



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

English Literature B

LITB1

(Specification 2745)

Unit 1: Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination

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Introductory Comments

The full range of marks was seen by examiners this January. Although most of the students were those re-sitting the unit, over 30% were taking the exam for the first time. This suggests that an increasing number of schools and colleges have found strategies to cover the four texts for this exam in just a few months and are successfully teaching their students about narratology. It is clear that many schools and colleges are teaching narrative as an intellectual concept rather than simply teaching four texts. This is clearly to the advantage of students. Central to this paper are the stories writers tell, how those stories are told and how readers find meanings in them.

For schools and colleges new to the specification or those who are new to reading reports, it is worth repeating what the expectations of the paper are. Section A of the paper requires students to concentrate on a single author. The question is divided into two parts, with some link between them, and students should write on this text for one hour; the two parts have discrete mark schemes and marks. In the first part of the question (the odd numbered questions), students are expected to analyse the writers' narrative methods in a particular part of the text and in the even numbered questions students are required to enter into an interpretative debate about an aspect of the same author's work as set up in the question.

In Section B students are asked to write about a particular aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts. There is no demand to compare the texts and if students do compare they often lose sight of the task.

The need to know texts well cannot be overstated so that students can make careful choices. Some students only seemed to know the opening chapters of novels and one or two of the poems in the poetry texts. As a result, their choices were restricted and material was often forced into answers when other sections of texts would have worked better. Some valuable teaching can be done by schools and colleges in helping students to make good choices but these choices can only be made when students have complete texts from which to choose. Several examiners commented that students had not always made wise choices.

It is advisable that when preparing for the exam teachers and students read all the questions from previous examinations to familiarise themselves with the types of questions that can be asked. Students then need to be encouraged to think independently about questions, choose those which best suit them and be confident in constructing clear arguments. As was pointed out in June 2011's report, it was very disappointing to see all students from some centres answering the same question for Section A with all using the same parts of texts for both the odd numbered questions and Section B. When this happened, very rarely was there genuine engagement. Students seemed to be trying to include ideas and material that had been received rather than thinking freshly and then arguing with an independent voice.

Independent thinking is valued by examiners and is rewarded.

Section A

The odd numbered questions

The questions in this section have a very specific focus. They are about how stories are told and they require students to write about the methods authors use in their story telling. The questions are fundamentally different from traditional critical analysis type questions and often when students do not perform as well as schools and colleges expect, it is because they do not see the **story** that is being told in the poem or the section of the prose text that is specified. In some cases students simply produced commentaries on poems pointing out poetic features and perhaps offering some interpretation. The best answers were produced by students who wrote confidently about method in relation to the overarching story of the prescribed section of text, and most of these were able to pin down the story in the opening paragraph. When this happened, students were able to give their writing shape and purpose. When it did not happen the writing was often disconnected, and often just a discussion of some features. Examiners reported seeing some tightly focused answers on Questions 3, 25 and 29 especially.

When students did not perform well, they often catalogued aspects of method with little sense of the story and such answers were rather wooden and disjointed. Although some credit was given for points made, students who produced answers like this very rarely received marks in the top bands. Answers which began with such tropes as pathetic fallacy, an example of alliteration, some writing about themes, ideas or characters lacked sharp focus. Some schools and colleges still seem to be teaching themes and characters for this section which is unhelpful. There also needs to be some caution when figurative language, rhyme and rhythm are being taught as many students find it very hard to write about those features in ways that meaningfully connect to, or illuminate, the stories. The story always needs to be in a central position in the answer.

There was no discernible difference in performance between those students who responded to the poetry tasks and those who responded to the prose tasks, but clearly there are different ways of approaching poetry and prose narrative. Very good answers were seen on all questions but some students struggled to unravel the rather odd story being told in Auden's 'O Where Are You Going' and the slightly complicated story of Hardy's 'The Voice'.

Once the story of the poem, chapter, short story or section of text has been established, it is best for students to focus on the larger features of narrative like voice or structure rather than discussing the effects of individual words. When lexical features are discussed more needs to be done than simply analysing what those words might mean. All comments need to be tailored to the story itself.

The even numbered questions

Answers in this section require argument, a key strand of AO1. All questions set up debates and the students who write the best answers have clear independent voices and are not just trying to remember what has been said in class or trying to reshape the question that was set in their mock exams. This question requires candidates to think. Students really need to engage with 'how far', 'to what extent' and 'significance'. The best answers were seen by students who clearly were thinking

about the text in relation to the question and often challenged the premises set up. When students are invited to discuss whether a particular idea is the most interesting feature of the writer's work, as was the case in the Tennyson question, students should not rapidly move away from the task and write about whatever they like. There is an expectation that the topic set up in the question is debated for at least half of the answer.

There is also an expectation that since this is an open book examination, that the text is well used to support the arguments that students posit. Good answers were seen on all questions but some particularly impressive ones were seen on the extent to which women in Browning's poetry are powerless, whether secrets in Keats's poetry are central to the narratives and the extent to which time stands still in *The God of Small Things*. There were also some good answers on Question 22 where students engagingly contrasted Hassan's and Amir's treatment of each other in childhood, drawing parallels with Baba and Ali. Students who did not read the questions carefully or tried to subvert them often struggled. Several students did not understand the word 'obscure' in the Auden question (some reading it as 'obscene'), some did not understand 'contempt' in the Gatsby question (some reading it as 'content') and some did not understand 'assertion' in Rossetti. Some useful work might be done in schools and colleges to help students to broaden their critical vocabulary; this would be beneficial to both their reading and writing.

Some students were constrained by the choices of poems or parts of texts they used for particular questions. This was particularly evident in the Hardy and Auden questions. Several students claimed that Auden's poems are too obscure to be enjoyable and then wrote about 'Miss Gee'. However, when good choices were made answers were more successful; for example, there was some agreement amongst students that 'Ode' is troublesome and many debated whether this stimulates or suppresses enjoyment so this poem proved to be a wise choice. There were also several stout defences against obscurity which were interesting. In Question 8 on Hardy, several students agreed with the proposition that the story of disappointed love which threads through a number of poems is the most interesting feature of this selection but then unwisely chose 'The Darkling Thrush' and 'The Convergence of the Twain'. Obvious good choices would have been 'The Voice', the poem that had been written about in the first part of Section A, 'The Going' and 'Your Last Drive'. It needs to be restated here that there is always a connection between the even and odd numbered questions and this is to help students. Therefore, in answering Question 2, it would have been sensible for students to write about 'O Where Are You Going' and in Question 14, Part 3 of 'The Lady of Shalott' contains the striking visual description of Lancelot's ride to Camelot which could easily have supported a relevant argument.

Section B

In this section, students had to manage the texts of three writers across an aspect of narrative, here either **generic conventions** or **the naming of characters**. As with Section A's even numbered questions, students needed to have a clear sense of the stories where **generic conventions** play a part and the stories in which **the ways characters are named or referred to** open up meanings. There were some excellent answers on both questions which suggests that many schools and colleges are preparing their students well and examiners reported enjoying marking this section of the paper. Preparing students well, of course, means teaching them how to

choose judiciously and to write about the prescribed narrative focus (generic conventions or naming) in terms of the story. When students did not perform well it was often because they seemed to assume that an odd-numbered question approach is appropriate and that any narrative method can be discussed. The question on generic conventions was less popular than that on naming but some excellent answers were seen and Question 41 seemed to attract some very able students.

Question 41

Generic conventions that writers employ are a key aspect of narratology but although examples were provided in the question, some students ignored the help given and just wrote anything about the three texts. Some students only used the examples given and this limited their answers. However, some candidates were able to identify genres and demonstrate their significance perceptively and relevantly. Many candidates seemed to grow in confidence during their writing and seemed to really enjoy thinking about the significance of the generic conventions to the stories that are told. Much good discussion arose from discussing the thriller genre in *Enduring Love*, the murder mystery genre in *The Curious Incident in the Dog in the Night-time* and Austen's use of social comedy. The best answers were produced by students who saw how writers adapt and subvert genres or who produce hybrid texts. Some exceptional work was seen on *Great Expectations* (though this is not a popular text) and *The God of Small Things* (which is increasingly popular). Some students who did not perform well substituted themes for genre, with several writing about 'redemption' and 'guilt', and some thought first person narrative was a genre. Some students wrote broadly about the 'novel' and 'poetry' as genres and such approaches did not enable students to engage with 'significance'.

Question 42

This was the more popular question, and although not necessarily the better answered, it was often done very well. There were some inventive and intelligent responses. It was clear that many students had considered the significance of names beforehand and this was particularly evident in the responses to *The Great Gatsby* and *The Kite Runner* and there was some very good exploration of the universality of names in Coleridge. Several students, however, did not read the question carefully and ignored the part of the question about the choices writers make in how they name or refer to characters. Some just wrote about characters and themes and some wrote about how characters are described, perhaps using the material of last summer's question on descriptive language. Some students ignored 'names of characters' altogether and focused on 'references to characters' but took the term 'refer to' too widely and not as a substitute for a 'name'. How writers *refer* to characters in their stories was included in the question because in Hardy, Auden, Coleridge, Browning and *The Road* characters are often not named though they are 'referred to' in ways which open up meanings. So, for example, students could have written about Auden's referring to his characters in 'As I Walked Out One Evening' as 'the lovers' or 'Time' or 'Justice' and in *The Road* focus could have been on 'the boy' and 'the man' and what is signified by the ways these characters are referred to. In other texts students should easily have been able to find meanings in the *names* that the writers give. A good example from a student's work on Keats clearly suggests what might have been done:

In 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', the Belle Dame is referred to in French which could possibly highlight the fact that she and the knight do not speak the same language so when he believed she said 'in language strange – I love thee true', we become more aware of the fact that perhaps Keats implies she does not say this.

Alternatively it may be due to the fact that Keats is trying to characterise her as foreign and different from the 'knight - at - arms', even in his naming of her, reflecting possibly a doomed love because the two are fundamentally different and incompatible. This is made more likely with his later naming of her as 'a fairy's child' where Keats not only highlights a contrast between her and the knight since 'fairy' invokes the lexical field of magic and wonder while 'knight' appeals very much to a rugged sense of masculine reality. The word 'child' also possibly conveys innocence helping to characterise the Belle Dame as less of the villain than she may appear to be, but once again illustrates a clear contrast to the obviously adult 'knight – at – arms'. In addition, referring to her as a child could suggest something sordid and wrong about their relationship as if crossing the boundary between reality and dream takes the knight into an immoral world, an 'otherness' that is dangerous.

Both questions showed clearly the necessity of thinking carefully at the start of the exam about matching texts to questions since some students found it hard to fit Hardy into the genres questions and some found it hard to fit Auden into the names question.

The new texts

Two new prose texts were available this January and interesting work was seen on both *The Secret Scripture* and *The Road*, particularly in Section B, and the evidence shown suggests that the texts work well for this unit. However, not many answers were seen and, as it is likely that more schools and colleges will be submitting work on these texts in the summer, a longer report on student's performance can be given after the exam in May.

AO1

As has been pointed out in previous reports, how students themselves write about literature is an important factor in how well they perform in terms of marks. AO1 is explicitly tested in Section A (the even numbered questions) and in B, though as is stated on the front of the examination paper, candidates are expected to 'use good English', 'organise information clearly' and 'use specialist vocabulary where appropriate' in their whole answer. AO1 is also about students having a tight focus on tasks and being able to structure coherent arguments. Teachers need to help candidates to write and not just to read. Several students wrote in a colloquial way and had scant regard for punctuation or paragraphing. Having said this, there was evidence of some very sophisticated writing and this made answers a pleasure to read.

Conclusion

This is very much a skills based paper. It is challenging, it is rewarding and many students seem to enjoy what they are doing.

Many schools and colleges have understood and appreciated the philosophy behind the paper and, where ‘Aspects of Narrative’ is at the heart of teaching, students have been advantaged.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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