



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification B

LITB1 Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – June series

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Introduction

Summer 2010 completes the first two years of specification LITB, and so for the first time there are full reports on all four units, with each unit being taken by a large number of candidates.

It is important that as many teachers as possible read these reports, ideally as a complete set of four: even though an individual teacher may not have taught a specific unit, it is well worth knowing and understanding that for candidates the four units are connected in many ways.

This specification, when it was designed, had a number of overarching principles, based on a coherent set of views as to how English Literature can be taught and assessed. Like all specifications it draws on different ways of reading and how that reading can be assessed. As you read through these reports as a whole, a number of messages will be repeated; one, for example, is that we do not reward bolted on historical context; another is that we aim in nearly all tasks to encourage candidates to debate meanings.

As there are principles that run throughout the specification, then inevitably there are links across the units. For example: a close study of narrative in LITB1 will help candidates with texts in all other units; looking at tragedy as a genre in LITB2 has a direct link with genres in LITB3, but can be relevant in the other two units also. The theories looked at in the critical material of LITB4 can be applied to LITB3. The ways texts are connected in LITB1 is similar to the process of LITB3. The issues around categorising texts in LITB3 can help with direct comparison in LITB4.

So, we hope that you find these reports illuminating, and urge you to read them as a whole so that the common messages, which are ultimately the most important ones, are made clear.

General

This was the fourth session that LITB1 has been examined and more centres seem to be grasping the significance of the unit's title. Clearly much good work has been done on narrative and teachers need to be commended for their efforts.

The unit is demanding and at the same time rewarding. It is certainly much more challenging than GCSE which has not always prepared candidates well. In this unit candidates have to manage four texts, two poetry and two prose, write about them in three different ways and always bear in mind that there is an overarching concept of how stories are written and interpreted. This is a tall order. Yet, it needs to be said that if candidates grasp what is required in this unit, then they have grasped what is fundamental to A level study and the skills and knowledge gained here should serve them well in the other units.

Candidates who are successful in writing about Aspects of Narrative are those who know their texts and use them judiciously to focus on the questions. Time spent analysing the questions in all their details is time well spent. Helping candidates to unpick questions should be at the heart of teaching for the examination. When candidates do not perform well it is often because they have their own agendas and rarely address the questions being asked.

In Aa candidates are expected to write about how writers tell stories, in particular poems or parts of poems or parts of prose texts. To do this effectively, they need to have a clear sense of the story or part of the story being told. This knowledge will provide some shape and direction for answers. Candidates who begin by saying, 'In this chapter Fitzgerald uses a simile' are unlikely to progress very well whereas those who begin with: 'This chapter's main event is the death of the protagonist, told retrospectively by the self-conscious writer and narrator, Nick

Carraway' might fare better since they are immediately engaging with the hub of the story and the narrative voice which tells it.

In Ab candidates need to focus on meanings as set up in the questions. Those who do well think about different interpretations, write with a clear personal voice and construct a coherent argument. It is always pleasing when candidates are prepared to offer their own readings and write with confidence.

In Section B candidates are asked to write about an aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts. There is no demand to compare texts and many who do often find that the comparison gets in the way of the answer.

Choices of texts and questions - and their implications

When teachers are selecting texts and preparing candidates for this unit, they need to think about the whole paper and the implications their choices will have on their candidates. Most centres wisely seem to be preparing candidates for a choice in Section A (usually of two texts). Those centres who select a single text for Section A for all candidates do seem to put them in a straitjacket. A preselected single text is often over taught and often leads to formulaic answers. Candidates seem to be trying to remember what their teachers have told them rather than thinking about narrative in an independent way.

Whether or not the text for A has been predetermined, the choice made in A will have consequences for what candidates 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 candidates have been given a choice by their teachers and before they make a decision in the examination, they should look carefully at the questions in B to see what texts and what parts of texts can 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.

Knowledge of Texts

Although many candidates had excellent knowledge of their texts, it was noted by several examiners that candidates' knowledge was not always secure. There was much evidence of fundamental misreading, especially of the poetry texts, and several candidates struggled with basic plot details of the prose texts. More than a few did not seem to know that Gatsby is murdered by Wilson or that it is the Wedding Guest who leaves 'a sadder and a wiser man' and not the mariner. The most serious misreadings were seen in responses to Hardy. Many candidates seemed to think that *all* the poems are about Hardy's reflections on the death of Emma – even 'The Darkling Thrush' which was written twelve years earlier. There were also many candidates who had limited understanding of 'At Castle Boterel'.

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*. Popularity, however, does not equate to strong responses. Some of the best answers were seen to questions on *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, *Enduring Love* and *The God of Small Things*. *Dubliners* caused difficulties for

many candidates just as it has done in previous sessions. This is because many candidates can think of nothing to say about the stories other than that they contain 'epiphanies'.

Section A

The questions in this section were 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.

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, candidates 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. Writing about punctuation (more prolific this year than last) is not a very helpful way to explore narrative. Candidates need to think about the story each chapter or poem has to tell and then write about some specific methods which are most interesting to write about in the half an hour that is recommended. Candidates can only write about some points but the points they choose should be well developed to reveal understanding; points should then be supported by close textual reference. Very little credit can be given for feature spotting. It is always more relevant to write about narrative structures and voices than single words which are then explained. Candidates need to keep in mind it is *how* novelists and poets create not *what* they create.

The question which caused some candidates particular problems this summer was 7a on Tennyson. Many candidates did not read this question properly and wrote about the whole of 'The Lady of Shalott' without focusing specifically on Part 4. Sometimes there was no reference to Part 4 at all and such answers received little credit.

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 candidates made good use of work done on tragedy and tragic heroes in Unit 2. Other particularly good responses were seen on Question 3 (Coleridge), Question 5 (Keats) and Question 17 (Austen).

Less successful answers were seen on Hardy, Rossetti, Tennyson and Hosseini. The problems with many answers were a result of not reading the questions carefully and including contextual material that was simply irrelevant. Examiners saw much contextual speculation on Rossetti's sexuality and relationships and it was noted that many candidates writing on Tennyson struggled to identify classical and medieval settings, often having hazy notions of both. Those

candidates who did not score good marks in their answers on *The Kite Runner* often failed to address the phrase 'more convincingly portrayed', and instead wrote about Afghan culture, the status of women or whether men are morally superior or more prominent than women. *Dubliners* was answered by several candidates but many ignored 'corruption and decay' or saw the terms as synonyms. Unfortunately many candidates wrote about the stories as if they were all the same.

In teaching for section Ab, centres need to encourage candidates to think and argue in fresh ways. Much pre-learnt unapplied material was in evidence in the examination papers. 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 questions. 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 seemed the most challenging for candidates mainly because the candidates had to write about either narrators or endings across three texts. Some candidates did not read the questions carefully enough here and there were rubric infringements. 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, perhaps misdirected by their teachers, sought to make links and comparisons between texts taking up valuable time. Teachers also need to help candidates understand what is meant by 'significance', the invitation in both Question 19 and Question 20 to write about meanings or what is signified.

Question 19

This question asked candidates to write about the 'significance' of the ways writers end their narratives. Many candidates took this to mean the literal end of the text whereas some looked at the endings of story threads wherever they occur in the texts. Where candidates were thinking about the significance of these endings some intelligent work was produced, especially when chronology was being discussed. The weakest responses were those which simply recounted plot details.

Question 20

This question asked candidates to write about the significance of narrators. Some candidates confused narrators and writers, some confused narrators and characters and some confused narrators and voices, claiming that anyone who speaks in a text is a narrator. Clearly work needs to be done in helping candidates to think about the relationship between the author, the narrator and the story being told. Candidates need to see that writers have made careful choices in selecting their narrators who will tell their stories. It is also important that candidates understand that characters and narrators are not real and that both are constructed..

Particular problems were seen when candidates were writing about Nick Carraway, Joe Rose and the Ancient Mariner, when candidates could not distinguish between character and narrator. Although many candidates began by saying first person narrators are used, the answer soon became a character study or description with a good sprinkling of 'unreliable' attached without really showing what 'unreliable' means. In the Hardy question, there was little sense of Hardy constructing himself, setting up a distinct narratorial position.

There were also problems when dealing with third person narrators. Too often candidates claimed that the narrator was the writer. There was little awareness of when narrators use characters as focalises or of when narrators are detached. When candidates did have an

understanding of narrators and their 'significance' in the story telling process, then answers were quite often superb.

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 still do not know how to demarcate titles of texts; this is something that could be usefully taught. Candidates also need to be helped to construct coherent arguments which are focused. Many candidates waste time writing empty introductions and pointlessly repetitive conclusions. Time would be better spent focusing sharply from the start and writing new points at the end rather than restating old ones.

There were also several issues regarding the use of quotations. The best answers contained carefully integrated quotations that were well chosen. Weak answers often had randomly placed quotations which bore no relation to the grammatical structure of the sentence. When candidates were writing fluently and accurately their writing was often a pleasure to read.

Conclusion

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. Such good practice needs to continue.

Centres are thanked for preparing so thoroughly their candidates to work with the new numbering system and the new style answer book. The majority of candidates responded well to the changes to the June 2010 exams, but where difficulties were experienced, centres are asked to draw candidates' attention to the comprehensive range of guidance material that is available on this subject in order that they are confident about what is required of them in future examinations. Support available on this issue includes Guides for teachers and candidates, and specimen question papers and mark schemes showing the changes in action. All documents published in support of the changes to exams can be accessed via notices published on all qualification homepages, all subject notice boards, and on the parent and student area of the web.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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