



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

English Literature B

LITB3

(Specification 2745)

Unit 3: Texts and Genres

Report on the Examination

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Texts and Genres

Examiners awarded the full range of marks this summer but many commented that the standard of some of the work seen was remarkably high, showing an impressive knowledge of the set texts and a high level of skills. As usual the best answers consisted of well-structured, coherent arguments which answered the questions that had been asked. Detailed textual analysis was used in support of the argument and different interpretations were debated and evaluated. In the high quality answers, context was understood and integrated into the argument, along with critical opinions, in connection with the questions asked. As with every unit on this specification, question focus is essential. Although this is stated in every report, the most significant fault again this summer was the failure to focus on the question. There were many shifts away from the questions where some candidates seem determined to write about what they think the key issues surrounding the text are, regardless of what they have been asked to write about. In too many responses to question 9, for example, candidates were determined to write lengthy feminist critiques of Angela Carter's work as opposed to discussing male or female victims. Responses to question 15 too frequently became accounts of the increasing mechanisation and "urbanisation" of the countryside, rather than a discussion of the hostility of nature. It should be noted that question 11 was not just a question on the significance of the Forest of Arden but a question on male/female empowerment.

To score high marks, it is also important to address all parts of the question. Candidates are advised to consider the wording of questions very carefully as question setters do not include anything which is superfluous to requirements. There were many answers to question 20, for instance, which simply identified examples of good and evil. Such answers often failed to address the notion of "struggle", which was central to the task, and overlooked the idea of victory. Similarly, in responses to question 21, the word "unintentionally" was frequently ignored. "Fear" was sometimes seen as the focus of question 6, when the task was very specifically about the "fear of the power of science". Responses along these lines are often partial answers at best.

It was pleasing to note that a number of candidates this session had acted upon advice to define question terms when appropriate. Although there were some examples of overkill where every single word was unnecessarily defined, defining terms was often helpful. Candidates who began answers to question 2 by defining the term "fiend-like" often gave an incisive edge to their responses. Fewer candidates actually considered the precise

meanings of “demon” and “ghoul” in question 7 which was a pity as this could have been very fruitful. In response to question 19 where the task set concerned “forces beyond human understanding”, defining what could be understood by this was essential. Examiners were prepared to be flexible but it was sometimes difficult to accept what some candidates seemed to think to be “beyond human understanding”! Many candidates were unable to distinguish between “inhuman” and “superhuman” in question 3 and indeed, for many, they seemed to be synonymous.

It is perhaps an appropriate time to raise a point about context and genre. As stated in every report, “bolted-on” context is never required by this specification. Answers which begin with a potted history of the gothic as a genre where it is not relevant to the question do not get any credit for that material. However, one vital element in developing an understanding of a genre lies in attaining a knowledge of key concepts relating to that genre which is demonstrated by response to vocabulary. An understanding of the word “ghoul”, for example, would seem to be part of an informed understanding of the gothic genre. Similarly, “sentimentality” would seem to be a key concept in the study of the pastoral genre. Many candidates seemed to think that sentimental and nostalgic and idyllic are all synonymous. Candidates would be better prepared for this unit by developing their understanding of key vocabulary, rather than learning by rote about “The Castle of Otranto” or “The Eclogues”. Candidates are equally expected to understand the implications of the vocabulary of literary study. Simple terms such as “role”, “presentation” and “significance” are often ignored or overlooked by candidates.

On a more positive note, it is pleasing to see candidates now addressing a wide variety of different contexts where relevant. Performance context when discussing plays can often lead to some interesting AO3. However, candidates should try to steer away from seeing past (or indeed present) audiences as homogenous and, as is often the case when discussing audiences in the past, stupid! While examiners welcome personal response to the texts, candidates should also be aware that applying a modern perspective to an ‘old’ text needs to be thought through critically.

Many examiners commented upon the impressive knowledge of the texts demonstrated in the highest scoring scripts where quotations were used extensively in support of the argument with analysis of the language. Where lower scores were awarded it was often the case that the text disappeared from discussion or was not used in support. Examiners are very conscious of the fact that this is a closed book examination but it is important to realize that the same academic rigour applies as in any examination. While we are willing to

overlook the occasional inaccuracy of quotations -the examination is not a memory test- continuous approximation of quotation is not acceptable. Nor is it acceptable to pretend that phrases are quotations by putting them in quotation marks when they are patently not. It is unlikely that examiners will be hoodwinked into thinking that Shakespeare actually wrote such things as, “Let’s go kill the king”, or, “Get a grip, Macbeth” or “Damn the blasted spot”. Such misquotation seems to indicate little understanding of Shakespeare’s language. It is also important that the links between the quotations and the argument are explained and commented upon, as they obviously should be used to illustrate points.

With regards to AO3, it is always interesting to read answers where candidates become involved in debate. Many candidates were not afraid to challenge potential critical viewpoints within the questions, nor were they afraid to argue that the text did not fit the given view, especially in Section B. As ever, the best responses to AO3 involved such discussion. Less successful answers occurred when candidates simply threw in learnt critical opinions which were not necessarily relevant to the task. With reference to any assessment objective, it is important to note that formulaic responses are never highly rewarded. Examiners observed that some students seem to increasingly feel that there are certain things they MUST say or do in order to get high marks. Students should be aware that there are NO words, phrases or ideas which are essential in gaining high marks. Inclusion of such phrases are not automatic passports to the top bands. It is imperative that students realize that this specification tests skills applied to specific tasks, not knowledge of topics, as reference to the band descriptors in the mark scheme demonstrate.

Another important feature of the best answers was the style in which they were written. Fluency of style and coherence of structure in answers will always be rewarded. Candidates are advised to begin each answer with a brief introduction and finish with a brief conclusion, “brief” being a significant term here, as repetition should be avoided. It is always helpful for examiners to be able to perceive the line of argument from the opening paragraph. Nor should the importance of paragraphing be overlooked.

Finally there are a few points to be made with reference to rubric infringements and set texts. The first point applies to those candidates studying Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale”. Whilst we would not want to discourage students from reading the description of the Pardoner from “The General Prologue” as part of their wider reading, they should be aware that this is not part of the actual set text so answers based on lengthy discussions of the colour of his hair, eyes, voice etc. are not really valid. The bulk of the discussion should be on the actual set text.

Meanwhile candidates studying either of the Pastoral Poetry selections should ensure they answer the correct question for the selection they have studied. Credit cannot be given for answering the wrong question; answering question 10, for example, with reference to post-1945 Pastoral Poetry. The most common type of rubric infringement, however, is only using TWO texts in answer to questions in Section B. Two poems from the same selection do not constitute two different texts. Two poems from different selections, however, do. Neither do two stories from “The Bloody Chamber” constitute two different texts. While it is not necessary to refer to all three texts at equal length, candidates should note the requirement on the question paper to refer “substantially” to “at least three texts”. The key word here is “substantially” and some candidates lost marks by not writing about their third text in a way which might be considered substantial. There is, of course, no absolute rule but a couple of lines clearly cannot be deemed substantial.

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