novel. The best responses were seen by students who were able to range around the key moments considering Mistress Beldam's behaviour at the novel's inception and the ending and often interpreting her actions in nuanced ways in light of the treatment she receives at the hands of the villagers. As always, the best responses were evaluative and well evidenced with a strong focus on the key words in the task with many engaging effectively with the different ways in which Mistress Beldam could be viewed as both rebellious and resilient. Students should be reminded to be careful not to generalise about gender and 'the patriarchy' and not to make assertions about characters, particularly in the case of Mistress Beldam who remains ambiguous, without grounding these firmly in the events of the novel.

There were almost no responses to *Hard Times* or *Henry IV Part I* in Section B although examiners did see a handful of responses to these texts appear in Section C.

Question 8 on *A Doll's House* asked students to consider whether it is impossible to 'sympathise with Torvald given his repressive treatment of Nora'. There were some excellent responses to the task with several students writing impassioned essays condemning Torvald and considering a wide range of aptly chosen moments to justify their views. Many students also effectively explored the ending of the play, which was an ideal moment to offer a counter view with many considering Torvald in a more sympathetic light. Students who achieved less well were very restricted in terms of the moments they covered with a lot of time being spent on Torvald's pet names for Nora and the macaroon scene but not getting much beyond this. Likewise, students achieved less well when they relied on sweeping generalisations about ideas associated with masculinity and society arguing that Torvald is merely conforming to expectation and is a victim of Victorian society with little evidence from the text. As with all questions, the best responses were from students who firmly grounded their answer in the text and were able to comment on the characters as evolving rather than static figures who can be interpreted in nuanced ways rather than as types.

Question 9 on *The Handmaid's Tale* was very popular and asked students to consider whether the Gilead regime entirely silences women. Students who were less successful were reliant on very broad comments about the Gilead regime with discussion of the function of the handmaids generally, their costumes and limited speech, but not engaging in key moments fully. Likewise, there were several students who drifted away from the text and task considerably by commenting on the range of historical regimes on which the novel might have been based and how they silenced women, which was not relevant as they were not

engaging with the task that asked them about the Gilead regime in the novel. The most successful responses were from students who considered a range of different ways in which women are silenced often commenting on individuals beyond the handmaids. There were also some superb responses that analysed the novel's ending considering both how this is evidence of Offred's not being silenced due to the narrative perspective and continuation of her story, as well as the manipulation and pejorative comments by Pieixoto which further silences women and maintains the Gilead ethos. The best responses were from students who were sharply on task, often commented on narrative perspective and showed in-depth knowledge of the novel through their choice of moments to explore.

Section C

It is worth reminding students that Section C questions are often about significance. This word should signal to students that they need to be considering different possible meanings. It could be the way in which this particular element of the genre illuminates a character, its significance in terms of the narrative trajectory and plot, the meanings it generates in terms of the political and social protest message that the author is conveying, its symbolic significance, its meaning in terms of reflecting the society in which the text is set etc. It is therefore not enough to simply identify examples; students need to engage with the meanings connected to these.

Whilst there is no expectation that students spend an equal amount of time on the two texts, they do need to cover them both in a reasonably substantial way that reflects their study of the texts over a two-year course. In some cases, coverage of the second text was very thin with only one short Blake poem being briefly discussed, for example, or a couple of brief examples provided on the second text. Timing is crucial and, although it is difficult to find time to undertake practice exams in centres, it is vital that students get used to managing the time available to them, so they cover both texts in a reasonably substantial way. Some students overcame this issue by writing alternate paragraphs on each of the texts rather than dealing entirely with one and then the other to ensure that they did not overrun and leave no time for the second text, which seemed to work well for them.

Question 10 that asked students about the significance of social divisions was far more popular than question 11. This enabled students to consider a range of different social divisions related to gender, ethnicity, class, status or power. If students began by simply identifying an appropriate social division such as that created by ethnicity between Amir and Hassan in *The Kite Runner*, they were well on their way to achieving marks. Where students offered more nebulous responses that did not clearly pin down an example of divisions, they were less likely to be successful as they were not clearly engaging with the question. The best responses were from students who showed an ability to select apt moments to illustrate their ideas that were then carefully supported. Less successful responses were from students who often simply provided examples of social divisions but didn't necessarily get at their significance. Where students considered the significance of divisions in shaping character, the outcome of the narrative or in revealing the author's social or political message, they were quickly achieving well.

Question 11 asked students to consider the significance of prejudice. Whilst there were some exceptionally perceptive responses to this task, there were several students who did not seem to understand what prejudice is. These students often seemed to read any act of oppression

as an example of prejudice, which was not always accurate. It is important that students are familiar with key terms associated with the genre and that they make sensible choices in terms of the question they choose to answer. Where students achieved highly it was often because they were accurately identifying examples of prejudice, showing comprehensive knowledge of the text and making analytical comments about the significance of key moments connected to the story, characterisation and meanings arising.

Finally, students should also be encouraged to consider the structure of their responses. Time spent planning an answer, organising ideas and taking time to consider the central moments or poems that they will include is never wasted. The best responses were from students who often began with a brief introduction that explicitly engaged with the question, included a few well-developed paragraphs and ended with a conclusion that had a purposeful sense of argument connected to the significance of that particular protest element. Students were less successful where their responses lacked this sense of cohesion, where the same ideas or moments were referred to repeatedly or where the conclusion merely summarised what had already been covered.

Conclusion

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material (context or critical views) regardless of the question. The best responses seen were by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words, stayed on task throughout and produced tight focused writing. Such responses were a joy to read.

Looking forward

While this report focuses specifically on what happened in this year's examination, there is much in it that can help teachers as they prepare for the future. For teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, there is also much support available on the AQA website (Go to 'subjects' - select 'English' - select 'AS and Level Lit B') and Centre Services (use the tile for teacher support and then the filters). On the website you can look at all training materials and previous reports to help you to understand how best to support your students.

As teachers prepare for the 2026 examinations they might like to give the following quick tips to their students:

- Know your texts thoroughly
- Focus on all the words of the question set, and base your argument on the subject of the question
- Root your arguments in details of the story itself
- Do not write about critical theory or critical views in a detached way
- Do not write about worlds or society outside of the text
- Think about the choices you make before you put pen to paper – which poems to cover, which text to use for each section and which key moments to cover
- Make sure that your first sentence is relevant to the question - and that you never veer from it.

New Novel

Excitingly, we are also adding an additional text option for first examination in 2027 to the post-2000 novel selection. The novel is *Brotherless Night* by V.V. Ganeshanathan, the winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2024. Set primarily in Sri Lanka during the civil war of the 1980s, this is a propulsive and brilliant novel with political and social protest ideas at its heart. This is a meticulously researched novel based on the narratives of the women, who experienced the horrors of the civil war in Sri Lanka firsthand. It is a searingly moving account of a period in history that has barely been written about despite its continuing impact ensuring it will appeal to readers who may not know about the Sri Lankan civil war. It will also appeal because the issues relating to women that are raised in the novel are relevant to all political conflicts. A heartrending narrative, it is particularly concerned with the impact on women who attempt to maintain their communities and support the men of their family regardless of the choices the men make. Given its focus on a young woman's maturation and struggles, it will also appeal to students who are of a similar age. However, it is also a novel deeply concerned with narrative itself, (which is vital to the Lit B specification) – the accuracy of who gets to tell the story and the importance of preserving the voices of those who are oppressed and ensuring the truth is not buried with the bodies that disappear.

There will be a range of comprehensive resources available including example questions and mark schemes to help teachers engage with this new and exciting post - 2000 novel.

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)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Professional development

Attend one of our feedback [courses](#) where you can review example responses from students and commentaries from our examiners.

Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

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