



General Certificate of Education

English Literature *Specification B*

LitB1 Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination *2009 examination - January series*

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Dr Michael Cresswell Director General.

General

Introduction

As with any new specification there is always much excitement and some anxiety about the first examination and how students will respond to it. It is therefore very pleasing to be able to report that this winter's LITB 1 was accessible to students and some excellent answers were seen by examiners.

It is clear that much hard work has been done by centres in responding to the demands of this unit and preparing students for an examination after only one term of study. Teachers need to be commended on their efforts. They have thoughtfully embraced the spirit of the new specification and understood the importance of narrative and how it is tested. Although it is true that some students did not seem ready to take the examination, some of the work produced by some students was most impressive and showed that to take the exam in January was entirely feasible.

This unit is challenging because students are required to respond to four texts and write about them in three different ways. The question paper as a whole is designed to enable students to think and write about the overarching concept of narrative and not just four texts in isolation. The title of the unit is 'Aspects of Narrative' and that is what the paper is about. Students therefore need to understand that they will be expected to write about narrative: stories and their plots, how those stories are told and how they can be interpreted. The questions have been written with a clear eye on the Assessment Objectives and each question has a different focus which centres need to understand and help their students to understand.

Section A of the paper requires students to concentrate on a single text. The question is divided into two parts and students should write on this text for one hour. In the first part of the question (a) students are expected to analyse the writers' methods in a particular part of the text and in (b) they are required to enter into some debate about critical interpretation. In Section B students are asked to write about an aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts though there is no demand to compare them. Most students who understood the requirements of the paper and who knew their texts well coped admirably.

What has been achieved

There was much evidence of students having enjoyed their work and having been stimulated by the variety of skills the questions and the Assessment Objectives demanded. Many students displayed all required skills in a remarkably confident and competent way. Enthusiasm was evident in responses to *all* texts though especially in *Enduring Love*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, *The Kite Runner* and in the poetry of Auden, Hardy and Rossetti.

Most students were able to demonstrate good textual knowledge and understanding of their texts particularly in Section A. There was clearly evidence of centres having done some good work on writers' methods (AO2) and many students were aware of how texts might be interpreted using different critical positions, while at the same time having the confidence to offer their own independent judgements (AO3). Some students were able to make good use of contextual material working *from the texts and writing relevantly* (AO4). Although there were problems with some students' ability to communicate effectively (AO1), most could express themselves with some degree of clarity.

So there was much that was pleasing in the first assessment of this unit.

What is to be learned

However, as with any new examination there are lessons to be learned. While some students were clearly conversant with the demands of the questions, some students seemed to be very insecure and their writing often bore no relevance to the questions being asked. Some students seemed to think that they should just write anything known about their texts.

AO4

The inability to focus on the set tasks was particularly noticeable in the addressing of AO4. This Assessment Objective is only tested in Section A part (b) and the only context that is required is the context set up in the question, so for example it was the political context in 1b, the social context in 2b and the gender context in 6b. Of course other contexts could be made relevant depending on how the student constructed his or her argument, but several students were so keen to write about contexts they had learned that they ignored the tasks and often the texts. This was especially evident in some responses to Auden and Rossetti and *The Great Gatsby*. Much published contextual material is obviously available on many of the texts and students have good knowledge of it, but often the students were so determined to show the examiner that they had the learned background information that they crammed it into answers regardless of relevance. Sadly, sometimes AO4 dominated the students' responses; some students wrote pages on the cultural milieu of their respective authors and others spent a great deal of time surmising the possible beliefs and opinions the authors 'must have had'. Several students were clearly more interested in Coleridge's opium addiction than 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Those students who paid scant reference to the task or simply bolted on contextual material scored few marks. Contextual material is only helpful when it illuminates discussion of the question being asked. It is also important to note that AO4 is not tested in Section B so there is little place there for comments about America in the Jazz Age or Victorian London.

AO3

This Assessment Objective is tested in Section A (b) and Section B and therefore students need to see the importance of writing about multiple meanings of texts in a clear and confident way and in ways that are set up by the questions. Some students seemed to have learned endless quotations of what various critics had said about texts and these were forced into the answer regardless of the task. Sometimes students included as many as six critical ideas, none of which coincided with the question. To teach AO3 in this way is clearly not very productive.

AO2

Where there were problems with answers, though, they mainly came in response to AO2 which is the only AO tested in Section A (a) and it is also tested in Section B. In some ways this was anticipated but it was hoped that with the new focus on 'Aspects of Narrative' students would realise that they cannot ignore this element. Students need to engage with the ways writers shape their stories. They need to focus on the structures of texts, the voices that can be heard in them and the language that is used to tell the stories. It needs to be stressed at this point though that students must take care that they do not simply learn lists of features which they do not understand. Some centres had taught their students terms like foreshadowing and anaphoric references which students only vaguely understood. This often resulted in muddled writing. Although there are many terms that might be relevant to discussions about narrative method, students should only use terms with which they are comfortable and terms they can explain in relation to the poem or the given chapter. Put simply, AO2 is asking students to discuss how writers construct their stories and how they use language to tell them. So, for example, students need to be aware of the structure and chronology of the texts, its authorial

viewpoint(s), the use of discourse features and how they work, the specific effects achieved through the use of syntax and lexis.

There are of course many other narrative features that might be commented on, many of which appear in the published mark scheme, so, when dealing with the section of the question that focuses on AO2, students need to place the authors' methods in the foreground of their thinking and writing. And above all they must focus on the task. Starting your answer with 'McEwan uses a simile to tell the story in this chapter' or 'Fitzgerald uses colour symbolism...' is unlikely to lead to a productive response. Broad narrative structures need to be addressed.

AO1

This assessment objective is tested in Section A (b) and in Section B so its importance is clear. Students need to be aware that they must write accurately and express themselves in a way that is appropriate for writing about literary texts. Several students wrote in a very colloquial way and some had scant regard for punctuation and paragraphing. This often caused difficulties in the communication of ideas. Others, though, showed sophisticated writing skills which made their responses a pleasure to read, not least because these skills allowed them to write relevantly about the tasks that had been set.

Some comments on the Section B Questions

Most students understood that they could not use a text in this section that they had written about in Section A. However there were some students who did contravene the rubric. Even if a student only writes about one Auden poem in Section A (like 'Ode') they cannot write about other Auden poems in Section B. The work of three other writers must be in evidence. There does not have to be even coverage of the three texts but if students only write one very brief paragraph on a text that has to be reflected in the final mark.

It must also be stressed that students do not need to compare texts. Both tasks in this examination asked students to 'Write about...' not to 'Compare ...'. Some students, in thinking that comparison was needed, wrote comparatively about themes and so did not answer the question.

Question 19 asked students to write about the significance of titles. Although there were some very good answers, several students wrote about the titles as if the titles were not attached to any text and as if they had just seen the titles for the first time. Good answers focused on the potential meanings of titles which were seen as integral to the texts they introduced and comments were supported by close references to the narratives that followed.

Question 20 asked students to focus on the significance of key events. Surprisingly, given that this unit is about 'Aspects of Narrative' several students did not know what an event was. Some thought they could just write about anything they considered important. Some students wrote about characters or bits of imagery as 'events'. The best answers were by students who selected key events carefully and thoughtfully and wrote about their significance in terms of plot, revelation of character, themes, writer's methods or the text's ideology.

A note on the use of the Open Book

This is the only unit that is Open Book and centres need to teach their students how to use Open Book texts at Advanced Level. Although having the set text in the examination can make students feel secure they still need to know their way around the texts so they are not wasting time looking for quotations. On the whole students used their texts well but students need to be reminded of the futility of copying out large chunks of quotation. It is obviously expected that students refer closely to the text but they need to integrate short quotations into the bodies of their essays. Some students in this exam were copying out lines and lines of quotations or paraphrasing at length, which served little purpose.

Conclusion

The first assessment of this unit went well, thanks in the main to the willingness of teachers to get to grips with the demands of a new specification. We hope that in future exams we will be able to build on the success of this first experience. To do this teachers must encourage their students to read questions carefully and think for themselves about what is being asked. Confident, relevant and independent writing leads to the highest marks.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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