



AS

English Literature

7716/1B

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Overall performance

Areas where students excelled

- When there was a tight focus on the extract and when students tracked its story from beginning to end
- When students had excellent knowledge of their plays and used relevant details in the construction of their arguments
- When students organised their ideas carefully and accurately
- When students were clearly able to think for themselves and make clear sensible points

Areas where students struggled

- When students had their own agendas and largely ignored the questions set, often not writing about the extract
 - When textual knowledge was insecure so that ideas couldn't be supported
 - When students wrote about general external contextual material instead of the dramatic story
 - When students randomly quoted and didn't pin the quotations to specific events in the dramatic narrative
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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 well.

This year's report will focus on four specific areas to try to help teachers in preparing students for future exams. Those 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 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 '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 argument to be had if students agree with it and question setters have ensured that there is plenty of material in the text to support the given view. Students can, of course, counter the view - though this takes some thinking about - and question setters will have ensured that there will always be material to support alternative arguments too. However, if students are challenging the question, 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 one is worse than the other. The counter argument isn't that there are alternative villains which students can choose to write about or 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 question as

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

The best 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 the text. These students engaged with the text as a developing story and linked their references and quotations to where they occur in the story's narrative trajectory.

Students should be reminded not to misuse precious exam time writing empty 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 best 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 have to know. So, they cannot sidestep the text and if they do not know it in a detailed way then they are 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 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 difficult 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 the course of 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 blessed 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 tragic and comedic trajectories in the extract questions.

In the light of the above, it is therefore unhelpful for students to have a bank of quotations said by Iago or Emma or Daisy which they write about to establish character (as if the characters are fixed and unchanging) without any sense of where those quotations occur 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 him and Daisy at their home in East Egg, Nick describes Tom's body as being 'capable of enormous leverage - a cruel body' and then a few pages later 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 way 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 on 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 on 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 anyway. 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 that 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 bad 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, interesting and who engage readers and audiences in their fates.

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. That is it.

Individual questions

The entry numbers for this paper were relatively small, with only about 70 centres opting for 1B. However, some excellent writing was seen, and most students seem to have enjoyed reading and responding to questions on the comedy genre. In Section A, most responses were on *Taming of the Shrew* but there was some very good writing on *Twelfth Night*. As has been the pattern for the last few years, students only wrote about *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Section B.

Question 1

The Taming of the Shrew

What students did well

The extract this year was from Act 4 scene 5 and demonstrates Petruchio's apparent success in taming Katherina as part of the taming school plan, alluding to the play's title. We see Petruchio's dominance in controlling the narrative and forcing Katherina to submit to calling the sun the moon and talking to Vincentio as if he is a woman rather than a man. Although we see Katherina comply, particularly after Hortensio explains what will happen if she doesn't, there is a sense that she is merely playing the game with Petruchio, rather than simply giving in to his demands. When Katherina 'passes' the test of wifely obedience here, this sets up the competition in the final scene, when Petruchio 'triumphs' over Hortensio and Lucentio. Hortensio's comic function in this extract is that of an eyewitness and observer, addressing the audience for comedic purposes in his asides.

Structurally, this scene returns to the main plot, after Bianca and Lucentio arrange to elope, and Vincentio's arrival signposts the resolution of the subplot. At this point in the narrative, the disorder is beginning to make way for a re-established sense of order, as seen in the relationship between Katherina and Petruchio and the appearance of the real Vincentio.

Many students wrote confidently about the taming of Katherina at this point in the play and recognised the importance of this moment in the narrative where we see Katherina co-operate rather than fight back. Many students took the opportunity to write about the structural significance of this change in Katherina's character and how this sets up the audience for her monologue at the end. Additionally, students also commented on the change in Katherina that we see within the extract itself: she goes from initially disputing Petruchio's claims about the sun being the moon, to speaking to Vincentio as if he is a woman – and then skillfully retracting that when Petruchio suggests that she's mad to say such things. Some students were able to make meaningful links to the wider play when exploring Katherina's presentation, briefly comparing the compliant version we begin to see here with earlier presentations of her when she is referred to as 'Kate the curst'. There was some good work seen where students explored the dialogue between Petruchio and Katherina, commenting on the fast-paced interactions and the similarities between their lines and how this could be suggestive of them moving towards a resolution. Students producing stronger

responses commented in detail on Hortensio's role in this extract and understood the dramatic function his character plays in delivering asides and moving the play towards its resolution.

Common misunderstandings

When students did not perform so well, it was often because they misunderstood what was happening with the appearance of Hortensio and then went on to develop points based on that misunderstanding. Some students thought Petruchio is flattering Katherina when in fact he is describing Hortensio (as if Hortensio is a woman), and then they wrote about Petruchio 'rewarding' Katherina with these compliments because she is finally being obedient. This led to confusion when writing about the events at the end of the extract, particularly when students realised something was amiss. Some students also struggled to discuss Hortensio's role, sometimes not writing about him at all, even though it was bullet-pointed in the task instructions.

Question 2

Twelfth Night

What students did well

For this task, students were asked to focus on an extract taken from the end of the play: Act 5 scene1. This is the dramatic moment where Sebastian and Viola are on stage together, and it is revealed to all the characters that they both survived the shipwreck – the audience already knows they are both alive. The extract begins with Sebastian's hurried entrance and talk of violence, following on from the comic disorder and mistaken identities in which Sir Andrew and Sir Toby are beaten up by Sebastian. We then observe the astonished reactions of Antonio, Orsino and Olivia as they look on in wonder at Sebastian who is of course the mirror image of Cesario. Sebastian's entrance reveals the truth about Viola's identity, firstly through the reactions of the onlookers, and then through the dialogue between them: he is the first person to address Viola by her true name, after which she then repeats it, reclaiming her identity as Sebastian's sister.

The twins' reunion resolves the Orsino-Viola-Cesario love triangle and sets up the expected 'happy ending' with a double wedding to restore social order. Despite the comic resolution, tragi-comic aspects can also be seen in Antonio's loneliness and perhaps also Olivia's realisation that she isn't married to Cesario after all.

Students genuinely seemed to enjoy responding to this extract, as they understood the significance of Sebastian's presence on stage with Viola, and how it leads the play towards its much-anticipated resolution. Many students took the opportunity to discuss this extract as a piece of drama and understood that having these characters on stage together for the first time, so that we can see their surprise and dawning realisation, is an effective way to bring the comedy to its conclusion. A lot was made of Antonio's 'apple cleft in two' comparison and Orsino's observation of 'one face ... two persons!' and students were able to discuss the way that Shakespeare's methods here add to the drama of the characters' feelings of disbelief.

Students who produced stronger responses made some thoughtful comments about the pace of the dialogue between Sebastian and Viola, and the way that Shakespeare slows things down at this point so that we can enjoy their reunion.

Common misunderstandings

There were very few misunderstandings of any details in this extract. Students who didn't perform so well often lost focus when discussing some of the wider issues raised such as Antonio and Sebastian's relationship; Olivia marrying someone she doesn't know and Viola remaining in men's clothes and what this might reveal about Orsino's preferences. Although these are interesting points of discussion – and some students did manage to integrate them concisely and effectively – often students were left with little time to discuss the specific details of the extract.

Question 3

She Stoops To Conquer – no responses to this question

Question 4

The Importance of Being Earnest

What students did well

As was the case last year, all students responded to the task on *The Importance of Being Earnest* and we saw the full range of marks here. There were many secure responses that engaged with the darkness of the play, typically looking at Algernon and Jack's lies and deception, and Lady Bracknell's treatment of Jack and her attitudes towards disadvantaged people. Many students discussed how Wilde includes these dark references to criticise the upper classes and expose their hypocrisy, and this led to relevant comments on class status and the representation of Victorian values. The best responses identified these darker moments in the narrative but then went on to consider the humour that Wilde uses to present them and that the darkness and the comedy are working hand-in-hand. Many students tended to look at 'dark' and 'funny' separately and weren't always able to connect the two concepts and evaluate how Wilde is using the comedy to comment on the darker issues. Students who found this task challenging were unable to express a clear, coherent line of argument in response to the view provided in the task.

There was some exceptionally good work seen when students saw the drama as performance and discussed comic moments such as Jack chasing Algernon in order to get his cigarette case back, or the tea scene where Cecily gives Gwendolen more sugar and cake than Gwendolen wants. The physical comedy that we see in these moments was then used to support the view that the play is not too dark, and that some moments are funny too.

Common misunderstandings

Students were less successful when they made sweeping generalisations about audience responses, asserting that Victorian audiences would have found it funny but audiences of today would not. As has been made clear in previous years, at no point is there a requirement to guess what audiences thought about the play – past or present.

Question 5

Educating Rita – no responses to this question

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

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

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