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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 2B Literary genres: Elements of political and social protest writing  
Report on the Examination

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## Introductory Comments

This is the second year of the new A-level examinations and there is a growing confidence in centres and colleges about how to approach the exam. Many centres have acted on the advice given by AQA in official courses and in materials that are available on the website. Where this advice has been central to teaching, students have clearly benefited. It makes sense that all centres look at the materials available and build the central information into their teaching. The two key essentials for success are:

- thorough knowledge of the set texts
- answering the questions in all their details.

There are several teaching suggestions in the course materials on the website to help centres to foreground these necessities.

All four papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen by examiners. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management. Students need to think carefully about the questions and plan what they are going to say, before starting to write.

As with last year, it is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and to an extent are interdependent. They share the same philosophy, the same levels of response mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (AOs) are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours. Both papers were marked as paper scripts.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts.

Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, understandably, very similar.

## The importance of students knowing their texts

Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation on both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Those students who had a clear sense of the order of events in their texts (who knew how the stories of the texts begin and end and where climaxes and crises occur) had a clear advantage over those who did not. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had a good understanding of the characters, ideas, ideology and genre of their texts and who understood how writers have constructed their narratives

and organised their ideas to shape meanings. When students have good textual knowledge they are able to address the questions confidently and to select material appropriately.

Making good choices is crucial and the student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. The very best answers were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the point they were making, rather than those who used what they could remember and then shaped their argument around that. When this happened, students often drifted from the task. Being equipped with good textual knowledge also helps students to be specific and accurate. It should be noted that Band 2 of the mark scheme has a headline descriptor of 'generalised' – and even here it has to be relevant to the task - so if students are aiming to gain marks in the higher bands they need to be precise and accurate.

Some students gave inaccurate responses. Examiners noticed this with quotations, some students created their own and then analysed their own version of authorial method. Inaccurate quotations and textual details detract from students' arguments – often because they lose any sense of the author's subtlety or creativity in choice making. Students should understand that close textual references in support of relevant arguments are perfectly acceptable – and quotation marks should only be used when students are certain that they are accurate.

Knowing texts is more important than citing critical reading or knowing background information about writers' lives and times. Some students were much happier writing about what they thought was relevant context about racial attitudes in Elizabethan England and Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne, than writing about the texts themselves and what is revealed within the texts in relation to the tasks.

Part of 'knowing' texts also involves students understanding their texts in terms of genre, although the text's story and the narrative arc must have priority before work on genre can be made meaningful. Students need to know how their texts connect with what might be regarded as traditional generic patterns and how they disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. It is worth reminding students that genre is a loose set of conventions and these conventions are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

### **The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details**

Once students are equipped with secure textual knowledge, they have to be trained to answer the questions that *are set* in all their details and not partially address them or respond to their own questions. In order to be successful students must answer the questions set taking account of all the words in the question. 'Answer the question' is an important reminder for students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess or requirements that are not asked in the questions. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to use extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question. What students need to focus on is to construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passage, firstly in terms of its mini narrative and then see what specific features were evident and which opened up meanings. In

Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Emilia as victim in *Othello*, Sir Toby as a riotous festive figure in *Twelfth Night*, atoning for crime in *Atonement* and the rejection of authority in *Henry 1V Part 1*.

### **The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate**

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy, comedy, crime or political and social protest writing and students are then invited to explore a view or explore the significance of an aspect. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word 'significance' is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings. Unfortunately some students thought that the word significance itself was up for debate and some tried to argue that extracts and ideas were not significant. This was an unhelpful approach and led many students into a dead end.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations can be valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who argued with personal voices and wrote relevantly were duly rewarded. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly and sensitively. For some, however, it did not work. Some students used critical material, including the Critical Anthology, that was not clearly understood and they tacked it on to arguments, often subverting questions. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used specifically to further the student's argument, they are best left out.

### **The passage based questions**

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail. A specific skill is required here which is to work closely with text in an independent way, tracking its narrative trajectory and seeing its relationship with the genre to which it belongs. Bringing in material that is not closely connected to the printed extract does not help students to answer the question successfully.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding, in a tight and detailed way, to a section of a play that they have studied and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. The connections to the wider play need to be sharp and obvious. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. It is worth repeating advice that was given last year.

*In all extract based questions, students need to read – or reread – the extracts carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.*

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is very helpful if students establish an overview of the extract taking note of its shape and the dramatic and narrative (and tragic or comedic) development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis, climax or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. It would be a useful teaching exercise for teachers to spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways so that they have an anchor for the rest of their discussion.

Clearly students need to know the play well though so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come *immediately* before and *immediately* after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages, but if students do have a secure sense of the whole they will see the benefits of writing about the extract as drama. As long as the extract is the *central* focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play. Although it is important to refer to the wider play, the comments must connect directly with the extract. Some students for example in their writing about the *Othello* extract unprofitably wrote more about Othello, who does not appear in the extract, than Iago and Roderigo, who do.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to think about the drama itself and the playwright's construction of the play. They have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words, which is rarely productive and invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

Students need to see that the skills for Section A questions are quite different from the skills needed for Section B questions. A number of students thought that they needed to debate whether the passage was or wasn't significant and several thought they should construct their own debate like those in Section B.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to see that these questions are different from those elsewhere in the paper. Students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and work with what is *there*. Although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed and how the mini story being told at this point is being shaped.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial or dramatic methods. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who did not respond to the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analyses of single words.

A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not fully understand. Last year advice was given about students writing about iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play and although there was a little less inaccuracy this year, there was still some unhelpful discussion and some comments which were wrong. The same was true for several students who wrote about metre in the poetry questions. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Students can generally write about these features sensibly and confidently.

### **The significance and influence of contexts**

There are still some students who think that they have to include material that exists outside the text and work it into their writing, often taking the place of analysis of the text itself. The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts, those which are set up in the questions and those which relevantly form part of their argument. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and naturally. Some students, unfortunately, still thought they had to include all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was not well understood. In the weakest answers there were generalised – and often inaccurate – claims about women and patriarchy, society, class and race and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the question.

Although there were fewer claims this year that various audiences and readers in past ages 'would have been shocked', this still existed in some responses. Examiners across all papers reported that students were still asserting that audiences of the past would have been shocked by characters' behaviours or the language writers used. It is worth ensuring that students know what the word 'shocking' means and then reminding them that it is unwise to claim that audiences of any time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Students also need to think more carefully about what they are actually saying. They need to think what a Shakespearian audience comprised (different people with different views and proclivities, like those in their own literature classes, experiencing drama in a theatre probably not for the first time). Would all those people viewing *Othello*, for example, really have been 'shocked' when they heard Emilia disobey Iago? Students need to be made aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex, to social order being overturned and to feisty and outspoken women.

There were also some assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and 'enlightened' readers of today. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. There is no requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To

what extent do **you** agree with this view?’ and students need to be prepared to commit themselves from their own perspectives. Their voices are what examiners want to hear.

There were also some students writing and making claims about the effects of pronoun use, particularly the use of ‘I’ and ‘me’ which many students said showed arrogance and selfishness. When speech is used it is natural for pronouns to be used, so students really do need to think more carefully before making claims about what ‘I’ reveals.

Another increasing trend is the way that students, regardless of the task, are becoming fixed on the ‘issue’ of women and how appallingly they were treated in previous ages. While students are to be congratulated on using their Critical Anthologies to open up ideas about texts (and here specifically feminist theory), they have to be careful about making sweeping statements and forcing material into answers that does not relate to the question. The ‘issue’ of both women and men is important, but the texts offer so much more to think about than the single concern of gender inequality. Sometimes readings are imposed on texts that are not supported by evidence in the texts themselves and have no bearing on the question set. There needs to be some subtlety in the application of theoretical concepts.

### **Writing skills**

When students are debating and discussing meanings, it is important that they try to express themselves in clear and logical ways. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. It is not necessary for writing to include an excess of critical, tragic and comedic terminology, perhaps using that terminology for its own sake and not fully understanding it. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Some students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty.

### **Removing burdens and giving students ownership**

Some students seemed to be burdened with material they felt they had to include. Apart from contextual material and terminology, some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Some students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students, references to other texts got in the way.

### **The importance of clear and independent thinking**

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Students need to be able to look at questions on the day of the exam with a clear mind. They need to approach the paper and questions without any



preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully. Students should remember that if the question does not ask for something, then they are not required to include it.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were, of course, rewarded appropriately.

### Specific comments

The work seen in this June 2018 series showed intelligent engagement with texts and tasks with evidence of increasing confidence and competence in tackling the paper. Students often wrote thoughtfully about ideas and concepts in the unit. It is refreshing and rewarding to read such engaged work and centres can be pleased that they are enabling students to interrogate their texts with such commitment.

The most popular texts continue to be *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Doll's House* though responses were seen to all texts. In Section A, the best responses linked genre and method to the overall trajectory of the extract and so produced more clearly focused and relevant writing. In Section B many responses were diligent in their use of the text to support discussion. In Section C, there was evidence of productive choices that allowed students to write freely and thoughtfully about their texts.

### Section A The Unseen Extract

Clearly many centres have worked hard to refine their preparation of students for this part of the paper and in general answers were more focused on securing an overview of the extract as a narrative than launching into a rehearsed list of genre elements. Many responses began by singling out the injustice of the brutal working conditions, and tracked through to the central conflict between the workers and the mill-owners, Henry Carson's banning of Trade Unions, and concluding with a discussion about John Barton's emotive speech reporting events later that evening. Students who were able to see the trajectory of the extract and make relevant suggestions about how it ended were writing in an engaged and thoughtful way. 'The low angry murmur that was yet to take form or words' was interpreted variously, and with equal validity, as continued oppression of the voiceless working class or as suggesting an ominous potential uprising against the injustice detailed in the extract. This showed careful thinking about the extract where narrative and genre became intertwined.

A considerable number of responses did not seem to reach the end of the extract; so missed commenting on this or even on John Barton's speech. Engagement with critical material was on the whole thoughtfully executed. The extract's focus on nineteenth-century working conditions lent itself to a Marxist approach that enabled students to open up ideas about oppression, power, social hierarchies and equality in engaging ways. A few less able students relied on their simplified understanding of Marxist literary approaches to rehearse familiar and generalised ideas about life in the nineteenth century. Such responses showed less independent engagement and were less successful. A surprising number of responses made factual errors despite material being provided in the preamble, such as the extract taking place in the 1930s and 40s relating to the Great Depression in America. A common error was to mistake the novel's title (*Mary Barton*) for the author's name. Centres should prepare their students to use the information in the preamble carefully and not rush to answer the extract.

With an unseen extract there may be occasions where it is hard to follow the plot development. Many students incorrectly attributed the dialogue of the masters to the workers or became confused about the work-people's 'delegates'. Though such misreadings were common, they often did not disadvantage students once they had moved on to another point. Students also found it tricky to pick out the strategies of the author to present the work-people's case sympathetically. The best students saw the ironic or satirical presentation of the masters as criticism of labour relations and wrote perceptively about this.

This specification prioritises narrative methods that engage with voice, setting, and structure as higher order skills than writing about individual words and phrases. Regrettably, some responses did focus on single images, particularly the 'sugar-plum to quieten a naughty child' and the description of the workers as 'cruel brutes' or 'wild beasts' or the sound of them ascending the stairs ('tramp, tramp'). These points were invariably connected to genre elements and relevantly discussed but were not the most analytical points that could be made. Centres should note that this extract contained dialogue, an intrusive narrator, focalisation, settings of the 'public room in a hotel', a 'public house', and the nineteenth-century world, and a chronological shift; discussing of how *some* of these might have worked would make for more credit-worthy answers. The best responses saw these methods and produced sharply focused writing.

## Section B

In this section where students are constructing a debate in response to a given view, writing was often thoughtful and clear, engaging personally with the ideas put forward. Many wrote with relish about the presentation of parents in *Songs*, or the effectiveness of resistance in *The Kite Runner*. A small number of centres have clearly prepared students to distinguish between types of social protest and types of political protest. This unit focuses on protest writing as a cultural genre and treats them as integrated and interactive. On Blake, Crace, Ibsen and Atwood in particular, there seemed to be a very clearly understood sense of the intersectionality of oppression, with many responses linking attitudes to race and class, gender and class, or normative values in private and public spheres. Such answers were engaging and thoughtful and showed an in-depth appreciation of how genre elements are at work in the text.

In this section there was much more focused discussion of methods linked to the task and responses on Blake, Ibsen, Dickens and Shakespeare all showed this; students writing on *Hard Times* wrote very well on the ways meaning is constructed through setting. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the best work was on the role of Offred as narrator or participant in stories of suffering. They showed very sophisticated understanding of how voice shapes narrative outcomes, and the text itself, if the Historical Notes were also considered. These were not often cited by students but when they were, comments were fully focused on structural features used to present ideas of suffering or repressive power.

The complex temporality of *The Kite Runner* was also teased out insightfully to show ideas about resistance, with more able students linking the two early scenes between Hassan and Assef with the culminating intervention from Sohrab in chapter 21. Responses to Shakespeare and Dickens engaged very thoughtfully with the storyworlds and interpreted the links to genre and the wider worlds of the medieval court or industrial England. Students seemed to handle the text of *King Henry IV Part I* very well and for the most part ranged through it carefully with well-chosen support for their points.

This specification is all about relevance to the question and it is worth discussing the ways students tackled the Blake question. Many answers were focused and students had chosen well to write about parents and children, thinking carefully about genre and the psychological implications of oppressive and controlling parents, with 'The Little Girl Lost', 'The Chimney Sweeper' and 'Infant Sorrow' being popular and productive choices here. The most relevant and obvious counter-argument set up by the question is that parents are not controlling and oppressive, and there is plenty of material in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to construct such an argument. Many responses, however, constructed counter-arguments that put forward 'religion' or 'society' or 'child labour'. Where the focus remained on 'oppressive and controlling' such answers were credited as this is a valid argument, but many wrote about such ideas in a very general way without engaging with the ways in which they were oppressive and controlling. Such responses seemed to be driven by a determination from the student to write about a poem they knew very well but which was not the most useful choice for this task. When students wrote about 'London' many discussed at length 'mind-forg'd manacles', 'blackening' churches or the 'cries of weakness' without reaching the most obviously relevant part of the poem at the end, where the 'harlot's curse/ Blasts the newborn Infant's tear'. There are over 40 poems in *Songs* and centres need to prepare students to make the most helpful selections to produce relevant fully focused answers.

On the whole debates were well-structured and showed focus on the view. The genre element given in the question was clearly identified in the best answers and put at the centre of the arguments. However some answers were beset with a more simplistic approach, forcing in some memorised terms, for example always referring to Harrison as having 'the radical voice of the protest poet' without illustrating it or discussing what it means.

### Section C

In this section students are asked to link two studied texts to a genre element. Question 10 invited discussion about the significance of endings. The accompanying quotation provided a steer towards ambiguity to help promote discussion. Many answers debated whether an ending was 'happy' or not and the ways in which that linked to genre elements. This, while surprising, was a common line of argument for *The Kite Runner* which had some validity to it. There was some very perceptive writing about *Harvest* and the intersecting lives that had been brought together and broken apart by the end of the village at the novel's ending. The most perceptive answers were able to hone in on ambiguity and interpret it in relation to earlier parts of the narrative.

Another productive area for exploration was a relevant debate about what constituted 'the ending' of a text. Many answers worked hard to consider expectations of an ending and engaged thoughtfully with the ways that connected to genre: the decisiveness of Nora's exit undermined by the cold world she walks out into; the self-deprecating voice of the poet-speaker in Harrison's *v.* making his attempts to speak out seem pointless or unconvincing; the use of questions by Blake in 'The Tyger'. Most students managed to engage with the idea of ambiguity at some level. More secure and confident answers were able to unpick methods that combined together to present the ambiguity, eg the narrative frame of the Historical Notes, the time leap into the future, the voice of Pieixoto and the final line 'Any questions?' in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and read it alongside the final line of Offred's narrative.

Question 11 on 'contrasting worlds' was the more popular choice. Many responses also saw multiple worlds created through the narrative past and the narrative present, or even the future, as with *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Harvest*. Students saw metaphorical and metaphysical worlds as well as the physical - worlds constructed through perspectives, or values, or identity and this is entirely in keeping with the unit's focus on cultural representations of protest. Contrasting worlds of

ethnic difference, of innocence and experience, of the present and the after-life, of remembered worlds and the present, of fictional worlds and the reader's world, internal psychological worlds and external reality were all offered as interesting interpretations of 'contrasting worlds'. The latter worked extremely well for *A Doll's House*. It was rewarding to read such varied responses and such free thinking about how writers construct the storyworlds of their texts.

Some students were less secure in their engagement with contrasting worlds and struggled to move beyond describing a place, and so there was little sense of meanings presented by the contrast. Other answers took a sequential approach to the worlds identified and wrote about one world and then another without focusing clearly on the contrast between the two. A significant minority of the answers contested that the worlds were *not* contrasting, and so often had little to say that was relevant. Some responses focused only on 'contrasts' and so were not directly addressing the task. The best answers selected episodes from the text that contained the direct contrast – so the scene where Hal and Falstaff impersonate the king in *King Henry IV Part I* was particularly effective, or where Offred contemplates the contrasting uses of the Rachel and Leah Centre that 'had once been the gymnasium' in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Similarly successful was the selection of *Them & [uz]* and *National Trust* for those studying Harrison. Answers where selections were not as productive were sometimes made on Blake, where the contrast emerged from two contrary poems such as 'The Echoing Green' and 'London'. Responses that chose well opted for poems such as both 'Chimney Sweeper' poems, or 'The Little Vagabond' where the voices in the poems do much to establish the contrasting worlds.

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

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