



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

English Literature B

LITB3

(Specification 2745)

Unit 3: Texts and Genres

Report on the Examination

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Once again this session examiners saw the full range of work which, at its best, is very impressive considering that students achieving high marks had only studied the texts for a matter of months, rather than the full year. However, examiners did feel that there were some students who would have benefited from a longer period of preparation and were being entered before they were quite ready.

As usual, the best answers engaged closely with texts and tasks, showing both understanding and an ability to organise thoughts into coherent and cogent answers. In such responses, AOs were part of the discussion rather than being tacked on and textual reference was not only pertinent but also integrated in such a way that the argument flowed seamlessly. The best work leaves examiners in awe of what well-prepared and conscientious students can produce in two hours in terms of perceptive and sophisticated thinking. However, there were still examples of questions which were only half-answered, irrelevant context and quotations which sat awkwardly because the point of including them was never explained. Many of the issues which follow in this report have appeared in previous reports on this unit but it is clearly still important to keep reiterating them.

The first and most important point to make is that question focus is paramount. Marks are not awarded for the assessment objectives alone when they are unrelated to the task that has been set. Consequently, long introductory paragraphs on the gothic or pastoral genre in general, rarely receive much credit as they are not usually related to the question asked. Similarly, pre-learnt chunks of biographies of authors are not often helpful and the insertion of quotations of critical opinions by named critics which are frequently artificially forced into an answer get little reward for the effort. Answers which go off at a tangent or stray from the task do not score highly. Examiners too often have to do the work of looking for implicit question focus in the writing. For example, question 2, on *Macbeth*, this session produced a number of answers where the question focus was particularly weak because students wrote at length about Lady Macbeth when the question is solely about Macbeth and the supernatural elements. Any extensive writing on Lady Macbeth was therefore irrelevant. Question 23 in Section B, was about the freedom of a childhood state and not a question about childhood innocence so candidates who wrote about this did not score very highly. It is essential to read the question carefully and not distort it either deliberately or unwittingly.

Students are also advised to make sure they address all parts of the questions so that they guard against only providing partial answers. For example, in response to question 21 in Section B, there were a number of answers where students only wrote about tension and suspense and completely overlooked the words “always inevitable”. (There were also other answers where inevitability was addressed but not tension or suspense.) Both beauty and use had to be addressed for a successful answer to question 22.

Perhaps even more worrying this session were the answers where students had actually misread or misunderstood the question. Students are advised to read the questions very carefully and think about the actual terms used before starting their answers. Question 9 on *The Bloody Chamber* produced many responses where the question had been misread and “basic instincts” were substituted for “base instincts”, sometimes with serious consequences. Whether this was a genuine misreading or whether students did not understand the difference between the two was hard to

determine but it led to some limited responses. The word “subconscious” was also frequently overlooked in this question.

Understanding and defining key question terms is of central importance in successful answers. Examiners felt that there were some fairly basic words in this session’s questions which students did not grasp the full significance of or indeed, understand. For example, the concept of sin, which is after all a key gothic concept, in question 19, did not always seem to be understood by students and both the words “ignorance” and “superstition” in question 15, surprisingly, caused many problems. Both these words have strong pastoral associations. It may be more useful for students to focus on the vocabulary and terminology of genre rather than potted histories. It is also often helpful to examiners if students define their understanding of some of the key terms of the questions. This does not mean they have to define every single simple word before they start to write but a definition of what is understood by “the natural order of things” in question 20, for example, would often have been a useful starting point for debate.

Students are also advised to ensure they answer the correct question for the texts they have studied. This seems to be a particular danger for students who study either of the pastoral poetry selections. There were several instances this January where students who had studied the post 1945 selection tried to answer question 10 or vice versa. Inevitably few marks were awarded in these cases as there was rarely anything of relevance to the question they should have answered. It is not a good idea to rush into question choices; it is better to take a few minutes to choose the most appropriate question. Some tasks in Section B, for example, are more appropriate for some text selections than others; there may simply be more to say so it is worth taking some time to choose wisely.

It is also important that students are aware of the need to structure their answers clearly. Appropriate introductions help to clarify the argument. Similarly brief conclusions help to re-define a well-argued case. Some essays this session lacked a useful conclusion so the line of argument was not always lucid. Clarity and coherence of syntax are also vital skills in constructing a cogent argument. In answers where ideas are poorly or inaccurately expressed, it is often difficult to follow the argument. Good academic practice of supporting points with quotations or specific references is also an essential hallmark of answers which score highly. This means that students do have to have a detailed working knowledge of their chosen texts. General, assertive statements, without apt support are not usually very convincing.

Good textual knowledge is also essential in addressing AO2 effectively. It is pleasing to see some of the skills developed for unit 1 being carried through to this unit. Some students do successfully consider such issues as voice and perspective in a way which is relevant to the tasks on this paper, for example.

Examiners are pleased to see that many students are now engaging with debate and alternative readings in their writing. Many answers construct successful arguments and counter-arguments. It is important to note, however, that a counter-argument is not the same as a distortion of the task. In response to question 8, for example, students should engage with the proposition that an obsession with the transgression of boundaries is a key element in the novel and an effective counter-argument would

be that it is not and the reasons for this; it is not enough to simply disagree and then to write what you like about the text. Similarly, question 23 is about whether or not pastoral writing always celebrates the freedom of a childhood state, not whether pastoral writing is about other things.

As well as focusing on the questions, it is also important to answer them using the texts set. There does seem to be an issue with *The Pardoner's Tale* in this respect. Quite understandably, students have read *The Portrait of the Pardoner* from *The General Prologue* as an introduction to the text. However, whilst passing references to this may enrich a discussion, extensive answers based on that information and analysis of the material from it are not given much credit as students are not actually writing about the set text.

There are also some students who are still not addressing AO4 successfully. All contextual material should arise naturally from pertinent response to the task in hand and not be artificially bolted on or irrelevantly inserted. Students who attempt contextual surveys of any kind which are deliberately tacked on to answers invariably run the risk of simplistic and often inaccurate historical or sociological summaries, making facile assumptions about what everybody thought or did at that particular period. Such generalisations are rarely helpful or convincing and suggest deliberate ploys to demonstrate contextual awareness.

With regards to answers to the Section B questions, students should note that there is no requirement to address all three texts at equal length, a fact of which everyone now seems aware. However, as stated on the question paper, there is a requirement to address all three texts "substantially". The word substantial is not synonymous with length but it does require discussion which is insightful and exploratory, even if it is not lengthy. Constant switching backwards and forwards amongst the three texts is not advisable as this does not allow for the in depth analysis which is desirable.

On a final note, examiners would like to encourage students not to be afraid of tackling questions which address an aspect of texts or genres which they have not previously considered. It is often the case that if students "think on their feet" in the examination room, responses are fresh, lively and original. The best answers are not those which include pre-prepared and learnt material which are inserted into the argument whether they are relevant or not. Answers which are formulaic do not achieve the highest marks, nor do essays which are more appropriate answers to last year's question as opposed to this year's. Schools and colleges which dictate how candidates should start their answers or insist there are things which must be included are not helping their students to write pertinent and engaging responses. Examiners enjoy reading interesting, relevant and original writing. If an answer is enjoyable, it is usually good!

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