



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

English Literature B

LITB1

(Specification 2745)

Unit 1: Aspects of Narrative

Report on the Examination

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Introductory Comments

Some excellent work was seen in this summer's LITB1 examination. It seems that many teachers and students have fully engaged with the title of the unit, 'Aspects of Narrative' and are approaching texts in a theoretical way. Central to this paper, of course, are the stories writers are telling, how those writers tell their stories and how readers find meanings in them. The students who achieved the highest marks were those who knew how to respond to the three different demands of the questions.

When students do not perform well it is often because they do not sufficiently focus on all the words in the questions or when their knowledge of the texts is insecure or when they make unwise choices in the material that they use to answer questions. For some, it is simply a lack of consistency across the whole paper. It is therefore imperative that teachers and students know exactly how to approach the three different sections of the paper and yet they should always ensure that responses are not formulaic. While it is understood that teachers want to guide students, there is increasing evidence of over teaching in ways that are not helpful and ways which seem to inhibit independent thinking.

Section A

The odd numbered questions

All questions have a very specific focus. They are about how stories are told and they require students to write about the methods authors use in their story telling. The questions are fundamentally different from traditional critical analysis type questions and often when students do not perform as well as schools and colleges expect, it is because the students do not see the **story** that is being told in the poem or the section of the prose text that is specified. Some students do not seem to know what a story is in terms of sequence and events. Those students often simply produce commentaries on poems or chapters pointing out various features, writing about characters and themes and perhaps offering some interpretation. The best answers are produced by students who write confidently about method in relation to the overarching story of the prescribed section of text. It is helpful if students pin down the story in the opening paragraph in a succinct way. This enables them to write with purpose and discuss method in relation to the story. When there is no sense of the story, writing is often disconnected, and often just a catalogue of features.

Every year there are favourite terms that students seem desperate to include in their answers. This summer the favourite was pathetic fallacy, a trope which was clearly not understood. Any mention of weather conditions in stories was claimed to be an example of 'pathetic fallacy'. It would be more appropriate to see weather as part of the story's setting. Other terms that are used somewhat gratuitously and without much understanding are 'foreshadowing', 'prolepsis' and 'destination'. There also needs to be some caution when figurative language, rhyme and rhythm are being taught as many students find it very hard to write about those features in ways that meaningfully connect to, or illuminate, the stories. The story always needs to be in a central position in the answer.

Once the story of the poem, chapter, short story or section of text has been established, it is best for students to focus on the larger features of narrative like voice or structure rather than discussing the effects of individual words. When lexical features are discussed more needs to be done than simply analysing what those words might mean. All comments need to be tailored to the story itself.

One issue concerning voice that many examiners noticed was the way that some students seemed to be so obsessed with unreliable narrators that they were unable to write about anything else (this even found its way into Question 30 when students were writing about the ‘unreliable tragedy’).

The even numbered questions

Answers in this section require argument, a key strand of AO1. All questions set up debates and the students who write the best answers have clear independent voices and are not just trying to remember what has been said in class or by some critic. It was noted that several candidates were still trying to weave in material about authors who have interesting personal backgrounds, regardless of appropriateness. The even numbered questions require candidates to think. Students really need to engage with ‘how far’, ‘to what extent’ and ‘significance’. The best answers were seen by students who clearly were thinking about the text in relation to the question and often challenged the premises set up. There is an expectation that the topic set up in the question is debated and not abandoned immediately in favour of a preferred question.

There is also an expectation that since this is an open book examination, that the text is well used to support the arguments the students posit. Good answers were seen on all questions but some particularly impressive ones were seen on Tennyson and whether the poetry presents the advantages of an active life, whether men are victims of women in Keats’s poetry and the extent to which the ending of *The Road is* ‘unbearably pessimistic’.

Question 2: How far do you think that Auden’s poems are dominated by death?

There were some interesting responses to this question. Death was often connected to war and society’s ills in quite inventive ways. However, some students quickly abandoned ‘death’ as a topic and wrote about any number of themes. The key word in the question was, of course, ‘dominated’ and those who engaged with the word in relation to death did very well.

Question 4: How far do you agree with the view that Fra Lippo Lippi is simply a “saucy and loud-mouthed monk”.

The students who answered this question seemed to enjoy it. The best answers focused on the sauciness of the monk and his volubility and more tellingly engaged with ‘simply’.

Question 6: How far do you agree with the view that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is essentially about the power of prayer?

This question was sometimes not answered well and this was something of a surprise given that Question 5, which the students had already addressed, contained a significant moment when the mariner blessed the water snakes and could then pray. Several students did not seem to know what a prayer is and some conflated prayer with religion or Christianity. The strongest answers engaged with the word ‘essentially’ and debated the power of prayer in relation to this. Several were able to track the references to prayer in the poem and to show how prayer is used in a structural way by Coleridge.

Question 8: How far do you agree with the view that Hardy presents a cynical view of everlasting love?

There are a number of key words here and the best answers focused on ‘cynical’, ‘everlasting’ and ‘love’. When answers were less successful it was generally because cynical was not understood or the focus was on ‘love’ and not ‘everlasting love’. Not all students chose well here. It was hard to see why students chose ‘The Darkling

Thrush’ and ‘The Convergence of the Twain’ as such choices led them away from the task.

Question 10: How far do you think that men are victims of women in Keats’s poetry? This was very well answered and there were a variety of responses with students drawing upon all three poems. There was some particularly interesting writing on ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ where some saw the knight as a tragic victim and perhaps also a predator.

Question 12: How far do you agree with the view that ‘Goblin Market’ is a story for children?

This was a question about genre, like Question 30, and there were some good discussions of the poem in relation to features of a children’s story with some debating whether the poem is more of a moral fable or a social commentary. Some candidates struggled when dealing with the more adult interpretations of the poem and not all were able to link these to why the poem might not be suitable for children.

Question 14: “For Tennyson, to act is vital; there is nothing to be gained by being passive.” How far do you agree that Tennyson’s poetry presents the advantages of an active life?

Good writing was seen on all the poems and they were handled in fascinating ways. There was very good debate of ‘Godiva’(a good choice since ‘Godiva’ had been the focus of Question 13) and ‘The Lady of Shalott’, which was used in both sides of the debate. Some candidates, although dealing competently with active and passive, struggled with ‘advantages’.

Very few responses were seen to **Question 16 and 18.**

Question 20: “The chapters narrated by Bernard are the least interesting in *Small Island*.” How far do you agree with this view?

This was quite a popular question but many students saw it as a question about Bernard’s character rather than his narration. The best answers were by those who were aware of the structural position of Bernard’s narration in relation to the chapters narrated by others. A number of students challenged the proposition set up in the question and argued that there is much to interest readers. When details were carefully selected the writing was often strong.

Question 22: To what extent do you think *The Kite Runner* presents a thoroughly depressing picture of life in Afghanistan?

This was one of the most popular questions. The best answers here were produced by those who wrote about ‘life’ in Afghanistan and those who drew from different time periods in the novel. Weaker answers focused exclusively on Amir and Hassan and although some material was made relevant often there was drifting from the task.

Question 24: Clarissa tells Joe: “You think you can read your way out of this.” How do you respond to the view that *Enduring Love* is primarily about reading and interpreting signs?

There were some very good answers to this question. Some of the best were by those candidates who saw that the whole experience of reading is about reading signs and there was some incisive discussion of the way that not only the reader has to read signs but also the readers of science, literary and religious texts from within the novel.

Question 26: How far do you think that Ammu can be seen as a tragic heroine in *The God of Small Things*?

As with Question 30, there was an expectation that students would use their knowledge of unit 2 and Tragedy in their answer. Many students engaged well with Ammu’s fatal flaw and her having the unsafe edge of a suicide bomber; many also saw her as a victim of an unjust world but one who is nonetheless brave and defiant.

Weaker answers did not get much further than seeing her as tragic simply because her story is sad.

Question 28: How far do you agree with the view that the ending of *The Road* is unbearably pessimistic?

There were a variety of responses to this task. Many agreed that the novel is unbearably pessimistic and wrote the death of the father at the end, the disappointment offered by the lack of colour in the sea and about their personal reading experience of the whole novel. Some argued that there is optimism in the boy's faith, the Christian imagery and the human desire to love and survive. Textual knowledge and use of it was often good in this question.

Question 30: How appropriate do you think it is to describe *The Great Gatsby* as a tragedy?

This was the question that most disappointed examiners as for many students there was very little evidence that they had gained anything from their coursework on tragedy. Clearly many did not see their coursework as a genre study (despite its title), and if they did they did not carry their knowledge across to this unit. The experience of marking this question suggests that the advice given at training meetings of connecting the two units at AS (and all four at A2), has not been heeded. Many students seemed not to know that this was a question about genre or to know what constitutes a tragedy. Some made references to Aristotle and to modern domestic tragedy and did their best to track the tragic features in the novel. However, there were many who wrote contradictory answers, simply writing about Gatsby's death as tragic and then saying that he is not tragic as he has flaws and that his fate is inevitable.

Question 32: How far do you agree with the view that the characters in *Dubliners* are trapped by their environment?

A range of stories appeared in the answers to this question and there was some success. Most students agreed with the proposition but some offered a challenge and produced some interesting writing about 'The Dead' and 'Eveline'. Some students did not handle the question well which was disappointing given that the question was on such a central issue in the text.

Question 34: How far do you agree with the view that Lady Catherine is simply a comic figure?

There were a variety of responses to this question and many wrote well about the role of Lady Catherine arguing that there is more to her role than just being a comic figure. Some saw her as a rather terrible representation of the aristocracy and some discussed her as a foil to Elizabeth. When textual evidence was given in support the answers were very strong.

Question 36: Some readers think that Jaggers strikes a note of sinister authority in *Great Expectations*. How do you respond to his character and role?

Although there were few responses to this text, this question was well answered by those who tackled it. There was good discussion of 'sinister authority' and the text was generally well used. When *Great Expectations* is used in either of the A or B sections it generally leads to good writing.

Section B

In this section, students had to manage the texts of three writers across an aspect of narrative, here either climaxes and/or anticlimaxes or the ways speech is used. As with Section A's even numbered questions, students needed to have a clear sense of the stories where climaxes play a part and the stories in which speech is used to open up meanings. There were some excellent answers on both questions which

suggests that many schools and colleges are preparing their students well and examiners reported enjoying marking this section of the paper. Preparing students well, of course, means teaching them how to choose judiciously and to write about the prescribed narrative focus (climaxes\anticlimaxes or speech) in terms of the story. When students did not perform well it was often because they seemed to assume that an odd-numbered approach is appropriate and that any narrative method could be discussed.

Question 37: Write about the significance of climaxes and\or anticlimaxes in the narratives of the three writers you have studied.

Climaxes and\or anticlimaxes are a key aspect of narratives and here candidates needed to identify climactic moments, see how they are built up and then comment on their significance. Some students wrote very generally about climaxes and did not identify what exactly is a climax; some did not grasp that a climax is only a climax if it is prepared for and some did not engage with the meanings that arise from the climax\anticlimax. Some just saw climaxes as the end of the text.

However, many candidates wrote confidently and were clearly thinking about climaxes in relation to the stories that are being told. Much good discussion arose from discussing the balloon incident at the start of *Enduring Love*, of Magwitch's return in *Great Expectations* and the strangling of Porphyria in 'Porphyria's Lover'. The best answers were produced by students who saw how writers structured their texts in preparation for the climax. Some students who did not perform well did not understand what a climax is and simply wrote about a key event. For some, 'significance' was beyond them.

Question 38: Write about the significance of the ways speech is used in the work of the three writers you have studied.

There were some good answers seen here when students knew what speech is and how it releases the story. However, several candidates confused speech with voice and some did not seem to know the function of speech in stories – that there needs to be an addressee or audience, even if it is the character him or herself as in the case of 'Mariana'. Rather surprisingly, though, many students were unable to identify speech and therefore found it difficult to write about its significance. Sometimes speech was selected rather randomly it seemed, for example 'old sport' in *The Great Gatsby*. When students wrote well they located where speech comes in the story and how it operates in terms of the narrative. The students' choices of speech were vital in helping them to write effectively. Examples that worked well included 'I am half sick of shadows' and 'She has a lovely face' from 'The Lady of Shalott'. Some students decided to focus, rather bizarrely, on the absence of speech. Although the lack of speech could be discussed relevantly, it was not a good idea to start the answer by approaching the question from a negative perspective and then selecting poems or parts of novels where there is no speech.

AO1

As has been pointed out in previous reports, how students themselves write about literature is an important factor in how well they perform in terms of marks. AO1 is explicitly tested in Section A (the even numbered questions) 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 students 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 students wrote in a colloquial way

and had scant regard for punctuation or paragraphing. Having said this, there was evidence of some very sophisticated writing and this made answers a pleasure to read.

Conclusion

LITB1 is a challenging paper but it is rewarding and the skills learned certainly benefit students in their work on other units.

Many schools and colleges have understood and appreciated the philosophy behind the paper and, where 'Aspects of Narrative' is at the heart of teaching, students have been advantaged.

One final point made by a number of examiners and one which students ought to heed as they prepare for future examinations is that many students write far too much and that long and rambling answers lack punchy and vibrant focus. It is not true that the more you write the more marks you will get. Students need to be trained to write efficiently with a strong focus on the tasks.

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