



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

English Literature B

LITB2

(Specification 2745)

Unit 2: Dramatic Genres

Report on the Examination

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General Comments

Summer 2011 marks the end of the third year of LITB2, and teachers and candidates can be suitably encouraged by the high quality of much of the work that was submitted this summer. One moderator commented that he found the moderating process ‘an intellectually stimulating experience’, and the excellence of the work produced by the best candidates continues to be a source of great satisfaction.

While such evidence of success is rightly to be celebrated, parts of this report will revisit problematic areas where weaknesses of approach continue to hamper candidates’ progress. The title of the unit is ‘Dramatic Genres’, and the implication of this is that the form of drama will be the central focus of the candidates’ attention, but that these drama texts will be analysed through the lens of a given sub-genre. For the last three years this sub-genre has been tragedy, and this will continue to be the case in 2012. From January 2013, however, comedy will replace tragedy, and centres will need to reshape their teaching to accommodate this change.

In many ways this change of genre should prove less problematic than might be imagined. It is clear that centres have become increasingly confident in their explorations of aspects of genre, perhaps as a result of their further experience within Unit 3, and have been able to apply this understanding to a study of dramatic texts. This unit encourages the study of genre as a means of facilitating different readings of a drama text within a wider sense of what possibilities and perspectives a particular genre allows. These readings will be closely linked to an exploration of the different dramatic methods that individual playwrights employ. Thus, many of the principles and practices that applied to the study of dramatic tragedy should also be applicable to the study of comedy.

Assessment

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all centres and all candidates. For this reason the marks of a number of centres required adjustment. Mostly these adjustments were relatively minor. Such adjustments were required because 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. It was, however, pleasing to note those occasions when centres made reference to the standardising materials to substantiate their judgements about a particular script.

The Assessment Objectives

All of the four Assessment Objectives are equally weighted in this unit. Where marks were adjusted there had often been a significant proportionate weakness in one of the four areas.

AO1

AO1 encourages the production of well structured and coherent arguments, sharply focused on the given task. Candidates who produced tightly constructed and consistently relevant responses were developing skills that are also significantly rewarded in externally examined papers. Essays which strayed significantly over the word limits could hardly be seen as well structured within the terms of this unit.

Accurate expression is expected at the higher levels, 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. Although some spelling errors may be expected to occur in the work of even the best candidates, it was disturbing to see how often Aristotelian terms or the names of central characters within the play were misspelt.

The appropriate selection and use of quotation is another coursework skill which is also expected in external examination units. Quotations in this summer's submission were often too long, inappropriate or even strikingly inaccurate. It should be emphasised that the use of quotation in itself is not evidence of a response to AO2, as some centres seemed to believe. The best use of quotation is when it is sharply focused and clearly in service of the argument.

AO2

There was much evidence this summer of improved understanding of this Assessment Objective, perhaps because of increasing familiarity with the ideas about narrative which are central to Unit 1. Where AO2 was a weaker area the cause was often excessive concentration on language features at the expense of consideration of form and structure. It should be emphasised that comment on aspects of language, form and structure needs to be integrated into the argument and relevant to the task. Ideas about structure, for instance, are often best linked to elements of genre, the question of why tragic things happen in the play where they do.

AO3

The first strand of AO3 requires candidates to connect texts through the generic concept of tragedy. This summer there were fewer examples of the irrelevant cross-references to other plays that add little or nothing to the argument. There were still, however, many occasions when an undue reliance on Aristotle got in the way of an effective reading of the text. Essays which began with an extended survey of the tenets of Aristotelian theory tended to take a long time to focus on the text and the task. Terms such as 'anagnorisis' and 'catharsis', when imperfectly understood, tended to actually get in the way of a more meaningful interpretation of the significant tragic elements of a play. Assessing the merits of a play by judging how closely it conformed to Aristotelian precepts usually proved a largely futile exercise.

All the units in this specification encourage candidates to debate readings of texts. This is addressed in the second strand of AO3. The implications of this strand need to be carefully considered when constructing tasks. Little debate emerged when candidates were invited to describe the operation of a particular theme or to chart the decline and fall of a particular character. The additional injunction to consider 'how the play might be viewed by an audience' was of little help to candidates. Too many candidates, in fact, seemed to see an audience as a homogeneous group with one unvarying response to the play.

AO4

The first strand of AO4 requires candidates to consider the craft of the playwright. Most candidates recognised the need to look at plays as plays rather than as some indeterminate form of narrative.

There was also less evidence this summer of the semi-relevant, bolted-on contextual material that in the past has impeded close analysis of the texts. There were still examples of wild generalisations about the apparently uniform Elizabethan or Jacobean view of gender, race and royalty, but some sensibly cautious distinctions were also made between contexts of production and reception. References to productions of the plays worked well when in support of a reading of the play based on close textual analysis. They were less successful when overly descriptive of what had been seen on stage in terms of costume, lighting or gesture.

Texts

Centres are clearly continuing to extend the range of plays studied for this unit. *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman* continue to dominate, for understandable reasons, although *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* have significantly increased in popularity.

Some candidates wrote interestingly about the tragic elements in what are normally labelled 'histories'. *Richard II* and *III* generated some challenging responses, as did the Roman plays, especially *Antony and Cleopatra*. Plays which straddle the boundary between tragedy and comedy such as *The Winter's Tale*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice* also offered the opportunity to examine tragic elements within the text.

Jacobean dramatists such as Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*), Ford (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*) and Middleton (*The Changeling* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*) made some effective entrances. Many candidates found interesting things to say about classical tragedies. *Oedipus* was popular, as were both versions (Sophocles and Anouilh) of *Antigone*.

Examples of more modern dramatic tragedies studied for this unit included Edward Bond's *Saved and Lear*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* and Friel's *Translations*. *The Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Father* provided interesting alternatives to Williams and Miller.

Tasks

The appropriateness of any text cannot be divorced from the accompanying task. It is what is done with the text that matters. Moderators reported few instances of wholly inappropriate tasks this summer. There was much evidence that centres had made productive use of their advisers when setting tasks.

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. The task 'Is Hamlet a tragic hero?' is both a rather self-evident proposition and almost impossible to debate effectively in the space permitted.
- Tasks need to offer candidates a genuine opportunity to deliver their own interpretation of an aspect of the play
- The tasks need to focus on what can generally be agreed to be an aspect of tragedy. Some candidates saw tragedy as signifying little more than a rather general sense of sadness.
- A range of tasks may assist independence of response, but there is no requirement that every candidate must be given a separate task. Some centres helpfully provided a list of all the tasks offered to the candidates.
- If task choice or creation is left to the candidate, it is still the responsibility of the centre to validate the task and ensure that it 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.
- Tasks which appear in standardising materials are not necessarily to be seen as exemplars. Centres must make their own judgements as to whether they will suit the needs of their candidates.

Conventional Responses

Many tasks continue to be focused on a particular character trait, such as Othello's jealousy, Hamlet's indecisiveness, or Macbeth's ambition. Responses to these tasks tended to rely excessively on narrative and drift towards the treatment of the characters as real people. AO2 was often a casualty here. Attention to aspects of dramatic form and structure was often

lost in an eagerness to focus on what the character said as a means of revealing his or her personality. Equally problematic were tasks such as those which invited the candidates to describe how Othello was presented, how he changed during the course of the play, or even to pronounce on how effectively Shakespeare had presented his tragic protagonist. Such tasks either precluded debate or invited judgements that asked a lot of AS candidates. While an emotion 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. 'Discuss the importance of race in *Othello*', for instance, is not a task that clearly addresses the needs of this unit.

The apportioning of 'blame' to a particular character did not often produce a very effective response, and again tended to lead candidates away from the sense of characters as literary constructs. Questions such as 'Who is to blame for Othello's tragic flaw?' are essentially unanswerable.

Many responses to *Othello* focused excessively on the thorny, but ultimately self-defeating question of what Iago's 'true' motives were. Attempts to unravel the intricacies of Hamlet's mind were less successful than explorations of the tragic function of Horatio or the Ghost. Essays on *Death of a Salesman* that offered extended examinations of the American Dream or those on *A Streetcar Named Desire* that pronounced forensically on the degree of Blanche's madness tended to stray unproductively into non-literary areas.

Many candidates found other ways of exploring how tragedy operated within the plays. Some 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).

Some very good work was done on the operation of power within the worlds of the plays. Candidates were able to offer meaningful debates about the degree of autonomy available to the central protagonists through a close examination of the power structures presented in *Macbeth*, *Lear* and *Hamlet*. Responses such as these were often also more effective in their treatment of structural patterns within the texts.

Re-creative responses

The re-creative option continues to grow in popularity and some very impressive work was submitted. 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, however, 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 merely because they have interesting personality features is not enough.

Monologues dominated submissions, often effectively giving a voice to the largely voiceless and making explicit what may have seemed largely implicit within the play. Candidates need to think carefully about whether their chosen voice is the most appropriate for their purpose. Candidates who selected the central character in the play often struggled to do much more than replicate the attitudes and opinions articulated by that character in the base text. Less dominant voices at times offered more productive perspectives. Mitch and Stella proved more effective choices than Blanche or Stanley; Bianca or Roderigo than Iago or Othello; Goneril than Lear. The Fool in *King Lear* often worked well, perhaps because of the interesting position that he occupies within the play.

Narrative gaps in the text also proved a productive area for study. Interestingly, gaps and untold stories also featured as a topic in this summer's LITB1 examination. Willy Loman's grave emerged as a very popular location. There were some ambitious and effective exercises in the sonnet form, but candidates who attempted an imitation of Shakespearean blank verse often ended up largely revealing their own limitations.

Commentaries, as usual, worked best when they established a clear connection between the re-creative piece and the base text and showed how the re-creative piece opened up a potential reading of the play. 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 relating to the candidates' own writing; AO2, especially at the higher levels, relates to the form, structure and language of the base text. Some candidates confined their comments to their own language choices and spent unprofitable time discussing the drafting process. Commentaries which offered what was essentially a paraphrase of the material of the re-creative piece did not achieve much, nor did those which were little more than character studies.

It should be emphasised that the combined length of both pieces needs to be within the 1500 word limit. It should also be emphasised that the re-creative approach requires a clear title to the work. 'Iago' and 'Lady Macbeth Speaks' are not very informative headings.

Annotation

Many moderators commented on the correlation between effective centre annotation and accurate application of the assessment criteria.

Annotation which assists the moderation process will:

- Occur throughout the two pieces of work
- Include detailed summative comments on each piece of work
- Address both strengths and weaknesses within the work. Too often candidates' work contained significant flaws that were nowhere acknowledged in the centre comment.
- Show awareness that the final audience for the work is the moderator and shape comments accordingly.
- Indicate the degree to which and in what ways the Assessment Objectives have been addressed. To merely identify different Assessment Objectives is of very limited value. Simply putting 'AO2' in the margin, for instance, could justify a mark of anything from 1 to 30.
- Apply to both sections of any re-creative response, not merely the commentary.
- Indicate where internal moderation has taken place.
- Avoid the practice of what often seems random and uninformative ticking.

Administration

The presentation of scripts matters, as does adherence to deadlines. Moderators reported many examples this summer of very late, badly organised submissions. Moderators' work will be made much easier if centres:

- Secure scripts with treasury tags rather than paper clips or plastic wallets. Staples tend to unfasten.
- Ensure that bibliographies, including the edition of the play, and accurate word counts are included.
- Present the folders in the sample in descending rank order.
- Arrange the two pieces in the same order as on the cover sheet (i.e. 'Shakespeare' first).
- If the centre is submitting work by 20 or fewer candidates, send all the work with the centre mark sheets to the moderator.
- Clearly write the tasks at the top of the first page of each of the two pieces.

- Complete cover sheets fully and accurately.
- Adhere to deadline dates. The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15th (or January 10th for the January module) or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres, not for candidates.

Word Counts

The upper word limit for this unit is 1500 words for each piece of work. With the re-creative response 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 every piece of 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. The best candidates produced what was demonstrably top band work while being clearly within the 1500 limit.

It was very disappointing, therefore, to note the number of assignments that were submitted this summer which were well over 1500 words in length. It should be made absolutely clear that candidates who go over the word counts do themselves no favours whatsoever. Centres are encouraged to stress this fact to their candidates. Candidates will not be given credit for a breadth of response to a task if that breadth has only been achieved by flouting the word limits. AO1 requires a degree of structured argument. It is hard to see that work which clearly exceeds the given limits is 'well structured' within the terms of this unit.

Conclusion

Moderators have commented on the range of innovative and challenging work that they have seen this summer. This is a credit to the hard work of centres and candidates. Centres have clearly appreciated the teaching and learning opportunities offered by this unit. The best candidates revealed a mature, independent and insightful approach to their chosen texts. They wrote fluently and confidently, often with an impressive level of sophistication. While examination reports of this kind inevitably spend time identifying areas for possible improvement, it is important to acknowledge how much has been achieved.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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