



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
June 2012**

**English Literature B**

**LITB3**

**(Specification 2745)**

**Unit 3: Texts and Genres**

***Report on the Examination***

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### LITB3: TEXTS AND GENRES

Examiners saw a full range of work this session, including a number of scripts which were awarded full marks. Some students produced very impressive work, demonstrating excellent analytical skills and the ability to evaluate. Many made extensive and effective use of quotations in support of their arguments, showing no disadvantages from not having the texts with them in the examination room. At the other end of the scale, there were some scripts where it was difficult to follow the argument as the lack of clarity in the writing hindered meaning. Clarity of argument is an important feature of good answers. It is not advantageous if examiners have to labour hard to detect what the student may be trying to argue in response to the question.

As always focus on the question is imperative in answers to this unit as it is indeed throughout this specification. Students are advised to read the questions carefully and plan their responses before they start to write. There were examples of scripts where students wanted to write pre-prepared answers, possibly to slightly different questions or to questions from previous papers which they had practised during their preparations. Such responses were rarely very successful. Sometimes students drifted away from the task and strayed onto irrelevant material. For question 7, for example, on *Wuthering Heights*, some answers went on to discuss how men were entrapped, imprisoned and disempowered. In a question about women, this could not be rewarded. In response to question 9 on *The Bloody Chamber*, some answers dealt extensively with distortion of any kind of relationship, including gender relationships, when the question was specifically about family relationships. Again, no credit could be given if the relationships discussed were not those of family. In addition to not straying from the question focus, it is also important for students to think about exactly what the question means and what it requires of them. Some questions employ several different terms, all of which need addressing in really good answers. For example, question 19 in Section B on the gothic genre asked students to consider the gothic as a warning of the “dangers” of “aspiring beyond our limitations”. The most successful answers unpicked the question terms and considered the idea of a warning, thought about what the possible dangers might be and explored the limitations and the consequences of aspiring beyond them. Answers which focused on just one of these aspects at the expense of the others were less successful. In response to question 6 on *Frankenstein*, many students ignored the idea of the “double”, again not looking carefully at the question terms. This was not a question simply on whether the Monster was evil or not which seemed to be the discussion many students wanted to engage in; the actual question topic was more subtle – whether he was an evil double. Similarly responses to question 22 which just focused on “change” and overlooked the idea of “resistance” were not exploring the subtle meanings of the question terms.

It was pleasing to see that some students, however, were beginning to define their understanding of some of the question terms. Whilst this is not always essential when question terms are obvious, this can sometimes be crucial to constructing a good argument. Some questions this year definitely derived benefit from such an approach. Good answers to question 20, for example, in Section B, showed that the word “obsession” had been carefully considered and defined. It was important here that students had thought about what makes something an obsession. Weak assertions that any vague interest in something could be seen as an obsession were

not convincing. In question 23, it was equally important to think about what the word “home” implies.

It is also important to point out that some students are advised to think carefully about what the question stems mean in order to ensure their answers are relevant. In order to encourage debate, question stems such as “How far do you agree...” or “To what extent do you agree...” are used. Such question stems are intended as invitations to debate around the topic of the question and are not an open invitation for students to say they do not agree and then write about whatever topic they choose. Question distortion is not counter-argument. If students do not agree, then they must show why that is so, not write about something else.

Whilst, as has already been stated, many students used extensive quotations from the texts in an impressive way, it is also worth making some important points with regards to less successful answers. The best answers made good use of textual support. There seemed to be an increasing number of answers this year where points were asserted and not backed up with textual evidence. Supporting points is part of good academic practice and no argument is convincing without evidence. It is important that candidates prove their arguments. Examiners are always conscious that this is a closed book examination and we are testing literary skills and not memory. However, quotations do not have to be lengthy and can often be embedded in the argument. Slight errors in quotations can often be overlooked in assessing an answer but there is a vast difference between occasional small errors and constant misquotation or vague approximation which just suggests lack of knowledge or laziness. It is sometimes extraordinary what some students think examiners will accept as quotations from texts, particularly from Shakespeare. Colloquial approximations rarely deceive examiners. Nor is it advisable actually to make quotations up and pretend they are genuine enough to analyse. On the other hand, there were many students who showed good textual knowledge and understanding. Another problem sometimes emerged from this and that was when students seemed too keen to show off that knowledge and understanding but failed to shape the material to the task. It is important that students show examiners exactly why their understanding is relevant and do not leave the examiners to work it out for themselves. It is always disheartening to read answers which are sometimes quite extensive and could be made relevant but the material has simply not been directed or shaped to the topic.

It is, however, reassuring to note that examiners feel students are now making better use of contextual material than in the early days of the unit. There were fewer examples of “bolted on” historical or social context which were not relevant to the argument. Often a good use of context was when it was fused with AO3 and became a means of offering an interpretation. Students often made good use of performance contexts when writing about plays. Some sweeping and often over-simplified generalisations were still made about historical reception contexts and students are advised against making such vague assertions about what people “back then” **all** thought and did. The most disappointing aspect of contextual study, however, appeared in response to question 3 on *Dr Faustus*. Many of the weaker answers to this question displayed an alarming lack of knowledge and understanding of the religious context of the play. Some students found it very difficult to write about the **corruption** of religious beliefs and practices when they did not actually know what those religious beliefs and practices were. There were examples of answers which

just addressed religion in general and answers which showed a lack of understanding of what actually constituted religious corruption.

The most enjoyable answers were those which were well-written, developing fluent, analytical and evaluative argument with sharp, clear question focus. Critical terminology is a useful tool and is part of the AO1 assessment. When used well, it facilitated argument but it was clear that some students seemed to be consciously trying to employ sophisticated terms which they did not really understand. The use of some specific vocabulary was also sometimes incorrect. The claim that certain words were “modifiers” was not always the case but “connotations” and “connotes” probably win the prize for some of the most abused words in the English language this year. There were some scripts where the register was informal and not very appropriate to critical writing.

Finally, it is important to comment on the fact that some students lost marks through rubric infringements or failure to address three texts “substantially” in Section B. If collections of poetry or short stories are studied, it is important to remember that the collection counts as one text so writing about two poems from the same collection does not constitute two different texts. There were more examples of scripts where the third text had not been addressed “substantially” this year, sometimes because of mishandling of time in the examination. “Substantial” can be defined by depth rather than length. In fact some scripts where the length of the writing on a text did not seem to be insubstantial, actually proved to be so with regards to what was actually said about that text. Candidates are advised to monitor their time carefully during the examination so that they do not unnecessarily lose marks in this way.

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