



AS

# English Literature B

7716/2B

Report on the Examination

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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, they 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 randomly quoted and didn't pin the quotations to specific events in the text's narrative

## 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 2B

The entry numbers for this paper were relatively small, with only about 60 students opting for 2B. However, some good work was seen, and most students seem to have enjoyed reading and responding to questions on the comedy genre.

In Section A, responses were only seen to *The Poetry Anthology: Comedy*. It was a pity to see nothing on Chaucer or Betjeman. However, in Section B, there were responses to all three prose texts. Some excellent work was seen by those students who knew and used their texts well and who focused exclusively on the questions.

Most students were able to integrate comments on authorial method into their arguments in an unfussy way when they focused on structural issues, voices and settings.

## Individual Questions

### Section A Poetry

When answering questions on poetry, students have to focus on a printed extract as part of their answer. In Question 2, it was *Mrs Sisyphus*. One reason why students have to know their texts well is that there are no short cuts. If students did not know *Mrs Sisyphus* well then, they struggled. The question this summer asked students to explore the view that in *Poetry Anthology: Comedy* 'failure is always presented as comic'. Students had to write about the section of the poem which focuses on the relentless failure of Sisyphus to successfully push the boulder to the top of the hill. His wife is mocking in her account of his failure.

Extracts are always chosen to help students to engage with the questions set and to give them an anchor for their arguments. If students track through the story of this extract they would be writing relevantly in terms of the question from the start since the extract is about a number of failures. Most students were able to construct arguments around Sisyphus's failure and how not only his wife laughs at him but also other people who see the failure as 'a bit of a lark'. There were also students who wrote well on Sisyphus' failure as a husband and how this might not be so funny given the wife's suffering. Some students insightfully focused on the wife's failure to be understanding and sympathetic.

When students didn't perform well it was usually because they did not locate the failure or say what the failure is and just used the word itself. Some students just wrote about some of the colloquial words in the poem and explained why they are funny. Such discussion did not enable students to gain many marks or progress up the mark range.

The choice of the second poem was often the key to success. When students chose well and knew the poem's story well, they could excel. Good work was seen on *Tam* and his failure to fully enjoy the sexual excitement of seeing the witches; on *The Flea* and the speaker's failure to bed his mistress; and on *A Satirical Elegy* and the countless failures of the General whose life is mocked by the speaker's ridicule. Students who selected *My Rival's House* often struggled as there is no obvious failure and students generally just wrote some things about the poem and ignored the question.

## Section B Prose

When writing their answers 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 argue their case. Given that students had their texts in front of them, they needed to quickly find key parts of the novel 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 fundamental. In all the responses to the prose text it was pleasing to see the engagement with comedy.

## Question

### ***Emma***

This question asked students to explore the view that Harriet's love life is presented as a source of comedy. Only a few students answered this question on *Emma* but those who did generally answered it well suggesting that they had been well prepared to think and interrogate questions, to focus and then choose relevant sections of the novel to support their ideas. The students who answered on *Emma* tended to argue that Harriet's love life is a source of comedy in terms of Emma's misguided interference, but that there is also initial suffering for Harriet until she finally gets the man she loves. Most students commented on Harriet's relationship with Robert Martin as bookending her love life in the novel - his proposal at the start which Emma persuades her not to accept and his renewed proposal at the end which Emma is all too happy for her to accept if only to remove Harriet's interest from Mr Knightley. There was also good discussion of Harriet's giddy expectations of a relationship with Mr Elton, which Emma encourages, Harriet's sadness when he cruelly rejects her, Emma's hopes for her to form a relationship with Frank Churchill and then Emma's horror when Harriet says she cares about Mr Knightley. Although students were sensitive to Harriet's suffering, they were aware of the comedic pattern operating: that although the course of true love never runs smooth, difficulties are ironed out in Austen's resolution of a happy marriage.

## Question 5

### ***Small Island***

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of England to the comedy of the novel. As indicated in the Introductory comments, when students headed their paragraphs with a point about England and its comedic value and then used the text to develop ideas about the point made, they did well. Many wrote about England as a potential place of optimism and there was good discussion of both Gilbert and Hortense in relation to this. Some good writing focused on how at the end of the novel England represents a new dawn for the marriage of Gilbert and Hortense which is blessed by their adoption of baby Michael. There was also good discussion of England as a darkly anti-comedic place where racism causes unhappiness and where the bigoted views of Bernard are allowed to thrive. Most students commented well on how Levy uses England, a small island, as the location for her comedic human story. When students didn't perform well it was usually because their focus was not on England or Englishness; those students just wrote some things about the novel and attached England to them in a vague way, not pinning points down about England itself.

## Question 6:

### ***Wise Children***

This was another significance question and here students were asked to explore the significance of acting and performing to the comedy of *Wise Children*. The students who knew their novel well and could range around it in the open book exam and find relevant sections to write about, produced interesting and focused answers. Given that acting and performing are so central to all the characters, as well as the novel's design, there was no shortage of material for students to draw upon if they had studied the novel. Many students wrote about the theatrical family and the various performances that are part of the novel's structure. There was good focus on the trip to Hollywood and the filming of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on Gorgeous George and the pier show in Brighton, on the sexual performances of Dora and Nora and also on the way that Carter weaves Shakespeare into every part of her novel. When students used relevant details from the novel they could easily move into Band 3 and beyond. The students who scored low marks were those who had clearly not read the novel and those who produced very little writing. There were several students whose work had to be placed in Band 1 as there was barely anything written.

## Looking forward

Students are at their best when they know their texts, 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 regardless of the question.

The best responses were seen by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. 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 key 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)**

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

## **Professional development**

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# Contact us

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

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