



General Certificate of Education

English Literature *Specification B*

LITB2 Dramatic Genres

Report on the Examination *2009 examination – June series*

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General

The first thing to do is to thank all the teachers, advisers, moderators and AQA staff who helped to administer and deliver LITB2 during its first year. Unsurprisingly, there were some problems, but these were relatively few, and it is important to acknowledge the significance of what has been achieved even at this early stage.

Coursework

It is perhaps worth re-stating some of the general comments made about coursework in previous reports and in recent teacher support meetings.

- Coursework is designed to encourage significantly different responses to texts from those possible in examinations. If the teaching and writing processes do not respond to and reflect those opportunities, then the justification for coursework vanishes.
- Centres are in a position to encourage flexibility and variety in the way that students write about literature. This unit is designed to encourage that diversity of response, while ensuring consistency of standardisation. A central question that centres need to ask themselves is how they have enabled their students to respond individually and independently to their tasks and texts.
- Coursework gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their skills under conditions which allow them to plan, research and refine their responses to texts. Coursework cannot however improve a student's ability. Re-drafting has a purpose, but teachers and students need to acknowledge its necessary limits. The model of drafting that this unit follows is for a single, first draft and then the final draft, as specified by the JCQ agreement.
- Coursework, like all work in this specification, should be delivered at pace. The submission requirements are not the same as teaching requirements. Centres might consider the advantages of offering each candidate a range of tasks during the study of a play and, based on performance, encouraging each candidate to re-draft one of those tasks for the final submission.
- Every centre has been allocated an adviser. This adviser is able to provide practical advice on task setting, the implications of textual choice, and some aspects of administration. Even if centres feel confident in what they are doing, it is worth making contact with the adviser for further discussion. The evidence of this year's submission is that the work of many centres has benefited significantly from their interaction with their adviser.

Assessment

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. These should not lead centres to feel that they have significantly misunderstood the process of assessment.

The two areas where moderators most often found it difficult to support the centre's marks were at the top and bottom of the centre's range. Where centres had over-rewarded the candidates at the top of the range the candidates had often not appropriately hit the assessment objectives. Some centres were unwilling to use the bottom two marks bands, even when the candidates' work clearly struggled to demonstrate a clear understanding of either the text or task. 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 weakness in one of these four areas.

AO1

The conditions under which coursework is delivered make it reasonable to expect that at the higher mark bands candidates will deliver fluent, well-structured work, accurately expressed. Centre annotation and summative comment at times failed to acknowledge significant weaknesses in these areas. AO1 also requires a degree of focus on the given task. Some candidates had clearly been credited for the inclusion of material of, at best, peripheral material.

Essay structures were at times inadequate for their purpose. Centres might usefully consider the value of working with candidates on general principles of essay structure, in particular the best use of opening and closing paragraphs. This does not mean, of course, that excessive scaffolding of individual essays is allowed.

In relation to another aspect of AO1, candidates often focused their attention on terminology about tragedy. At times this demonstrated clear and relevant understanding; at times Aristotelian terms were rather arbitrarily dropped into the argument. Here, as in other areas, there was less evidence of knowledge about drama, the other generic requirement in this unit.

The use of quotation is another area where there is work to be done. The effectiveness of an argument is often enhanced through the use of judiciously selected quotation, effectively embedded in the developing analysis of the text. Some quotation was far too long for the purpose, or left without comment to justify itself. At other times the mere appearance of quotation was credited, however tangential to the argument, or cited as an example of response to AO2.

AO2

This objective requires the candidates to demonstrate understanding of the ways in which form, structure and language shape meanings in literary texts. It is not designed to reward simple textual reference in the service of a restatement of the plot. As stated in an earlier report, form and structure are at least as important as language. At times, when candidates confined their comments to lexical features of the text little was achieved in terms of exploration of dramatic method. At other times candidates seemed to lose any sense of the text as a literary construct and confined their attention to content and the general ideas.

AO3

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

It should again be emphasised that in order to show understanding 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 in some cases this approach can inform the argument. In other cases, however, such cross-references seemed to have little purpose other than to show that the candidate knew of the existence of the other plays; the analysis of the central text was little, if at all, advantaged.

Some candidates were able to demonstrate how certain features or conventions of dramatic tragedy were being used while understanding that other dramatic usages were possible. The use of soliloquy, for instance, is a convention whose effect emerges out of its particular dramatic context. To merely identify that soliloquies are being used within a tragedy is a lower level skill. The second strand of AO3 requires evidence of understanding that texts can be interpreted differently, that they are textually and dramatically ambiguous. At the higher mark levels candidates evaluated these interpretations very impressively. Many candidates, however, failed to offer any evidence of different interpretations of the text. Moderators reported many examples of one-dimensional analyses based on single perspectives on the plays. An argument which does little more than cite and uncritically agree with a critical opinion is not operating at a very high level. Tasks which require candidates to describe a particular interpretation or aspect of the play are unlikely to generate genuine debate.

AO4

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 and to explore aspects of dramatic presentation. Some candidates tended to treat the plays as narratives of indeterminate form and genre without any sense that elements of drama also needed to be explored. Centres should encourage their candidates to see **plays** which are tragedies as the focus of their study rather than simply **texts** which are tragedies. One moderator commented that some candidates' comments on dramatic method were confined to 'an afterthought at the end of the essay'.

The second strand invites understanding 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 introduced in addition to it. 'Bolt-on' biographical or socio-historical information, for instance, is likely to be little value. Superfluous comment of this kind often took the form of glib statements about the universal racism and sexism of Shakespearean society. Some candidates began their essays with such material, thus losing the focus of their argument from the start. The specification 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

A couple of general points: even an apparently well-structured task only offers potential; it is the response to the task that ultimately matters. Conversely, tasks that at first sight do not look altogether promising can, with good teaching, deliver effective responses. Moderators also understand that students do not always transcribe tasks accurately.

What needs to be emphasised, however, is the significance of the title of this unit: 'Dramatic Genres'. As indicated above, genre here refers to a type of text described by its form (drama) and a further sub-categorisation (tragedy). A successful task, therefore, is likely to offer the opportunity to address both these aspects of the text.

A second significant phrase in the section on this unit in the specification is 'aspects of genre'. The unit does not expect responses which offer a wide-ranging exploration of every element of tragedy within a play; indeed the word limit of 1500 words precludes such a response. Tasks such as those which invited candidates to decide whether 'Death of a Salesman' was a tragedy risked encouraging diffuse, unfocused descriptions of the play.

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

- close focus on an aspect of both drama and tragedy within the text
- the opportunity for a genuinely independent response
- the opportunity for a genuine debate around different readings of the text
- close focus on aspects of form, structure and language
- close textual reference.

Conventional Responses

Most successful responses had a tight focus on an element of dramatic tragedy and allowed the candidates to explore their own interpretation of the play. Tasks which essentially invited narrative or a very one-dimensional descriptive response were predictably less effective. Some candidates successfully challenged Aristotelian (or Bradleian) perspectives and terminology in the context of their applicability to the text in question. Less successful were those responses which offered an uncritical check-list of features of tragedy and then dutifully logged them off against the text. It should be stressed that the definition of what tragedy 'is' is not fixed. A more productive approach can be to explore how an individual play challenges and interprets areas of experience that were once, or are now, thought of as tragic.

Some tasks which worked well included:

- consideration of the extent to which Blanche DuBois was presented in a specific section of '*A Streetcar Named Desire*' as being the victim of the past
- the degree to which Titus Andronicus is revealed as a tragic hero in the final scenes of the play
- the different possible interpretations of the dramatic symbols in the tragedy of '*The Wild Duck*'
- discussing whether the dumb show in '*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*' justifies a reading of the play as a tragedy

Less successful tasks included:

- A judgement as to what Iago's real motives were. (This invited treatment of the character as real and tended to lead to narrative based around a description of his methods.)
- An account of the ways in which Othello's language deteriorates during the course of the play. (Often this delivered little more than a list of quotations charting an uncritical view of Othello as a corrupted but heroic figure.)
- A description of Willy Loman as a victim of the American Dream. (This encouraged excessive historical background material and discouraged any exploration of dramatic method)
- Whether Hamlet (or Blanche, or Lear, or Willy Loman, or Lady Macbeth) was really mad. (This tended to deliver rather naïve excursions into the world of psycho-analysis.)
- The degree to which *The Merchant of Venice* integrates aspects of Aristotle's 'Poetics' (This hints at a debate, but in practice delivered a chronologically ordered list.)
- A decision as to who is responsible for Cleopatra's death. (The temptation is to say: 'Shakespeare'.)

None of the above tasks invite genuine debate or effective exploration of the ways in which drama can explore aspects of tragedy.

Re-creative Tasks

As in the January submission, this kind of response was less popular, but some excellent, genuinely creative readings of the plays emerged. At times it was clear that the re-creative option in the portfolio had offered some candidates an opportunity to demonstrate a critical engagement with the texts that was more productive than their employment of the conventional method.

The re-creative response is designed to illustrate a reading of the base text that incorporates implicitly or explicitly an understanding that different interpretations of that base text are possible. Many candidates offered little more than a re-phrasing of the original or a very conventional representation of character. On the other hand, some responses strayed so far from the base text that it was hard to see how they convincingly offered a clear reading of aspects of tragedy within the original play. In such cases creative writing tended to swamp or wholly replace critical exploration.

To repeat a point made in an earlier report, the central purpose of the commentary is to complement and reinforce the significance of the re-creative piece. There is no need for candidates to explore ways in which their work might have been improved, to offer an extended exploration of the form or style model, nor to subject that re-creative work to minute lexical analysis. Significant areas of form, structure and language will be those that illuminate their reading of the base text, as will be comments on choice of materials and chosen perspectives.

In some cases neither the re-creative piece nor the commentary convincingly offered a debate around a reading of any aspect of the play as a dramatic tragedy.

Some tasks that worked well included:

- Obituaries that offered different views on the tragic significance of a character's life and death
- Self-justifying monologues by 'villainous' characters within plays that offered no such comparable opportunity in the original
- Conversations between characters that the base text suggests must have happened off-stage and had significant impact on the tragic outcome of the play

Less successful tasks included:

- Imagining childhood experiences of tragic villains as a means of explaining their adult behaviour
- Directorial instructions to actors (which tended to descend into instructions regarding clothing, lighting and stage movement, and made the commentary redundant)
- Letters between a character and a distant descendant in which they exchange views about the differences between their different (in one case wholly imagined) societies
- Diary entries from a character in which they set down little more than a description of the sequence of their actions in the base text

None of the above tasks offered an understanding of the ways in which, at certain moments in the play, the audience is offered an opportunity to consider the nature of some aspect of the tragic experience.

Texts

Many considerations will understandably influence centres' choice of texts. By far the most popular choices were 'Othello' and 'Death of a Salesman'. Both plays clearly offer critical and contextual perspectives that are likely to engage twenty-first century students, and centres found ways of exploring the texts from original and interesting perspectives. Interestingly, though, Iago often proved a less successful focus for tasks. Candidates at times struggled to get past the deliberately obfuscatory self-portrait that Iago offers to the audience and other characters in the play.

'Hamlet' and 'King Lear' were the next most popular Shakespearean texts, and some interesting work was also offered on those texts on the fringes of the 'traditional' tragedies. 'The Merchant of Venice' proved a more successful choice when the focus was on Shylock or a specific scene, rather than when a general debate about tragedy vs comedy was offered. Aspects of tragedy in 'The Winter's Tale' and 'Measure for Measure' proved fertile territory, as did exploration of tragic potential (or realisation) in some of the history plays. When centres extended the boundaries of their search into areas traditionally considered comic (e.g. 'Much Ado About Nothing') the tasks often proved problematic for students.

Elsewhere, Pinter, Beckett, Stoppard, Bennett and David Hare provided productive alternatives to Miller and Tennessee Williams, while Strindberg, Ibsen and Lorca were popular European dramatists. Classical tragedies also attracted much interest and generated some impressive work, although here, as with other texts in translation, it was at times noticeable how reluctant candidates were to explore dramatic form, structure and language.

Administration

In many cases the quality of administration from centres was excellent. It is difficult to over-emphasise the degree to which good administration can assist the moderating process.

It is thus worth repeating the following points:

- Centres should provide a 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.
- 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 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.
- 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.
- 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).
- The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15th (or January 10th 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 several 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. AO1 requires a degree of 'structured argument'. It is difficult to argue that work which clearly exceeds the word limits is 'well structured'.

Conclusion

LITB2 has begun remarkably well, thanks to the hard work and commitment of teachers and their students. Different moderators commented on 'the number of delightful assignments demonstrating very high order skills' and the evidence that 'candidates seemed to have enjoyed the challenge of writing about two plays in terms of dramatic tragedy'. It has been clear that centres have benefited from regular contact with their advisers and from the guidance offered at standardising and support meetings. We hope to build on this success in the coming series, the next being January 2010.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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