



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification B

LITB2 Dramatic Genres

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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General

In many cases in January 2010 centres entered only small numbers of candidates. For this reason the report will be relatively short. Because of this comparative brevity, it is important that centres also revisit the report on the June 2009 examination and ensure that all those teaching the unit are familiar with its contents. The standardising materials issued in autumn 2009 are also of continued relevance. They should provide the basis for centres own assessments and internal standardisation in May 2010.

Even at this early stage, in the second year of LITB2, it is apparent that much has been achieved. Centres have clearly benefited from the advice and support offered through previous reports, standardising meetings and their allocated advisers. There was plenty of evidence in the January submission of candidates producing confident, innovative and independent work that was a credit to all concerned.

Assessment

As has been previously emphasised, the purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all centres and candidates. A number of centres' marks therefore required adjustment. A common reason for such adjustments is that candidates produced work which, in terms of the marks awarded by the centre, matched neither the assessment criteria nor the standards suggested by the autumn standardising materials. Some centres seemed very unwilling to use the bottom two mark bands, even when the teacher comment acknowledged that the candidate had offered only a perfunctory response to most of the Assessment Objectives. It must be stressed that all the mark bands reflect a balance of strengths and weaknesses and are not direct equivalents of grade boundaries.

Although some tolerance is allowed between the marks of centres and the marks of moderators, some marks need to be adjusted to do justice to those centres who have applied the criteria accurately.

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

Many candidates delivered fluent, well-structured work, sharply focused on the task. In such cases it was usually easy for the moderator to confirm the centre's mark. This was less often the case when there were significant weaknesses that the centre annotation and final comment did not seem to acknowledge. The opening paragraphs of some essays were only tangentially connected with the task. Such paragraphs tended to offer generalised definitions of tragedy or largely irrelevant biographical or historical material. More successful essays focused immediately on the text in terms of the given task and gave some indication of the way the essay might develop.

There was also evidence of very clumsy and unselective use of quotation and textual reference in general. Essays which drifted away from the text into areas of general theoretical or socio-historical speculation were often not very successful. Essays which exceeded the word count were often unhelpfully weighed down with such material.

The closing paragraphs of some essays were also ineffective. It was often the case that candidates wrote themselves towards an interesting perspective on the text that might have provided a more purposeful introduction. At other times the last paragraphs merely provided a rather laboured summary of what had gone before.

AO2

Many moderators reported this as a weak area, especially – interestingly – in responses to plays by dramatists other than Shakespeare. Often AO2 material was limited to comments on lexical features which did not offer the best insight into the methods of the dramatist. AO2 was often weak when candidates became excessively drawn into narrative or a treatment of the play that treated characters as real. Where candidates also explored elements of form and structure a much more impressive exploration of the text as a literary construct usually emerged.

AO3

The two strands of this Assessment Objective require candidates to connect texts through the concept of tragedy and to demonstrate understanding that texts can be read in different ways. In general responses to this Assessment Objective demonstrated a greater understanding of what was required. There were still, however, cases where candidates' essays were unnecessarily complicated by direct comparisons with other plays that were often superficial and unhelpful to the analysis of the central text. If the candidates are examining how a particular text explores the aspect of dramatic tragedy identified in the task then they are doing all that is required.

The second strand of this Assessment Objective requires candidates to show that they understand that at certain points in a text different interpretations are possible. This was often well demonstrated when debate arose from a close reading of the text and a clear individual response emerged. When candidates merely identified critical views it was hard to see that much real consideration of different interpretations was being offered. Little debate can emerge when candidates are given a task which requires them merely to describe how a character in the play behaves or the nature of a particular character's language.

AO4

There was evidence that this Assessment Objective was better understood than in previous submissions. Bolt-on context was less in evidence, although one moderator remarked how some candidates seemed to have been 'overwhelmed by social history'. More candidates also understood the need to look at the plays **as** plays, not as texts of some indeterminate kind. Some candidates limited their exploration of drama to asserting at intervals how an audience **would** have responded at the given point in the play, or claiming that at another given point the dramatist presented the character as showing this or that feeling without in any way explaining how this effect was achieved.

Tasks

Some general points here:

- Successful tasks will clearly address both elements of the phrase 'dramatic tragedy'
- The task needs to be focused closely enough to allow a close exploration of an aspect or section of the text within the 1500 word limit.
- Tasks need to offer candidates a genuine opportunity to come to their own interpretation of an aspect of the play. A range of tasks may assist this independence of response, but there is, of course, no requirement that every candidate must be given a separate task.
- When all the candidates submitted work on the same task, however, the result was often that their work revealed strikingly similar opinions about the play and even similar choices of illustrative materials.
- There is no guarantee that a task that has worked well for one cohort of candidates will always be successful. Centres are encouraged to continually review their task-setting.
- Many centres had clearly benefited from discussion with their advisers when wording their tasks.

Conventional Tasks

Most tasks offered candidates the opportunity to debate a reading of an element of dramatic tragedy. When there was even the hint of an opportunity to treat the characters as real, however, some candidates seized this opportunity with relish, and all sense of the play as a literary construct vanished. For this reason tasks which focused on a perceived aspect of personality (e.g. Hamlet's madness or Othello's jealousy) at times led the candidates into critical cul-de-sacs. Centres might consider widening their approaches to these very popular plays to explore such areas as the political dimensions of the tragedies, or the ways in which power operates within the texts. Here, as elsewhere, centres' increasing familiarity with the critical approaches suggested in LITB4 may offer new opportunities for debate and analysis.

Some centres chose to base their tasks around the application of Aristotelian ideas to their chosen text. While some terms from the 'Poetics' may generate an interesting debate in terms of what the candidate sees as their applicability to the play, in practice what was at times delivered was a very formulaic approach whereby evidence of 'hamartia', 'anagnorisis' etc was grimly ticked off. Some critics, of course, have taken issue with the very idea that Aristotle's critical views offer the most useful perspective whereby Shakespeare's tragedies can be explored.

Re-creative Tasks

This continues to be the less popular option, although it was interesting to note the number of occasions where candidates at all ability ranges performed more confidently and effectively through this approach than through the more traditional academic essay. Dramatic monologue continued to be the most popular form, although obituaries produced some interesting responses, as did various forms of official report. Many candidates found it easier to produce a genuinely individual reading of the play through the voice of a comparatively minor character (e.g. Mitch in 'Streetcar') rather than a central character like Iago or Willy Loman.

The commentaries worked best when they helped to make explicit what was implicit in the re-creative piece. This was particularly so when the candidate was able to show the significance of their choice of material and narrative perspective in terms of their reading of the play as a dramatic tragedy. Commentaries which offered little more than narrative, paraphrase or character study contributed little.

Texts

'Othello' and 'Death of a Salesman' continue to dominate submissions. While these two plays continue to engage the interest of candidates, this will no doubt continue. Some critics have argued that certain tragedies tend to have particular resonance for certain periods in history. It may well be that 'Othello', with its exploration of racial conflict and representation of gender has something special to say to the twenty-first century. It is also true to say, however, that certain areas of these two plays did not always produce very effective responses. Candidates were often drawn into a discussion of Iago's possible motives – or lack of them – and ended up doing little more than speculate about the theoretically 'real' feelings of a dramatic construct, or simply trawl through an account of his tactics. Some responses to the tragic world of Willy Loman found it very hard to escape the appeal of the American Dream and extended analyses of the flaws of 20th Century capitalism. Any sense of Miller's shaping role as a maker of the play tended to take a significantly second place.

It is also likely that as this unit progresses, a wider range of plays will attract centres' and candidates' interest. Interesting work was submitted in January on Titus Andronicus, Richard III

and Richard II from the Shakespearean canon, and on Edward Bond's 'Saved', 'Doctor Faustus', 'Look Back in Anger', 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' and 'Endgame' from elsewhere.

Administration

Some reminders:

- Please place the scripts in the order indicated on the Candidate Record Form.
- Treasury tags are the preferred way of securing scripts. Please do not use paper clips; the script may have to pass through many hands.
- All work should be accompanied by an accurate word count and a bibliography.
- The unit requires both teacher annotation in the body of the scripts and a summative comment indicating the relative strengths and weaknesses of the work. On some occasions a candidate's work attracted no critical comment whatsoever which made it more difficult for moderators to see how the centre had arrived at the given mark.
- Annotation which is confined to ticks or mere citing of the AOs is of little assistance in indicating the qualities of an individual script.

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 combined word count of the re-creative piece and the commentary. Quotations are included in the word count. It is expected that all work will be accompanied by an accurate word count.

The majority of centres had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits and the candidates' work benefited as a result. In some cases, however, assignments were submitted that were well over 1500 words in length. As stated earlier, the purpose of moderation is to produce parity for all candidates and centres. If some centres allow their candidates to use more than 1500 words, this is clearly unfair to those who follow the guidelines.

It should be made very clear that candidates who go over the word limit do themselves no favours. The best responses were secure in AO1, being concise and relevant. Essays which are clearly over 1500 words can hardly be judged to be 'well structured' in terms of the unit requirements. What tends to happen in these cases is that candidates write themselves **out** of a mark band.

Conclusion

Although reports of this kind inevitably spend much time indicating areas for possible improvement, it is very important to acknowledge what has been achieved. It is clear that centres have embraced the philosophy of LITB2 and, in the words of one moderator, 'most centres produced tasks which had engaged the candidates and allowed them to explore tragic drama with confidence and enthusiasm'. Moderators in general were impressed by the large number of candidates who had produced fluent, personal and interesting essays that delivered a sharp argument through the candidates' own reactions to the texts and issues around dramatic tragedy.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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