



**General Certificate of Education**

**English Literature**

*Specification B*

**LITB2      Dramatic Genres**

**Report on the Examination**

*2010 examination – June series*

Further copies of this Report are available to download from the AQA Website: [www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk)

Copyright © 2010 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

#### COPYRIGHT

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

## Introduction

Summer 2010 completes the first two years of specification LITB, and so for the first time there are full reports on all four units, with each unit being taken by a large number of candidates.

It is important that as many teachers as possible read these reports, ideally as a complete set of four: even though an individual teacher may not have taught a specific unit, it is well worth knowing and understanding that for candidates the four units are connected in many ways.

This specification, when it was designed, had a number of overarching principles, based on a coherent set of views as to how English Literature can be taught and assessed. Like all specifications it draws on different ways of reading and how that reading can be assessed. As you read through these reports as a whole, a number of messages will be repeated; one, for example, is that we do not reward bolted on historical context; another is that we aim in nearly all tasks to encourage candidates to debate meanings.

As there are principles that run throughout the specification, then inevitably there are links across the units. For example: a close study of narrative in LITB 1 will help students with texts in all other units; looking at tragedy as a genre in LITB2 has a direct link with genres in LITB3, but can be relevant in the other two units also. The theories looked at in the critical material of LITB4 can be applied to LITB3. The ways texts are connected in LITB1 is similar to the process of LITB3. The issues around categorising texts in LITB3 can help with direct comparison in LITB4.

This is the second year of LITB2 and much progress has clearly been made – for which teachers and candidates are to be congratulated. There were fewer problems than last year which suggests that many centres had taken careful account of advice offered in last year’s report and in the various standardising meetings that took place in the autumn. The contribution of coursework advisers has continued to be significant, and centres are encouraged to maintain their contacts with their designated adviser.

Inevitably, however, there were areas of weakness, many of which had been the subject of comment in previous newsletters and reports. For this reason, parts of this report will revisit some areas where difficulties continue to arise.

It is important to emphasise just how much good work is being produced. Many moderators commented with admiration and appreciation of the quality of responses from the best candidates: insightful, intelligent and genuinely individual.

There have been significant developments in the following areas:

- Centres have been setting more effective and challenging tasks within the generic contexts of drama and tragedy
- There has been a growing willingness to explore a wider range of texts
- There has been a significantly increased use of the re-creative option

It has also become increasingly clear that centres’ work in this unit both benefits from and benefits the studies taking place in the other three units of the specification. Several approaches to the chosen plays utilised critical perspectives foregrounded in the LITB4 critical anthology, and candidates’ work in the LITB3 examination seemed to have been strengthened through a familiarity with the concept of genre explored in this unit.

## **Assessment**

As has been previously stressed, the purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all candidates and all centres. Some tolerance is allowed between the marks of centres and the marks of moderators, but some marks have to be adjusted to ensure that candidates at different centres are being judged by the same standards. In most cases, where marks are adjusted there are relatively minor changes.

Such changes should not lead centres to feel that they have significantly misunderstood the process of assessment. Any significant areas where there has been some misinterpretation will be indicated in the coursework feedback form which is sent to all centres after the moderation and examination processes have finished.

It should be stressed – and not all centres seemed to have understood this point – that the mark bands do not equate to grades. It was not unusual to find summative comment which identified a piece of work as representing a particular grade, and a mark was then awarded accordingly. Centres are encouraged to use the mark bands independently of any presumed grade equivalent and base their assessments firmly on the criteria set out in the different bands.

Where appropriate, centres are encouraged to use the top and bottom mark bands. As with previous submissions, some centres seemed unwilling to use the bottom two mark bands, even when the candidates’ work struggled to demonstrate a clear understanding of either text or task.

There were, however, fewer examples this year of centres awarding marks which were significantly out of tolerance. Generally only minor adjustments were required.

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

### **The Assessment Objectives**

All of the Assessment Objectives are equally weighted in this unit. In many cases where marks were adjusted there had been a significant proportionate weakness in one of these four areas.

#### **AO1**

Many moderators noted how frequently significant weaknesses in the quality of the candidates' writing were not reflected in the final mark awarded. AO1 also requires a degree of relevance and focus on the given task. Some of the material credited within candidates' work was at best peripheral to the ostensible subject.

Essay structures were at times disappointingly loose. Opening paragraphs were a particular weakness; many arguments did not really get going until the bottom of the opening page. Contextual material in particular often acted as thick undergrowth through which the reader had to hack a way before a clear path emerged.

AO1 also refers to the use of critical vocabulary. Some candidates used terminology sparingly and effectively; others sprinkled Aristotelian (and other) terms about with limited evidence of real understanding or relevance.

Writing in this unit at the highest level should show evidence of a fluent and well-structured argument, representing a clear individual voice. At times centres over-rewarded responses which were fairly clear and accurate, but also rather mechanical.

The use of quotation was also variable. Quotation is well used when it is focused, supports the analysis of the text, and is clearly integrated into the argument. Too often the mere appearance of a quotation was indiscriminately rewarded or even cited as an example of a laudable response to AO2.

#### **AO2**

When moderators found it difficult to support the centre's marks, a weakness at AO2 was often the cause. This objective requires candidates to demonstrate understanding of the ways in which form, structure and language shape meanings in literary texts. As stated in an earlier report, form and structure are at least as important as language in this unit, but it was often language that attracted the most or indeed the only attention from candidates. When the response to AO2 is weak the result is often that the candidates see literary characters as 'real' or with significant lives beyond the text. Response to AO2 is also often weaker when the task is too broad, and the candidates are driven to plot summary and general contextual comment.

#### **AO3**

The two strands of AO3 require candidates to connect texts through the concept of tragedy and to show understanding that these texts can be read in different ways.

It must again be emphasised that in order to demonstrate that texts can be connected through the concept of tragedy it is not necessary for candidates to make explicit cross-reference with other named examples of tragic drama, although it is possible that in some instances such references may inform the argument. In many or even most cases, however, such cross-

references (usually involving Shakespearean texts) were so glib or purposeless that they simply impeded the close analysis of the text at the heart of the task.

There are also many ways of contextualising tragedy through the examination of a text other than working dutifully through a tick-list of Aristotelian terms. If candidates identify a sense of isolation as the characteristic destination of a tragic hero, then a further exploration of exactly how and to what effect that isolation is presented within the chosen play is going to explore that text within the wider context of what is possible within the genre of tragic drama.

The second strand of AO3 requires candidates to show understanding that texts can be interpreted differently. There are many ways of delivering this understanding, not limited to the citing of named critics, and there is also a significant difference between reference to a critical view and the consideration or evaluation of that view within a wider argument around the text. Some largely descriptive tasks such as those which offered an invitation to examine Othello's jealousy offered little opportunity for real debate, and moderators again reported many examples of one-dimensional analyses based on single perspectives on the plays.

It was clear, however, that some reading had gone beyond the traditional critical canon, and that critics such as Raymond Williams and Stephen Greenblatt had been used to offer an alternative to Leavis, Coleridge and Bradley. Often, close focus on a section of a play encouraged alternative readings of character, language or action that worked more effectively than generalisations about the play as a whole.

#### **AO4**

Candidates often seemed to need little encouragement to delve into contextual material. Problems emerged when that approach led to sweeping assertions about the context of the play's production such as the frequent description of Shakespeare's audience as universally racist and sexist.

The two strands of this objective test understanding of different contexts. The first contextualises tragedy as a dramatic genre. This requires candidates to demonstrate understanding of the plays as plays rather than some indeterminate form of narrative. There was clear evidence that centres have increasingly found ways of formulating tasks that encourage candidates to explore aspects of dramatic presentation, but in many cases the candidates treated the plays as little more than biographies.

The second strand of this Assessment Objective invites examination 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 superfluously plastered on top of it. Candidates still introduce 'bolt-on' biographical or historical information which is of minimal value in the interpretation of the text. Such material often occupies the opening paragraphs of an essay, probably the worst place for it to appear. This unit is interested in the cultural, literary and linguistic contexts that emerge from the study of genre: here the context of reception is as valuable as the context of production.

#### **Tasks and task setting**

Some earlier sections of this report have touched on the importance of task setting. It is worth at this point stressing that it is not the intention of this specification to issue lists of 'approved' tasks: to do so would take away centres' autonomy. Individual centres, with advice from their adviser where necessary, are in the best position to devise tasks that will best assist their own students' response to a text, relevant to the demands of this unit.

A couple of further general points: even an apparently well-structured task only offers potential; it is the response to a task that matters. Conversely, tasks that at first sight do not look altogether promising can, with good teaching, deliver effective results. Nevertheless, it is clearly the case that the wording of a task can significantly affect the quality of a candidate's response. Here, again, the role of the coursework adviser is significant.

A reminder: the title of this unit is 'Dramatic Genres'. Genre here refers to a type of text described by its form (drama) and a further sub-categorisation (tragedy). A successful task, therefore, will offer the opportunity to examine how an individual play explores an element or aspect of tragedy. The word 'element' is significant. This unit does not encourage responses which offer a wide-ranging survey of the nature and history of tragedy, indeed the 1500 word limit precludes such an approach. Tasks which asked the candidates to consider the different ways in which 'King Lear' could be seen as a tragedy invited (and got) diffuse, unfocused descriptive responses.

In general tasks which offered opportunities for the following responses were most successful:

- A close focus on a section of the play
- A close focus on an aspect of both drama and tragedy within the text
- A genuine debate around different readings of the text
- A genuinely independent response
- A close focus on the playwright's methods

### **Conventional Responses**

Centres need to ask themselves how their teaching of the texts and setting of tasks have encouraged genuinely independent responses from their students. In many cases, such independence is not best encouraged by the early selection of a single task and the remorseless study of the text in the context of that task. Many centres had clearly offered the students a range of tasks and had negotiated with the individual students which of their responses to these tasks might result in their final submission. In contrast, where candidates had responded to a single task they often offered very similar readings of the play and even similar essay structures and textual references.

Many tasks were character-based or focused on a particular character trait. These at times resulted in treatment of these characters as 'real' and encouraged some candidates to offer advice as to what the given characters should have done to avoid their tragic fate. Tasks which asked the candidates to determine final 'responsibility' for the outcome of the play often suffered the same fate. When there were opportunities to look at aspects of the dramatic presentation of characters and their function within the tragedy (e.g the symbolic function of the characters in Lorca's 'Blood Wedding') the results were predictably better.

Some tasks were simply too broad. Asking a candidate to determine whether characters such as Hamlet or Lear can be seen as tragic heroes leaves limited scope for effective argument within 1500 words. Where the dramatic presentation of a character provided the opportunity for genuine debate around the question of their tragic status (e.g Bianca in 'Women Beware Women') candidates were far more successful.

Tasks which invited treatment of a theme such as Macbeth's ambition or Lear's pride tended to produce very descriptive responses. This was also the result when the task drowned the play in background historical material, as was frequently the case in treatments of Willy Loman and the American Dream.

---

An area of increasing interest, perhaps informed by work on Unit LITB4, is the operation of power within the plays. Candidates in one centre looked at tragedy as a means of social control in relation to 'Macbeth', and another centre explored the ways that 'King Lear' could be seen as a tragedy of the dispossessed. Such approaches offered real opportunities for debate around the effects and nature of the genre of tragedy through close analysis of an individual play.

### **Re-creative Tasks**

Many moderators reported on the increasing popularity of the re-creative option and on how, for some candidates, it offered a more productive way of engaging with the texts.

Centres should note carefully the slightly different wording of the Assessment Criteria for the re-creative approach, but also that all Assessment Objectives are still equally weighted. Re-creative approaches that fail to respond to the texts as dramatic tragedies cannot expect to achieve a great deal.

Much impressive work was centred on silent, or largely silent, voices within the plays. One candidate presented a powerful monologue by Glauce in 'Medea'; another imagined a sermon that the Cardinal might have delivered at the end of 'Women Beware Women'. Here and elsewhere, candidates used the concept of the unreliable narrator to find ways of representing a view of the tragedy from which a reader might very well dissent. In such cases, the commentary has an important function in illuminating how the re-creative piece offers an opportunity to debate alternative readings of the play.

Where candidates chose to use the voice of a central character within the play, they often found it more difficult to create anything original. 'Othello's diary' (or Willy Loman's), for instance, almost inevitably drifted into simple narrative that essentially replicated the events and feelings represented in the base text.

While dramatic monologues remained the most popular form, there were also interesting examples of obituaries, extra scenes, imagined debates between high ranking characters in a public forum within the world of the play, phone calls (where the base text allowed such a form of communication) and psychologists' reports.

Whatever the form used, it is important to emphasise that the central purpose of the re-creative option is to illustrate a reading of the base text as a dramatic tragedy.

The purpose of the commentary is to complement and reinforce the significance of the re-creative piece as a reading of the play. Candidates do not need to spend time ruminating on ways in which their work might have been improved, nor to offer a narrative of the drafting process, nor to explore the nature of the chosen style model. What they do need to do is ensure that where the re-creative piece addresses the Assessment Objectives implicitly, the commentary does so explicitly. In this context AO1 should be seen as focusing on the candidates' own writing, AO2, especially at the higher levels, on the language, form and structure of the base text.

While there is no recommended proportionate relation between the length of the re-creative piece and the commentary, most candidates offered commentaries which were at least as long as the re-creative piece. It should be stressed that the combined length of both needs to be within the 1500 word limit. It should also be stressed that the re-creative approach also requires a clear title to the work. 'Othello' and 'Emilia' are not very informative headings.

### **Texts**

'Othello' and 'Death of a Salesman' continue to dominate submissions, for perfectly understandable reasons, and some excellent work was submitted on both plays. 'A Streetcar

Named Desire' also proved a popular choice and certainly was more successful than some texts in encouraging attention to dramatic method. 'King Lear' and 'Hamlet' were the next most popular choices of Shakespearean plays.

The range of plays studied has clearly widened, however. The Histories offered many opportunities to explore tragic potential within the plays. Richard II and Richard III were increasingly popular choices, and one candidate made an impassioned plea for Hotspur in 'Henry IV Part 1' to be seen as a tragic hero. The Roman plays also made several appearances, 'Antony and Cleopatra' in particular, but there were also some challenging responses to 'Titus Andronicus'. Those plays such as 'The Winter's Tale' and 'Measure for Measure' that operate on or across the boundary between comedy and tragedy also offered opportunities to explore the nature of the tragic material within the texts.

Elsewhere, responses to the plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were supplemented by some interesting work on 'Translations', 'Blood Wedding', 'Edward II', 'The History Boys', 'The Shadow of a Gunman' and 'Medea'. It seems likely that during the time that tragedy remains a focus of this unit, the range of plays studied within this genre will continue to productively increase.

### **Administration**

The quality of administration from centres was generally good. Efficient administration is of huge assistance to the moderating process. Many moderators, in their reports, recorded their appreciation of good practice where it occurred.

Inevitably, there was some inconsistency in centres' administrative procedures, so it is worth re-emphasising the following points:

- Centres should provide detailed summative comment on each piece of work, addressing both strengths and weaknesses. Too often candidates' work contained significant flaws that were nowhere acknowledged in the centre comment. Some comment was very light. The final audience for the work is potentially the moderator, so comments need to be shaped with that in mind.
- Some centres concluded their annotation with the award of a grade for the work. This judgement cannot be presumed at this stage and may risk unwisely raising candidates' expectations.
- There should also be detailed annotation throughout the body of the students' work. Such annotation should comment clearly on significant moments in the script, perhaps indicating to what degree or in what ways a particular Assessment Objective has been 'hit'. To merely identify different Assessment Objectives by number is of very limited value. Simply putting 'AO2' in the margin, for instance, could justify a mark of anything from 1 to 30.
- Randomly ticking the page at frequent intervals similarly serves little purpose. Where ticks are clearly used to identify a good and relevant point, then they can be valuable, especially when accompanied by some brief explanation.
- Some centres follow the practice of underlining points they consider worthy of credit. This is not the general practice in this specification, and can prove distracting to moderators.
- Some centres provided annotation only for the conventional responses. Annotation of **both** sections of the re-creative response is equally necessary, at times even more so.
- Cover sheets need to be completed accurately, with a title and clear mark provided for each piece of work within the portfolio.
- It is very helpful if the two pieces are arranged in the same order as on the cover sheet (i.e. 'Shakespeare' first)

- The tasks need to be clearly and accurately written out at the top of the first page of each of the two pieces. This was a surprisingly common omission, especially with re-creative responses.
- Folders should be secured with treasury tags. Plastic wallets may appear neat, but they are clumsy and time-consuming to handle. Staples and paper clips do not adequately secure scripts which may pass through many hands during moderation.
- The folders in the sample should be presented in descending rank order.
- Each piece of work should contain an accurate bibliography, including the edition of the drama text.
- Each piece of work should contain an accurate word count (see below). Some candidates recorded word counts which were considerable, even ridiculous, underestimates.
- If the centre is submitting work by 20 or fewer candidates, all the work should be sent to the moderator with the centre marks.
- The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15<sup>th</sup> (or January 10<sup>th</sup> for the January module) or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres, not the deadline for candidates. It is very helpful if subject leaders can ensure that deadlines are met. There were some cases this year of very late submissions, which made the moderators' work much more difficult.

### **Word Counts**

The upper word limit for this unit is 1500 words for each piece of work. With the re-creative responses this applies to the aggregate of the word counts of the re-creative piece and the commentary. Quotations are included in the word count. It is expected that all work will have an accurate word count provided.

Most centres had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits, and the candidates benefited from the resulting precision and focus of their responses to the set tasks. It must be stressed that candidates can gain no benefit whatsoever by exceeding these limits, and centres are encouraged to stress this point to their candidates. AO1 requires a degree of 'structured argument'. It is difficult to argue that work which clearly exceeds the word limits is 'well structured'.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence suggests that LITB2 has made a very auspicious beginning, due to the commitment and hard work of teachers and their candidates. There has been much testimony to the effect that centres appreciate the aims of this unit, and that candidates enjoy studying it. Certainly many candidates displayed remarkably impressive knowledge of their drama texts and a real engagement with the critical issues that they raised.

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

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