



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

English Literature B

LITB1

(Specification 2745)

Unit 1: Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination

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Introductory Comments

This January's examination provided further evidence that centres are becoming increasingly confident about what is required by a paper that is entitled 'Aspects of Narrative'. A number of scripts received maximum marks suggesting that some candidates know exactly what to do. This is a paper about how stories are told and how they can be interpreted. If teachers are teaching first and foremost narrative across four texts and not four texts for their own sakes then those candidates are being well served.

There was also evidence, though, of candidates who were struggling with the demands of the paper and the types of questions being asked. It is clear that in some centres further work needs to be done.

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 question is divided into two parts 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 (Aa), students are expected to analyse the writers' narrative methods in a particular part of the text and in (Ab) they are required to enter into some debate about critical interpretation on the work of the same author. In Section B candidates are asked to write about some aspect of narrative across the remaining three texts though there is no 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 and who answered the questions, performed very well. It was felt this January that some candidates did not know all their texts well; several were only referring to the opening chapters of novels without seeming to know much beyond those first chapters.

It is advisable that when preparing candidates for the exam that teachers read all the questions from previous examinations to familiarise themselves with the types of questions that can be asked. It is also advisable for teachers to encourage their students to think independently and to have the confidence to argue a case with a clear personal voice. Teachers should also teach their students how to make wise choices of questions and texts or parts of texts.

Again, following the pattern established in previous examinations, not every question asked candidates to range across different poems in Section Ab. Questions might be set on single poems if there are interesting things to debate, as for example there was with 'Ulysses'. Such flexibility in setting questions will continue in future exams. Centres must also not be surprised if they find chapters or poems that have already been used appearing again in future examinations although on the whole different tasks will be set.

Choices of texts and questions - and their implications

When teachers are selecting texts and preparing students for this unit, they clearly need to think about the whole paper and the implications their choices will have on their candidates. Most centres seem to be preparing students for a choice in Section A (usually of two texts). Those centres who select a single text for Section A for all students are not helping their students to make independent choices and to respond to literature in independent ways. For some candidates, the poem or chapter chosen for the examination is not one they find easy, and if there is no choice of task they struggle in Section A. If centres over teach one particular text they are also in danger of students responding in a formulaic way, trying to remember what their teachers have told them and not always understanding what they are

writing about. Students need to be taught what authorial method is about and then apply their knowledge. Independent thinking is valued by examiners and rewarded.

Whether or not the text for A has been predetermined, this choice made in A will always have a bearing on what students do in Section B. Therefore, 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 here.

When students have been given a choice by their teachers and before they make a decision in the examination, they would be well advised to look carefully at the questions in B to see what texts and what parts of texts could best be used in the answer. Sometimes candidates use a text in A which might better suit the purposes of B.

If candidates only know some parts of texts for the B question, and only a few things about narrative method and the ways texts can be read, then there is a danger that these bits of knowledge will be thrust into the answer regardless.

Section A

Aa

The questions in this section have a very specific focus. They are about how stories are told; they require candidates to write about the methods authors use in their narratives. 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 given. Candidates who began their answers by describing, for example, the metre and rhythm of Hardy's 'The Convergence of the Twain, and did not develop their comments in relation to the story, had not really understood what the question was asking. Many candidates develop points on figurative language and rhyme and rhythm, teasing out all sorts of potential meanings but if the comments are not related to the overarching story then they have little value. When candidates perform well, they have usually pinned down the story at the start of their answer and the comments on various techniques have been related to that story.

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 is a different way of approaching poetry narrative and prose narrative. Many centres seem to understand this. Very good answers were seen on all questions but some candidates did not unravel the story of Auden's 'If I Could Tell You' and some who wrote on 'The Convergence of the Twain' simply said that the story was about the sinking of the Titanic without showing what Hardy's particular angle on the story is. When candidates are writing their answers, having briefly nailed the story, they then need to focus exclusively on the narrative methods that the writers use and not write about the content, themes and characters of the text. Clearly the story's structure is of central importance and it was therefore disappointing that many candidates writing about 'The Convergence of the Twain' did not realise that the story begins at the end and that there is a double time scheme operating; many in fact suggested that the story is chronological. The strongest candidates understood that the fires that brought the ship to life were its funeral pyres so that the ship is simultaneously seen as alive yet dead. The least successful answers were by those candidates who picked out words, similes or verse patterns. Some excellent answers were seen on Browning and Coleridge.

Those who wrote on prose also fared well when they wrote about structure and voices and when they developed particular methods in relation to the stories being told. In half an hour candidates have to select some features to write about and it is more productive to write

about structure and voices than single words, similes and colour imagery. Very good answers were seen on *The Great Gatsby*, *The God of Small Things* and *Great Expectations*, though sadly there were few on the Dickens text.

Ab

Answers in this section require argument, a key strand of AO1. All questions set up debates and the candidates who perform best have clear independent voices and are not just trying to write what their teachers have told them. This question requires candidates to think. The best answers are those which often challenge the premises set up in the questions. There is also an expectation that since this is an open book examination, 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 Assef's character and role, whether *Pride and Prejudice* is more about money than love, whether *Gatsby* is worth more than the 'whole damn bunch put together' and how far 'Ulysses' is a celebration of old men. Candidates who did not read the questions carefully or tried to subvert them often struggled. This happened in the Rossetti question when candidates did not write about men as villains but women as victims, often with a good dose of irrelevant biography about Rossetti working with fallen women. Some candidates did not perform well on Hardy because they could not locate human errors and failure in the poems and instead wrote about Hardy's grief and regret, perhaps a topic for which candidates had been prepared. Context remains a problem for some candidates and it is surprising that after all previous reports we are still finding bolted on details of Auden's homosexuality, Hardy's marital problems and Tennyson's feelings about Hallam. The best answers had tightly structured and focused arguments with developed points which were well supported.

Section B

In this section candidates have to manage the texts of three writers across an aspect of narrative, here either structure or places. As with Section Aa, candidates needed to have a clear sense of either the stories that are being structured or those that are located in particular places. There were some excellent answers on both questions which suggest that centres are preparing their candidates well. Preparing candidates well, of course, means teaching them how to choose judiciously and to write about narrative focus (place or structure) in terms of the story.

The question on structure was slightly less popular than that on places. The best answers were those where candidates used the beginnings and endings of texts to write about structure, or those who saw the structural significance of where the key event or climactic moments occurs, or those who saw how chronology is used to shape stories. Very good answers also focused well on 'significance', with candidates seeing the word as an invitation to write about meanings. Some candidates spent much time writing about narrators and narrative perspective. Although writing about narrative perspective could have been made relevant, those candidates who wrote exclusively about last summer's question on the significance of narrators (perhaps because they had done it for a mock examination) did not score high marks.

Answers on places were generally better than those on structure, perhaps because 'place' was more easily understood. However several candidates rapidly substituted place with 'setting' and those answers became increasingly vague. In the best answers places were clearly identified and their significance to the story became the main point of debate. Here is an example from one candidate which shows how this can be succinctly done:

In 'Goblin Market' Rossetti places her characters in the countryside among 'brookside rushes' for the opening, perhaps to show their innocence at the start of the story. The

place can be interpreted as an idyllic, pastoral setting, well suited to their virginal states. However, an alternative interpretation could be that the place signifies danger, alerting the reader to the threat which is lurking in the shape of the goblin men, and which is perhaps a stronger reading as Rossetti suggests that Lizzie and Laura are hiding in the 'brookside rushes' as if forbidden.

Some excellent responses were seen to sections on *Great Expectations* and *Pride and Prejudice*, texts where candidates seemed to see places as having significance much more clearly than in *Enduring Love* and *The Kite Runner*. This was something of a surprise given the number of significant places in those texts. Little was made of the significance of Afghanistan in *The Kite Runner*, quite a few candidates thinking that Kabul is in Pakistan. When candidates performed well it was often because good decisions had been made about the places to choose. Places which worked well for students included Miss Gee's small bed-sitting room, Porphyria's lover's cottage, the equator in 'the Rime of the Ancient Mainer', the lonely hillside in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and the restaurant in *Enduring Love*.

AO1

How candidates themselves write about literature is of course an important factor in how well they perform in terms of marks. AO1 is explicitly tested in Ab 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 their whole answer. 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. Many candidates do not know how to demarcate titles of texts which is something that could be usefully taught. 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.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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