



## **General Certificate of Education**

# **English Literature** *Specification B*

**LitB2      Dramatic Genres**

# **Report on the Examination** *2009 examination - January series*

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*Dr Michael Cresswell Director General.*

## General

This was the first assessment of this unit, and it proved to be an interesting process for the moderating team. It is clear that much hard work had been done by centres in responding to the demands of this unit and preparing students for a coursework submission after only one term of study. Teachers and students should be commended on their efforts. There was plenty of evidence that centres had engaged positively with the opportunities offered by the new specification.

## Assessment

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all students and all centres. Although there is some tolerance allowed between the marks of centres and the marks of moderators, marks sometimes have to be adjusted (either up or down) to give all students a roughly equal chance. Where marks were adjusted, there were a number of reasons:

- This is a new specification so teachers are still getting used to standards
- All the Assessment Objectives are equally weighted in this unit. At times there was a significant weakness in one or more of the Assessment Objectives that was not reflected in the centre's marks.
- At times there was evidence of careless written expression and weakly structured argument which seemed to have been overlooked when marking and assessing. In a coursework unit it is reasonable to expect clarity and accuracy of expression.

Not surprisingly, the two areas where moderators found themselves most often in disagreement with centres were at the top and the bottom of the centre's range. A number of centres over-rewarded at the top end of the range, especially when there was doubt about whether the students had hit all the objectives. Similarly, over-rewarding was seen at the bottom end of the range, with some centres unwilling to place very weak scripts in the 0-5 category, or even in some cases the 6-10.

Centres are reminded that each individual piece of work should be given a clearly recorded mark out of 30, and the two marks aggregated to give an overall mark out of 60 for the unit.

## Assessment Objectives

All of the Assessment Objectives are equally weighted in this unit. As indicated above, in many cases where marks were adjusted downwards, there had been a significant weakness in one of the Assessment Objectives. Some further comment on some of the objectives may be useful here.

**AO1:** This objective requires students to be relevant in their answers, responding in a tightly focused way to the task that has been set. It requires use of appropriate, but not random, terminology and clear accurate expression. This time, while students often had plentiful, but not always relevant terminology about tragedy, they tended to have far less about the other generic requirement in this unit, namely drama.

**AO2 :** This objective requires the students to demonstrate understanding of the ways in which form, structure, and language shape meanings in literary texts. It should be stressed that form and structure are at least as important as language in this critical context. Many students confined their analysis to lexical features of the text, and this was not always very productive. In

this area, as elsewhere, textual reference was at times thin or ineffectually supportive of the argument.

**AO3:** The two strands of this objective require students to connect texts through the concept of tragedy and to show understanding that texts can be read in different ways.

In order to show understanding that texts can be connected through the concept of tragedy it is not necessary for students to make explicit cross-reference with other named examples of tragic drama, although this approach may in some cases inform the argument. If the student is discussing how specific elements of tragedy operate within their chosen play then that discussion will necessarily involve an appreciation of the wider concept of tragedy and alternative dramatic possibilities. If a character within a tragedy takes on the role of a revenger, for example, then that character does so in a way that offers an individual dramatic exploration of a familiar but infinitely adaptable convention.

The second strand of AO3 requires evidence of understanding that texts can be interpreted differently, that they are textually and dramatically ambiguous. At the higher mark levels students will evaluate these interpretations. There were many examples of students' work, however, which lacked any evidence of a debate around different possible readings of the text. All that was offered was a rather one-dimensional analysis based around a single perspective on the play. A task which invites students merely to comment on the ways that a playwright presents the tragic hero is unlikely to deliver a debate because no debate is asked for.

**AO4:** The two strands of this objective test understanding of different contexts. The first contextualises tragedy as a dramatic genre. This requires students to demonstrate understanding of the plays **as** plays and to explore aspects of dramatic presentation. Where the texts were merely treated as narratives of indeterminate form and genre this objective was obviously poorly addressed. Centres should encourage their students to see **plays** which are tragedies as the focus of their study rather than **texts** which are tragedies. In this unit 'The play's the thing'.

The second strand invites understanding of other contextual factors. Here, as elsewhere in the specification, context should be seen as arising out of the text and its interpretation rather than being introduced in addition to it. Thus 'bolt-on' socio-historical material is likely to be of little value. The specification focuses on the cultural, literary and linguistic contexts that emerge from the study of genre. Here the context of reception is at least as valuable as the context of production.

### **Tasks and Task-Setting**

The whole idea of coursework is that centres can investigate areas of texts that interest their students and then shape tasks around them.

Crucially, centres need to ask themselves how their teaching of the unit (and their final selection of tasks) is going to deliver the independence of response that is central to the philosophy of this unit and indeed the wider specification. Many centres set students a range of tasks during the study of the play and then, based on individual student performance, encouraged the student to re-draft one of those tasks for the final submission. It should be stressed here, that the model of teaching and drafting that this unit encourages is for a single, first draft and then the final draft. No more than this is allowed.

When setting tasks, the upper word limit of 1500 words should be carefully considered. Tasks which invite discussion of the various ways in which 'Hamlet' is a tragedy would be difficult to deal with effectively in 1500 words. Such tasks are also likely to force the students to stand well back from the play, merely list features of tragedy and generally lose any close contact with the texture of the text.

The most successful tasks seen in this submission focused on a specific area of the play, invited analysis of dramatic method, kept an aspect of tragedy at the heart of the argument and offered genuine opportunities for debate around different readings.

### **The 'Conventional' Tasks**

More successful responses located argument firmly in the texts, had a clear and sustained focus on an element of tragedy, developed a well-structured argument throughout and consistently explored the texts as plays and not as some form of prose biography.

Less successful responses to 'conventional' tasks offered a descriptive or chronological approach, suggested that the students saw the characters as 'real', were dominated by narrative or character study, worked remorselessly through a check list of Aristotelian terms, or paid lip service to tragedy in the opening paragraph and then took the essay off on an unrelated route.

There was evidence that centres had studied an interesting range of texts, with much confident and interesting work submitted on Miller and Tennessee Williams. Some centres looked at elements of tragedy in 'Measure for Measure' and 'The Merchant of Venice', while the list of more modern tragedies included work by Ibsen, Alan Bennett, Pinter and Edward Bond.

### **The 'Re-creative' Tasks**

This optional approach was less popular, perhaps because of centres' understandable caution at this early stage of the course, or through unfamiliarity with this method of literary response.

There was, nevertheless, some very impressive work submitted, offering original and challenging readings of the base texts. The potential ambiguities within the text were explored through the creation of a specific perspective, but clearly coming from within the world of the text. This, it should be stressed, is of central importance: the re-creative pieces are designed to illuminate a reading of the drama text within the context of tragedy. Where work offers little more than simple paraphrase or conversely strays far away from the base text, it is difficult to see that much is being achieved. In some cases, as one teacher wisely observed 'imagination got in the way of interpretation'.

The purpose of the commentary is to complement the re-creative piece. Students do not need to agonise over what they might have achieved in a later draft, nor do they need to spend time on exploring the nature of whatever style model they may have used. The commentary should explore the significant choices of material or perspective that the student made, and explicitly comment on the ways in which the re-creative process highlighted an interpretation of the base text. It should also be stressed here that both the re-creative piece and the commentary together need to come within the upper word limit of 1500 words.

## **Word Counts**

The upper word limit for this unit is 1500 words for each of the two pieces. It should be emphasised that students do themselves no favours whatsoever by exceeding these limits. It is far more often the case that students write themselves out of a mark band than gain any credit through such excess. It is difficult, for instance, to see how students can be said to have presented 'structured argument' (AO1) if they cannot work within the word limits. Quotations count as part of the word limit and it is expected that all work will have an accurate word count provided.

## **Administration**

Much centre administration was admirable: prompt submissions, carefully presented, with ample evidence that good moderation procedures had been followed.

The following points are worth stressing:

- It is expected that the students' work has been annotated in the body of the work and that a summative comment has also been provided. Such comments should address strengths and weaknesses and help the moderator to see why a particular mark has been awarded. Some centres provided annotation only for the 'conventional' piece; annotation of the 're-creative' piece is equally as valuable, in some cases even more so.
- Cover sheets need to be completed accurately, with a clear mark provided for both pieces of work within the portfolio.
- Folders are secured with treasury tags. Plastic wallets are very time-consuming to handle.
- The folders in the sample should be presented in descending rank order.
- Each piece of work should contain an accurate bibliography.

## **Conclusion**

On the evidence of the January submission, this unit has started remarkably well, due to the imaginative and hard work of teachers and their students. We hope to build on this success in future examinations, the next being in May 2009. Centres are reminded that they have a coursework adviser, to whom they can refer for advice, especially on task-setting. The final date for submission of marks is May 15.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.