



**General Certificate of Education**

**English Literature**  
*Specification B*

**LITB1      Aspects of Narrative**

**Report on the Examination**  
*2009 examination - June series*

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## **Aspects of Narrative Unit 1**

### **Introduction**

The January experience of examining this unit gave us much to be optimistic about; the June experience, with 23,000 students taking the exam, has consolidated that optimism and it was pleasing to see the advances that have been made since January. Again teachers need to be commended on their efforts. Examiners reported that they saw much excellent work and it is clear that candidates can cope well with the demands of this new and challenging exam. Teachers and students on the whole have understood the importance of narrative and how it is tested.

As was stated in the January report, this unit is demanding, not least of all because students are required to respond to four texts and write about them in three different ways. Most were able to do this with some confidence. There were fewer spoiled papers or very short responses seen on this unit than on legacy units when only one or two texts were being examined. The paper as a whole is designed to enable candidates to think and write about the overarching concept of narrative and not just about four texts in isolation. The title of the unit is 'Aspects of Narrative' and this is what the paper is about. Students therefore need to understand that they will be expected to write about narrative: stories and their plots, how these stories are told and how readers can interpret them. The questions have been written with a clear eye on the Assessment Objectives and each question has a different focus which centres need to understand and help their students to understand.

Section A of the paper requires students to concentrate on a single text. The question is divided into two parts and candidates should write on this text for one hour; the two parts have discrete mark schemes and marks. In the first part of the question (Aa), students are expected to analyse the writers' methods in a particular part of the text and in the second part (Ab) they are required to enter into some debate about critical interpretation. In Section B candidates are asked to write about some aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts though there is no demand to compare the texts and if candidates do compare they often lose sight of the task. Most candidates who understood the requirements of the paper, who knew their texts well and who answered the questions, responded admirably.

It is advisable that when preparing candidates for the exam that teachers read all the questions on the paper to familiarise themselves with the types of questions that can be asked.

Again, following the pattern established in January, not every question asked candidates to range across different poems in Section Ab. Questions might be set on single poems if there are interesting things to debate. Such flexibility in setting questions will continue in future exams. Centres must also not be surprised if they find chapters or poems that have already been used appearing again in future examinations although on the whole different tasks will be set.

### **Choices of texts and questions - and their implications**

When teachers are selecting texts and preparing students for this unit, they clearly need to think about the whole paper and the implications their choices will have on their candidates. Most centres seem to be preparing students for a choice in Section A (usually of two texts). Those centres who select a single text for Section A for all students should make sure their students do not write formulaic answers, trying to remember what their teachers have told them rather than thinking about narrative in an independent way. Over-preparing students can be dangerous. Students need to be taught what authorial method is about and then apply their knowledge.

Whether or not the text for A has been predetermined, this choice made in A will always have a bearing on what students do in Section B. Therefore, if candidates choose to answer on poetry in A, they will have to write about two prose texts (plus a poetry text) in B; similarly if they write about a prose text in A they will have to write about two different poets (plus a prose text) in B. Whether candidates prefer writing about narrative in poetry or narrative in prose is of course a significant factor here.

When students have been given a choice by their teachers and before they make a decision in the examination, they would be well advised to look carefully at the questions in B to see what texts and what parts of texts could best be used in the answer. When the texts have been chosen candidates then need to carefully consider how they deploy those texts to maximise marks. Sometimes candidates use a text in A which might better suit the purposes of B.

If candidates only know some parts of texts for the B question and only a few things about narrative method and the ways texts can be read then there is a danger that these bits of knowledge will get thrust into the answer. An example from this year's examination can well illustrate the point. When writing about *The Kite Runner* in B, many students wanted to write about the rape of Hassan, presumably because this was the most memorable or most shocking event. However, whether Question 19 or 20 were being answered the material was often not shaped to the demands of the tasks. Similar problems were also noticed in responses to Hardy. The choices of poems for A and B were not always judicious. For example, it was not perhaps wise to choose an iceberg or a ship or a waterfall when writing about how authors create characters. So, careful thought is essential.

### **Popular choices of texts**

There was a very wide range of texts studied and examples were seen of every text. Centres seemed to be fairly evenly split over the poetry but *The Great Gatsby*, *The Kite Runner* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* were the most popular prose texts. There were relatively few responses to *Digging to America*.

### **Section Aa**

The questions in this section are exclusively about writers' methods. Only AO2 is tested here. Those candidates who performed well had been taught to write about how narrative works and they were able to apply their knowledge to the chapter, poem, story or part of the text specified. The candidates who scored very high marks confidently wrote about narrative structures, narrators, settings (when these were applicable), form and language with some depth and understanding. Those candidates who simply identified features or who worked at a lexical level only did less well; those who only told the story did even less well. If candidates just wrote about the content of the chapter (plot, character and themes) they were not answering the question and they often received marks in Bands 1 or 2. Quite a few candidates were conversant with technical terms like prolepsis, destination and signifier and when the terms were used relevantly they were often helpful. However it was not a stumbling block for the many who did not have the terms so long as they understood how writers were telling their stories.

Some centres seemed to have prepared their candidates in a formal way to write a paragraph about form, a paragraph about structure and a paragraph about language. While this did ensure relevance, students often found this constraining and the most able were limited by this approach. Some candidates retreated into micro-analysis and some startling claims were made about alliteration and commas. Candidates need to think about each chapter or poem as an independent entity as they explore what specific methods will be most interesting to write in the half an hour that they have. They can only write about some points and the points they choose should be well developed to reveal understanding. Often the responses to the early texts were of a higher standard than those of the post 1990 texts, perhaps because they drew on more

secure teacher expertise. Candidates need to keep in mind it is *how* novelists and poets create, not *what* they create, that is important.

### Section Ab

This section produced a variety of results and was generally answered well. Many candidates engaged in the debates set up in the questions and were aware of different possible readings. The most confident candidates often took issue with the questions and explored and analysed their own ideas by using close supportive references. Weaker answers tended to be short or rather vague with little reference to the text. Some candidates offered more comments on methods but did not advance any arguments. This was a pity as such material could have secured marks had it been included in Aa.

Particularly good responses were seen on Browning, where there was much intelligent discussion of the Duke and the lover; on the uses of letters in *Pride and Prejudice* and on stagnation in Tennyson's poems. At the other end of the scale, in 1b, when writing about the comic potential of 'Miss Gee', not all candidates understood the significance of Auden's reference to 'St James's Infirmary'. Some thought it was a jolly song with a jaunty rhythm. There was some struggle for some candidates with 'universal significance' in Hardy (some just listed Hardy's references to death) and most surprising of all was the difficulty some candidates had with Baba as a tragic hero in *The Kite Runner*, not least of all because the students must have studied tragedy as a genre in Unit 2. Some candidates also had a limited understanding of what was meant by the 'relationship' between Jed and Joe in *Enduring Love*, perhaps because they only understood relationship in a very restricted context, claiming there was no relationship between Jed and Joe so there was nothing to debate.

In this section centres need to encourage students to think and argue in fresh ways; much pre-learned material was in evidence here and this was often unapplied. This was particularly true of bolt on context which was largely irrelevant. Ab is the only section where context is tested and the contextual factors required in the answer are those which are set up in the question. Although other contexts may be used as part of an argument, there is no point ever in simply citing biographical, social or historical material for its own sake.

### Section B

This seemed the most challenging section for candidates mainly because the questions were often not read carefully enough. Some candidates did not write about three different authors and some wrote on the texts – or author – already written about in Section A. Some candidates sought to make links and comparisons between texts, so taking up valuable time.

### Question 19

This was by far the most popular question and responses varied hugely. When candidates wrote well they focused on the author at work in creating characters and the candidates also were able to write about how characters might be interpreted. In those texts where a first person narrator is employed there were interesting points to be made in relation to the narrator's bias (for example Nick Carraway in his creating Tom and Gatsby) or through the narrator's partial understanding (for example Chris in the creation of his mother and father).

However there were many responses where candidates barely grasped the concept of author and while they wrote about characters, they did not write about *characterisation*. Some clearly thought that character studies were required; some wrote about characters as if they were real, arguing that deep down they were guilty/ sorry/ caring or able to do things differently 'if only...'. Some candidates merely jumped at what they saw as the opportunity to describe their favourite

characters from the texts they had studied. Many examiners were writing comments on scripts like *'But how are the characters created?'*

There were also candidates who wrote about method in the texts without applying it to the creation of characters. The focus needed to be on some of the following: how authorial or narrational description might be used to create characters, how characters are revealed through the language given to them by the authors; how other characters are used in the revelation of the traits of the selected character; how actions and attitudes are used; how authors use gaps in their texts or silences to reveal characters or how the authors actually structure their stories to create their characters. Some candidates underperformed in this question because they wrote about how characters are used rather than how they are created. So, again, the question needed to be read more carefully.

### **Question 20**

There were similar issues here with improper reading of the question. This was not a question about time as a theme but the ways writers use time to sequence their stories. Essentially the question was about chronology.

Although this question was less popular, examiners said they saw some excellent answers. When candidates wrote well they focused on the way writers condensed or protracted time, how single days or nights were used to structure stories, whether a writer used linear or disjointed narration, whether flashbacks were employed or how specific months, seasons or years might have been used. The best answers also showed how different readers might respond to aspects of narrative chronology.

### **AO1**

How candidates themselves write about literature is of course an important factor in how well they perform. AO1 is explicitly tested in Ab and in B. Candidates must be aware that they must write accurately and express themselves in a way that is appropriate for A level study. Several candidates wrote in a colloquial way and had scant regard for punctuation or paragraphing. Many candidates do not know how to demarcate titles of texts; this is something that could be usefully taught. Having said this, there was evidence of some very sophisticated writing and this made answers a pleasure to read.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that students have to learn many skills in responding to this paper. It is challenging, but from the evidence of this year's performance, it is rewarding.

Many centres have understood the philosophy behind the paper and in those centres where narratology has been the focus of teaching, candidates have been advantaged.

There was much encouraging work offered. The specification drew some original responses from students and teachers resulting in a pleasing first year. There was plentiful evidence that candidates, had for the most part, enjoyed their experience.

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

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