



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
January 2011**

**English Literature B**

**LITB2**

**(Specification 2745)**

**Unit 2: Dramatic Genres**

***Report on the Examination***

---

Further copies of this Report on **the Examination** are available from: [aqa.org.uk](http://aqa.org.uk)

Copyright © 2011 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

**Copyright**

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).  
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

## **Introduction**

This is the third year of LITB2 and it is clear that much has been achieved during that time. Teachers and candidates are to be congratulated on their hard and effective work. Several moderators commented on the genuinely individual and challenging work that was produced by the best candidates in this January submission.

Nevertheless, some problems continue to arise and centres are encouraged to continue to maintain contact with their coursework advisers. The standardising materials issued in autumn 2010 are also of continued relevance, and these should be used to establish the standards on which centres' assessments are based in May 2011.

## **Assessment**

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. 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.

## **Unit 2 and the Specification as a whole**

It has been frequently stressed in previous reports, in standardising meetings and in teacher support meetings, that this specification has a number of overarching principles. There are several ways in which all four units within the specification link together. It has become increasingly clear that candidates who are well prepared for this unit are developing skills which should benefit them in terms of the specification as a whole.

This is significantly the case in relation to the Assessment Objectives. In all four units AO1 encourages the production of well structured and coherent arguments, sharply focused on the given task. This has significant teaching implications, and it was disappointing to note the times when centres seemed to have paid little attention to significant technical weaknesses when arriving at their final coursework mark. Candidates who produced tightly constructed and consistently relevant responses were developing skills that are also rewarded in externally examined papers.

In some respects the response shown to AO2 indicated a marked improvement on earlier submissions. Where AO2 was a weaker area the cause was often an excessive concentration on language features at the expense of comment on form and language. AO2 was also understandably weak when the candidates treated the characters in a play as real people rather than as literary constructs. Character-based tasks were often particularly problematic in this respect. Unit 1 focuses on the methods that authors use to shape their narratives, and it is disappointing when this understanding is less evident in the other AS unit.

All the units in the specification encourage candidates to debate readings of texts. This is addressed in the second strand of AO3. The coursework of weaker candidates merely identified critical interpretations; those operating at the higher band levels incorporated evaluation of these interpretations into their wider explorations of the texts. Little debate emerged when candidates were invited to chart the decline of a character during a play or describe the operation of a particular theme. The simple injunction to consider 'how the play might be viewed by an audience' was also of little help to candidates.

The first strand of AO3 requires candidates to connect texts through the generic context of tragedy. There were fewer examples in this submission of those largely irrelevant cross-references to other plays that add little or nothing to the argument. There were, however, plenty of examples of work where an undue reliance on Aristotle got in the way of an understanding of the text. Essays which began with a summary of the main ideas from 'On the Art of Poetry' tended to take a long time to focus on the given task. Terms such as 'peripeteia' and 'catharsis', when imperfectly understood, often distracted candidates from looking at more relevant tragic elements of the play. One moderator commented on the deleterious effect of the tendency to 'squeeze Shakespearean and modern tragedy through a crude Aristotelian Play-doh mould'. The point is that Aristotle does not have to provide the only point of reference when considering the nature of dramatic tragedy. Assessing the merits of a play as a tragedy by judging how closely it conforms to Aristotelian precepts is likely to prove a largely fruitless exercise.

In general candidates seemed to have understood that contextual references need to be clearly integrated into the argument. There were relatively few examples of clumsily bolted-on chunks of history or sweeping generalisations about social attitudes in Elizabethan England. The first strand of AO4 contextualises tragedy as a dramatic genre. Most candidates were able to look at the plays as plays, rather than as some indeterminate form of narrative.

### **Texts**

Centres are clearly continuing to extend the range of plays studied for this unit. It should be stressed that the continuing popularity of *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman* in no way reduces their value as text choices. Much excellent work was submitted on both plays, often when candidates resisted the seductive appeal of Iago's 'true' motives or Willy Loman's capitulation to the American Dream.

*Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* proved increasingly popular. Some candidates turned to what are normally labelled 'histories' (e.g. *Richard II*, *Richard III*) to explore the elements of tragedy within these plays. Jacobean dramatists such as Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*) and Middleton (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Changeling*) made a number of appearances, as did Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*.

Examples of more modern dramatic tragedies studied for this January submission included Edward Bond's *Saved* and *Lear*, Friel's *Translations*, Bennett's *Talking Heads*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and Buchner's *Danton's Death*. Ibsen, Strindberg and Beckett also provided interesting alternatives to Miller and Williams.

The appropriateness of any text cannot be divorced from the accompanying task. In this context it is pleasing to see that centres are continuing to make use of their coursework advisers and discussions at standardising meetings.

### **Tasks and Task Setting**

The title of this unit is 'Dramatic Genres'. A successful task, therefore, is likely to address both parts of this generic term. The focus needs to be on the ways in which an individual play can be seen to explore an aspect of dramatic tragedy.

Some further general points:

- The set task needs to be sufficiently focused to make possible 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 deliver their own interpretation of an aspect of the play.

- A range of tasks may assist this independence of response, but there is no requirement that every candidate must be given a separate task.
- If task choice or creation is left to the candidate, it is still the responsibility of the centre to ensure that the task is appropriate.
- There is no guarantee that a task which has worked well for one cohort of candidates will always be successful. Centres are encouraged to continually review their task-setting.

### **Conventional Responses**

Many tasks continue to be focused on a particular trait of character, such as Othello's jealousy, Hamlet's indecisiveness, or Macbeth's ambition. While such an approach allowed candidates to engage with the narrative of the play, it often also led them away from dramatic tragedy and towards a treatment of the characters as real people. AO2 was often a casualty here. Equally problematic were tasks which invited the candidates to describe how Othello was presented, how he changed during the course of the play, or even how effectively Shakespeare had presented his tragic protagonist. Such tasks either precluded debate or invited judgements that asked a lot of AS candidates. While emotions such as jealousy may well be seen as a significant factor within the world of a play, too many tasks did little more than ask candidates to describe the incidence of a theme.

The apportioning of 'blame' to a particular character did not often produce a very effective response, and tended to lead candidates away from the idea of character as a literary creation. At times candidates were seduced into speculation about what might have happened had the character in question acted differently.

Many candidates found other ways of exploring how tragedy operated within the world of the play. Some saw the central character as significantly influenced by the culture of his or her society as presented on stage. Others debated the degree to which a modern audience was able to see the tragic hero as genuinely heroic or rather as a representation of an outmoded set of principles. Rather than simply describing the ways in which a character evinced a particular emotion, some tasks offered the opportunity to consider whether that emotion was presented as a weakness or a strength (or, of course, both).

### **Re-creative Responses**

The re-creative response proved to be a more popular choice than was the case a year ago. In several cases, every candidate in the centre submitted a re-creative response. In some portfolios, where the re-creative piece was the stronger of the two, it had clearly enabled the candidate to engage more confidently with the nature of the tragedy within the play. It needs to be re-emphasised that the re-creative approach must allow the candidate to offer a reading of the play as a dramatic tragedy. To give a voice to a character from the play merely because they have interesting facets of personality is not enough.

Candidates who selected the central character in the play to deliver a dramatic monologue often struggled to do much more than replicate the attitudes and opinions articulated by that character in the base text. Other, less dominant, voices at times offered more productive perspectives. Mitch or Stella sometimes proved more effective focalizers than Blanche or Stanley; Bianca or Roderigo than Othello or Iago; Goneril than Lear.

Commentaries, as usual, worked best when they clearly connected the re-creative piece to the base text. Where the re-creative piece may address the Assessment Objectives implicitly, the commentary needs to do so more explicitly. In this context AO1 should be seen as focusing on the candidate's own writing; AO2, especially at the higher mark band levels, on the language, form and structure of the base text. Candidates also need to comment on

the significance of their choices in constructing their re-creative response, perhaps justifying their choice of narrative voice and form and debating the reading of the play offered through this process.

Commentaries which offered a paraphrase of the material of the re-creative piece achieved little, nor did those which were little more than character studies. Extended stylistic analyses of the candidate's own writing methods did not effectively address AO2.

While there is no recommended proportionate relation between the length of the re-creative piece and the commentary, most candidates offered commentaries which were at least as long as the re-creative piece. It should be stressed that the combined length of both needs to be within the 1500 word limit. It should also be stressed that the re-creative approach also requires a clear title to the work. 'Iago' and 'Lady Macbeth' are not very informative headings.

### **Administration**

Most centres' administration was efficient, and where this was the case the moderation process was significantly assisted. Because administrative procedures are so important, it is worth repeating the following points:

- Centres should provide 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. The final audience for the work may be the moderator, so comments need to be shaped with that in mind.
- 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.
- 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.
- It is very helpful if the two pieces are arranged in the same order as on the cover sheet (i.e. 'Shakespeare' first)
- 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, especially with re-creative responses.
- 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). Some candidates recorded word counts which were considerable, even ridiculous, underestimates.
- If the centre is submitting work by 20 or fewer candidates, all the work should be sent to the moderator with the centre marks.
- The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always January 10<sup>th</sup> (or May 15<sup>th</sup> for the May 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 some cases this January 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 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. 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.

### **Conclusion**

Moderators have commented favourably on the range of interesting and innovative work that they have seen this January. This is a deserved tribute to the hard work of teachers and candidates. Judging by comments received during the autumn standardising meetings, it seems that centres and candidates have appreciated the teaching and learning opportunities offered by this unit. Although examination reports of this kind inevitably spend time identifying areas for improvement, it is important to acknowledge how much has been achieved.

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

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