



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification B

LITB1 Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

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General

This January's examination again provided much evidence of the excellent work being done in centres. Examiners reported that they were able to give maximum marks to a number of scripts; this is testament to the hard work that teachers and students are clearly doing. There was also evidence, though, of candidates who were struggling with the demands of the paper and the types of questions being asked. It is clear, therefore, that in some centres there is still much work to be done.

In order to achieve high marks on this paper, candidates need to understand that this is a paper about narrative. The title of the unit is significant. 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. Teachers therefore need to teach aspects of narrative rather than everything about the four texts. Questions require candidates to write about 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.

It is worth repeating what the demands of the paper are. 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 discreet mark schemes and marks. In the first part of the question (Aa), students are expected to analyse the writer's methods in a particular part of the text and in 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 from previous examinations to familiarise themselves with the types of questions that can be asked.

Again, following the pattern established in previous examinations, 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, as for example there was with 'Tithonus' and 'The Convent Threshold'. 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 it is likely that 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. Independent thinking is rewarded.

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 regardless. There was evidence of this in both Question 19 and Question 20 when candidates claimed all sorts of things to be crises or repetitions. Crises were sometimes any event in the text or any event outside the text that came to mind; sometimes the crises cited were not even events but characters or themes. The examples chosen of repetitions were sometimes even harder to credit, for example Haddon's use of full stops and commas or the repetitions of Mr Bennet's name or the repeated getting into cars in *The Great Gatsby*.

The most popular texts were Hardy, Tennyson, *The Kite Runner*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *The Great Gatsby*. Interestingly some of the best answers were seen on the less popular *The God of Small Things* and *Great Expectations*. Many candidates struggled to write relevantly on *Dubliners*; they seemed to think that if they included the words 'epiphany' and 'paralysis' in the answer then they did not have to do anything else.

Section A

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 wrote about words 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.

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 the least successful responses focused on punctuation. Candidates can only write about some points and the points they choose should be well developed to reveal understanding. Candidates need to keep in mind it is *how* novelists and poets create not *what* they create.

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. Sometimes candidates included material that was more relevant to Aa. This was a pity as such material could have secured marks had it been included in Aa.

Particularly good responses were seen on: *The God of Small Things*, where there was much intelligent discussion Roy's uses of 'returning'; on the beautiful yet dangerous women in Keats and on Charlotte Lucas's role in *Pride and Prejudice*. Questions which were less well done were: 12b where the candidates did not write about 'texts' and instead wrote about science, literature and religion; question 15b where candidates ignored the task and wrote about the American Dream and question 4b where candidates did not construct an argument around whether Hardy's use of contrasts is the most interesting feature of his poetry. In this question candidates often did not choose their poems for discussion wisely; they selected poems that they knew rather than poems which are built on contrasts.

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 not applied to the question. This was particularly true of bolt on context which was largely irrelevant; it is surprising that descriptions of writers' lives and their political ideas continue to appear in rather random ways especially since centres have been warned against this in previous examination reports. 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 section was generally answered much better than in the summer and most candidates were able to write about some examples of crises or repetition. The best writing was by those candidates who wrote about crises and repetition in terms of narrative and how stories are shaped.

Question 19

This was the most popular question and responses were varied. When candidates wrote well they focused on the author at work in creating crises and how these crises might be interpreted. Particularly good answers were by candidates who wrote about how crises contributed to the subtext. Some candidates focused on the personal crises in characters' lives, as if they were real rather than the significance of the crises in narrative terms. In the weakest responses candidates did little more than identify crises or show how one crisis led to another. Some candidates confused crises with climaxes and this limited their responses.

Question 20

Many examiners reported that the candidates' spelling of the word 'repetition' was often inaccurate showing that candidates could not copy what was written on the examination paper. Weak candidates did themselves no favours by choosing lexical repetitions of little significance and with only tenuous relevance in the text. Candidates working at a lexical level often fared better on the poetry texts where they were more secure with patterns of repetition.

The best answers were achieved by candidates who wrote about how repetition is used by authors to structure their texts and open up meanings. Some excellent answers were seen especially in discussions of Auden, Coleridge, Rossetti, Roy and Dickens.

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 ways 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 demark 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

This is a paper based on narrative. It is challenging, it is rewarding and many candidates seem to enjoy what they are doing.

Many centres have understood and appreciated the philosophy behind the paper and in those centres where 'Aspects of Narrative' have been at the heart of teaching, candidates have been advantaged.

There was much encouraging work offered. The specification drew some lively and engaged responses from students and the work was a pleasure to mark.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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