



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

**English Literature B**

**LITB1**

**(Specification 2745)**

**Unit 1: Aspects of Narrative**

***Report on the Examination***

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## Introductory Comments

More and more centres seem to be grasping the intellectual demands of narratology that lie at the heart of this unit entitled 'Aspects of Narrative'. A number of scripts received maximum marks suggesting that some candidates knew exactly what to do. Central to this paper are the stories writers tell, how those stories are told and how readers find meanings in them. Teachers who are first and foremost teaching aspects of narrative across four texts and not four texts for their own sakes are serving their candidates very well.

For centres new to the specification or those who are new to reading reports, it is worth repeating what the expectations of the paper are. Section A of the paper requires students to concentrate on a single author. The questions on each text have two parts, with some link between them, and candidates should write on this text for one hour; the two parts have discrete mark schemes and marks. In the first part of the question (the odd numbered questions), students are expected to analyse the writers' narrative methods in a particular part of the text and in the even numbered questions candidates are required to enter into a debate about critical interpretation on the work of the same author, as set up in the question.

In Section B candidates are asked to write about a particular aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts. There is no specific 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 focused sharply on the tasks, performed very well. The need to know texts well cannot be overstated. Some candidates only seemed to know the opening chapters of novels and one or two of the poems in the poetry texts. As a result their choices were restricted and material was often forced into answers when other sections of texts would have worked better. Some valuable teaching can be done by centres in helping candidates to make good choices but these choices can only be made when candidates have complete texts to choose from.

It is advisable that when preparing for the exam that teachers and candidates read all the questions from previous examinations to familiarise themselves with the types of questions that can be asked. Candidates then need to be encouraged to think independently around questions, choose questions which best suit them and have the confidence to argue a case with a clear personal voice. It was very disappointing to see all candidates from some centres answering the same question for Section A and using the same parts of texts in their arguments for both the odd numbered questions and Section B. When this happened, very rarely was there genuine engagement. Candidates seemed to be trying to include ideas and material that had been received rather than thinking freshly and arguing with an independent voice. This was particularly apparent in Question 30 when many candidates were unable to write about their views on the role of Nick Carraway as a narrator and instead wrote about either his character or anything they knew about Nick's unreliability, seemingly because they had been directed to think about this during their course.

It was also clear that in several cases, candidates did not always understand what they were writing about. Terms were often thrust into answers gratuitously. In one answer intradiegetic narrator, homodiegetic narrator, participant narrator and unreliable narrator all appeared in the same opening sentence and there was no development to show understanding. Candidates need to be taught to write confidently about what they understand. Independent thinking is valued by examiners and rewarded.

Candidates also need to read and think about the whole of the paper before answering any question. The choice they make in Section A will have an impact on what they do in Section

B. 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 and an important choice therefore has to be made.

## Section A

### The odd numbered questions

The questions in this section have a very specific focus. They are about how stories are told and they require candidates to write about the methods authors use in their story telling. The questions are fundamentally different from traditional critical analysis type questions and often when candidates do not perform as well as centres expect, it is because they do not pin down the story that is being told in the poem or the section of the prose text that is specified. In many cases candidates simply produced commentaries on poems pointing out poetic features. The best answers were produced by candidates who wrote confidently about method in relation to the overarching story. Often these candidates either briefly summarised the story discussing authorial methods in the light of it or the story was integrated into comments about structure, voice, form and language. When this happened the candidates had clearly embraced all key parts of the question, for example: ‘**How** does McEwan tell the **story** in Chapter 22?’ or ‘Write about the **ways** Hosseini tells the **story** in Chapter 2. An example from one candidate’s opening paragraph illustrates well what can be done in a succinct way:

‘Hosseini uses a retrospective, intradiegetic narrator, Amir to tell the story within Chapter 2. Following on from the enigmatic, foreshadowing chapter 1, this chapter is the first time we hear of Amir and Hassan’s childhood, showing us that the handling of time here has been taken back many years from June 2001. Amir tells us in the first person of their friendship, using imagery of nature and childhood to create a melancholic tone: ‘We would sit across from each other on a pair of high branches, naked feet dangling’. This reflects the innocence of the pair, free from the worldly conflicts that surrounded them.’

When candidates did not perform well they often wrote about aspects of method with little sense of the story and such answers were rather wooden and disjointed. Although some credit was given for points made, candidates who produced answers like this very rarely received marks in the top bands. Answers which began with pathetic fallacy, an example of alliteration, themes and ideas or characters often lacked sharp focus. Some centres still seem to be teaching themes and characters for this section. Also many candidates find it very hard to write about figurative language and rhyme and rhythm in meaningful ways that connect to the stories; some useful work can be done on this section by helping candidates to put the story in a central position in the answer.

There was no discernible difference in performance between those candidates who responded to the poetry tasks and those who responded to the prose but clearly there are different ways of approaching poetry and prose narrative. Many centres seem to understand this. Very good answers were seen on all questions but some candidates struggled to unravel the rather odd story being told in Auden’s ‘1<sup>st</sup> September 1939’ and the more complicated story of ‘Your Last Drive’. Indeed many candidates got into a muddle with this poem because they thought that Hardy was with his wife on her last journey, some thinking that they were in a car on a motorway and that Emma died in a car crash. Once the story of the poem, chapter, short story or section of text has been established, it is best for candidates to focus on the larger features of narrative like voice or structure rather than discussing the effects of individual words. Answers that began with comments on

similes were rarely as strong as those which teased out the chronology of the story or the way the story is built. This is not to say that lexical analysis has no value but some candidates only wrote about language issues and such answers were limited. Some favourite terms used this session which caused some problems for candidates were ‘unreliable narrator’, ‘foreshadowing’ and ‘symbolism’. Many candidates get so caught up in writing about ‘unreliable narrators’ in *The Great Gatsby* and *Enduring Love* or indeed in any first person narrative that they are unable to write about anything else. There was also a common misconception in the writing of some candidates that there is a **true** story that could have been told. Candidates seem not to realise that truth of this kind would itself be fictional. Some candidates even questioned the authors’ accuracy in conveying events that they believed actually happened in some real time. Clearly, the words ‘real’ and ‘true’ are best avoided when writing about fiction. Often the unreliability of narrators was overstated anyway or not well understood.

Similar problems were noted with ‘foreshadowing’ and ‘symbolism’. Some candidates claimed that everything is ‘foreshadowed’ by something else and almost anything or any character was said to be a symbol of something or other. In such cases, understanding was very rarely shown. It would be helpful if candidates fully understood the meanings of such terms.

### **The even numbered questions**

Answers in this section require argument, a key strand of AO1. All questions set up debates and the candidates who write the best answers have clear independent voices and are not just trying to remember what has been said in class or trying to reshape the question that was set in their mock exams. This question requires candidates to think. The best answers were seen by candidates who were clearly thinking about the text in relation to the question and often challenged the premises set up.

There is also an expectation that since this is an open book examination, that the text is well used to support the arguments the candidates posit. Good answers were seen on all questions but some particularly impressive ones were seen on the extent to which *Small Island* can be labelled a love story, whether Jed Parry is anything other than terrifying and Mr Collins’s role in *Pride and Prejudice*. Candidates who did not read the questions carefully, or who tried to subvert them, often struggled. This happened in the Browning question when candidates chose not to write about women revealing men but men in general. The choice of poem here was often an issue. Clearly good poems to use were ‘My Last Duchess’, ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ and ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’. It was hard to see why candidates chose to use ‘The Patriot’ other than they did not know any other poem. Some candidates did not use ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ which was strange given that they had written about it in Question 3. It needs to be restated here that there is always a connection between the even and odd numbered questions and this is to help candidates. The same text can be used since it will be written about in different ways.

Some excellent work was seen on ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ where candidates wrote about the speaker’s objectification of women and the manner in which women are used to reflect the corruption of men within the church. The Coleridge question was popular but not all words of the question were addressed. Some candidates simply said the poem is baffling and confusing because they did not understand it. Those candidates who performed well wrote about the mystifying presence of the supernatural elements, the voices (picked up from Part 6 – Question 5), the odd sequencing of events and the archaic language. Those who challenged the task focused on the simple and demystifying moral at the end and the poem as religious allegory.

In the Hardy question, although there were some good answers, it was surprising that many candidates did not identify specific places in the poetry and instead wrote about settings. This was especially disappointing in the light of January’s Question 38 which was also about places and in the report of January much was said about candidates needing to write about specific places and not settings. In this session’s Hardy question candidates were also often

hampered by the choices they made. Good choices were ‘Your Last Drive’, ‘At Castle Boterel’ and ‘At an Inn’ where places are central to the stories. Many candidates struggled when they used ‘The Darkling Thrush’ and ‘Neutral Tones’. This is not to say that these poems could not be successfully used but candidates would have needed to focus on the outdoor landscape, the edge of the coppice in ‘The Darkling Thrush’ and the pond in ‘Neutral Tones’ and then teased out their significance to the stories. Sadly, candidates often just wrote anything about the poems without focusing on the significance of the places. Places needed to be central to the discussion. It was also noted that many candidates mistakenly thought that both of these poems were about Hardy’s relationship with Emma.

In Question 10 the focus was on settings, but here in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’. Candidates performed well when they wrote about place settings and time and mood. In the response to Rossetti, candidates had some difficulty pinning down ‘sadness’. Those who placed it at the heart of their answers did well; some argued convincingly that some female characters managed a kind of triumph and fulfilment rather than experiencing sadness. A similar word that candidates often struggled with was ‘moving’ in *The Kite Runner*. Several did not seem to know what the word meant. Some focused only on the childhood moments that could be read as moving and so were not fully able to debate the question. For some the response simply became a list of moments that might be seen as moving. Specific support was not very secure other than when candidates talked about chapter 2 or Hassan’s rape (which almost all did, often exclusively).

Examiners reported seeing few responses to *Birdsong*, *The God of Small Things* and *Great Expectations* which was a pity; those which were seen were often good.

## Section B

In this section candidates had to manage the texts of three writers across an aspect of narrative, here either **narrative gaps** or **descriptive language**. As with Section A’s even numbered questions, candidates needed to have a clear sense of the stories where **gaps** play a part and the stories in which **descriptive language** opens up meanings. There were some excellent answers on both questions which suggests that centres are preparing their candidates well. Preparing candidates well, of course, means teaching them how to choose judiciously and to write about the prescribed narrative focus (gaps or descriptive language) in terms of the story. The question on gaps was less popular than that on descriptive language.

### Question 37

Narrative gaps or untold stories are a key aspect of narratology yet many candidates did not know what a gap is. This is strange given the centrality of gaps in the re-creative coursework option in Dramatic Genres.

When candidates did understand what was meant by a gap some excellent answers were seen. Many candidates seemed to grow in confidence during their writing and seemed to really enjoy thinking about the significance of the stories that are untold. Much good discussion arose from consideration of why Coleridge does not reveal why the mariner shoots the albatross, why Austen does not say how Lady Catherine knows Darcy has proposed to Elizabeth, why Roy leaves untold what happens to Rahel and Estha in the 1992 story, why ‘Jessie Cameron’ ends in uncertainty and why the encounter between the knight and the belle dame is shrouded in mystery. Some exceptional answers were seen on the lack of voice of the lady in ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and the fact that Penelope’s story is not revealed in ‘Ulysses’.

For some candidates the choice of text here was unhelpful and as a result weaker candidates tried to shoe horn what they had learnt about another aspect of narrative (most notably the unreliable narrator) into the question and they did not link this clearly to the task.

### Question 38

Although this was much more popular, it was not the better answered question. Several candidates did not know what descriptive language is and wrote about any language, for example ‘She said “I am weary, weary”’. Some candidates just wrote about isolated words and some wrote about descriptive language in an abstract way without citing any examples at all. In such cases it was impossible to engage with ‘significance’. When the question was answered well, candidates had a good sense of the overarching story and how specific examples of descriptive language opened up meanings. The most able also made very insightful connections to perspective, settings, characterisation and aspects of form and genre. Some candidates chose texts or sections of texts and said there is no descriptive language used by the writer which was clearly an unproductive way to approach the question. An example of a paragraph from one candidate’s work can show what could be done with this question:

‘Descriptive language is also important in the setting of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. The ‘green’ icecaps and the supernatural, descriptive imagery of the ‘tyrannous storm blast’, engage the reader and alter the tone and genre of the text to that of a thrilling adventure. This adds to the tension, but through the description of the setting where ‘the Bloody sun’, the ‘hot and copper sky’ and the ‘slimy things’ different interpretations of the text can be made. Written in the Romantic period, such imagery may have been perceived as supernatural and perhaps a warning against discovery and the perils of exploration.’

When candidates performed well they chose telling examples of descriptive language, like the description of Gatsby’s parties or the description of the Valley of the Ashes, the opening paragraphs of *The God of Small Things* which establish the novel’s setting, the description of the eccentric clothing and behaviour of the Pied Piper and the exotic description of the island of ‘the mild-eyed melancholy lotos eaters’.

### AO1

As has been pointed out in previous reports, how candidates themselves write about literature is an important factor in how well they perform in terms of marks. AO1 is explicitly tested in Section A (the even numbered questions) and in B, though as is stated on the front of the examination paper, candidates are expected to ‘use good English’, ‘organise information clearly’ and ‘use specialist vocabulary where appropriate’ in all their answers. AO1 is also about candidates having a tight focus on tasks and being able to structure coherent arguments. Teachers need to help candidates to write and not just to read. Several candidates wrote in a colloquial way and had scant regard for punctuation or paragraphing. Having said this, there was evidence of some very sophisticated writing and this made answers a pleasure to read.

### Conclusion

This is very much a skills based paper. 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’ is at the heart of teaching, candidates have been advantaged.

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