



A Level English Literature A

7712/2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

The majority of students who take this option are very well prepared; they demonstrate secure knowledge of their chosen texts and clearly have a useful understanding of the varying contexts that support their study. Students have adapted well to changes in the specification, and it is good to see strong work on the most recent post-2000 text, *The Wipers Times*. Rubric infringements were very rare and again reflected the fact that students have a confident understanding of the paper's requirements. It is worth noting, however, that some students were disadvantaged when they irrelevantly attempted to recycle previous work on past questions. Examiners also felt that overlong responses prevented some students moving up the mark scheme. Such work was often poorly paragraphed, and undermined by poor expression. Examiners also noted a continued tendency for some students to adopt an over-elaborate approximation of an academic register. This work was often very unclear and led to generalised thinking that often refused to answer the question. On the other hand, the very best work this summer engaged with all the keywords of the questions and conveyed complex ideas clearly through precise, sharp thinking.

Areas where students excelled

- exam skills: there was more evidence of better prepared students who focused on the keywords of questions, planned effectively, wrote clearly and managed their time well
- knowledge of set texts: the majority of students demonstrated secure knowledge and understanding of their texts, and were able to make appropriate textual references that both supported and developed their thinking
- there was greater appreciation of genre differences. More students were able to focus on narrative form and perspective in their prose texts as well as considering dramatic methods in their chosen drama texts. Poetic methods were considered in a thorough way, although for some there was a tendency to 'feature spot'
- many students made better use of varying contexts to produced more nuanced thinking. Lengthy contextual 'add-ons' and digressive reference to other texts were less evident. More students excelled in using context as a precise literary tool to debate meaning.

Areas where students struggled

- the Section B extract question is challenging for some students, who often do it last after working on taught texts. Careful reading, annotating, and planning are crucial. Students should not address every prose method as though they are reading it for the first time but should focus on how the extract reflects the given theme
- many students still limit their responses to the comparative task in Section B by mainly focusing on similarities rather than exploring differences. When they consider how different their chosen texts are because of time and genre they can more purposefully consider the ways in which they present the given theme

- a significant minority of students struggle because produce work which is only loosely connected to the questions. These students would benefit from more careful highlighting of the question's key words in planning before they start writing.
- exceptionally long scripts rarely moved up the mark bands. Overlong work prevented students from writing to write clearly and coherently which two key descriptors of Band 4 in the mark scheme.

General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on Paper 1 and NEA, along with the mark schemes for those components.

It was evident from the marking of all three components that the New Historicist philosophy of the specification is positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. New Historicism sees texts not in isolation but as products of their time. As such, it encourages the exploration of the relationship between texts and the contexts in which they are written, received and understood. Key to the engagement with a New Historicist approach is the focus on a shared context. In Component 1 this is the diachronic context of Love through the ages. In Component 2, it is the synchronic context of either WW1 and its Aftermath, or Modern Times. In Component 3, it is the idea of 'texts across time' which allows for a diachronic or a synchronic approach with a chosen focus.

Importantly, this specification aims to encourage confident, independent readers who are able to 'make meaning' through both close textual analysis and a wider understanding of the contexts that might inform their literary study. Students are encouraged to pursue clear, authentic arguments with conviction.

Such responses are best rewarded by the holistic marking of five Assessment Objectives using a 25-mark scale divided into five bands. The holistic use of assessment objectives allows for a flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage independent work not limited by formulaic constraints. Holistic marking enables responses to be assessed as organic whole texts in themselves. Assessment objectives are not tracked in the marking or reported on separately in summative comments. This enables the genuine inter-relatedness of assessment objectives to be respected. The advice to students is to concentrate on answering the question set and let the assessment objectives look after themselves. However, because the quality of written expression is crucial in enabling literary skills, students should continue to be mindful of how they answer the question.

Extract: unseen prose (Section B: Questions 5, 11, 17)

The unseen extract was selected to allow students to fully engage with prose methods. The extract was deliberately accessible in terms of length; well prepared students would have time to read, reread and plan before writing. This question always requires students to engage in 'relevant detailed analysis' as a way of discussing how the writer shapes meaning when considering the keywords of the given view which in this series was **team spirit and shared values**.

Clear focus on the given view allows students to structure a reading that doesn't just 'go through' the extract with paraphrase and list-like analysis of prose methods. Full engagement with the given view encourages a more selective, thorough approach that allows the student to draw together literary analysis and contextual knowledge in a cohesive way.

Successful students clearly benefit from exam practice that builds effective time management through focused reading and planning. Careful reading of the question and the preamble is crucial. Reading the preamble helps the student consider the context of the time of setting and publication. Examiners noted that many students grasped the significance of a writer born in 1916 growing up in the inter-war years and who had adult experience of the second World War. Students alert to the 1961 publication date were able to consider the literary context and the revisionary approach to a war that allowed for the massive casualties experienced during the Battle of the Somme. Careful reading of the preamble also allowed students to consider the men who 'volunteered' together in pals divisions and the impact of mass casualties on their communities.

The best work always considered 'team spirit' and 'shared values' precisely and did not conflate the two. 'Team spirit' was explored through considering rhetorical patterns that stressed the collective nature of the immense preparation for battle through repetition of number and adjectives. Repetition of clauses and listing was seen to reinforce the collective nature of 'team spirit'. Many confident students considered 'shared values' to underpin the military discipline of 'team spirit' and discussed the presentation of patriotism and national pride in the extract. The use of the *Richard II* speech allowed students to consider pastoral, spiritual imagery that they thought was typical of early war sentiments. Some sophisticated responses considered the biblical echoes of the narrator's sense that they were 'the chosen people, poised on a lofty height'. The singing of 'God Save the King' was carefully considered; many could comment on the significance of collective act of singing, others considered how important the anthem was an act of patriotism and how engrained it was in Edwardian England.

Less able students tended to treat the text in isolation and were unable to consider many of the contextual prompts highlighted in the preamble. More assertive responses engaged with the given view through criticising the naïve patriotic attitudes of the author. Some students recognised the 1960s context of publication and felt that the patriotism presented in the extract was atypical of the time. More successful students confidently considered narrative form and recognised the irony and pathos embedded in the presentation of 'team spirit' and 'shared values' before the historical tragedy of The Battle of the Somme. This work carefully considered the significance of the retrospective first person narrative and explored the imagery with more subtlety. These responses explored how 'team spirit' was merely subsumed

into a vast mechanised war that was represented through the simile of the 'iron monster'. Less able students misread the imagery and concluded that this was the force that the soldiers would need to fight against. More assured students recognised that this was 'The Big Push' that had been promised as an offensive that would win the war. Confident students explored the true nature of 'team spirit' through focusing on specific verb choices; men were mere commodities that would be 'snatched' and 'flung' into 'the final holocaust'. Again, the most sophisticated responses explored the religious notion of 'holocaust' and sensibly considered the extract in the wider context of the novel's title, *Covenant with Death*.

More successful **extract-based** answers

- always explored the extract through considering the significance of 'team spirit and shared values'
- never treated the extract in isolation; had a secure overview of prose structure and perspective as well as using varying contexts to consider the significance of team spirit and shared values'
- did not see prose methods as a simple check list, but through engaging with 'significance' purposely considered how the writer shaped meaning. Textual detail was chosen carefully and analysis served to develop an argument rather than as an end in itself
- integrated contextual knowledge into the argument rather than using it as an add-on. Always considered the extract and the topic within the shared context of the option
- communicated with clarity with an appropriate literary register.

Less successful **extract-based** answers

- frequently lost sight of the significance of 'team spirit and shared values' and 'went through' the extract in a decontextualised way noting prose methods without considering how they shape meaning
- either treated the text in isolation, or discussed context in a digressive way which led the student away from the extract
- tended to 'feature spot' prose methods and sometimes produced over-elaborate readings based on the use of punctuation or misapplied poetic terminology such as 'volta' to a prose text
- did not read carefully and produced misreadings to support over-assertive ideas
- did not communicate clearly and sometimes adopted an over-elaborated style of writing perhaps to create an academic register. Students need to be reminded that the best work communicates complex ideas simply.

Comparison: chosen set texts (Section B: Questions 6, 12, 18)

In Paper 1, two out of three tasks involve explicit comparison. In Papers 2A and 2B, one out of three tasks is explicitly comparative. The NEA task is also explicitly comparative. In stark contrast, Specification B never asks students to compare one text with another. There are other kinds of comparison involved in Specification A tasks too, of course, such as explicit or implicit comparison within the shared contexts to establish typicality or atypicality.

A clear understanding of the task was key to success in this comparative element of section B. Students were asked to **compare** the **significance of team spirit and shared values** across **two texts from different genres**. Well-prepared students clearly familiar with the unchanging format of this task.

Successful comparisons explored differences, not just similarities. They considered how the given theme was presented in both texts, focusing on the differing genres and literary methods. Weaker responses relied on content similarities and narrative paraphrasing, ignoring genre differences. Understanding 'significance' is crucial for considering genres, methods, and contexts that create meaning. Successful students used precise literary language appropriate to poetry, drama, and prose. Less successful work often focused on word-level analysis and misapplied poetic terms to drama and prose.

Work that was less successful tended to focus more on demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the chosen texts, rather than selecting material relevant to 'team spirit and shared values'. These efforts often involved treating the two texts separately through extensive sections on each individual text, using brief discourse markers such as 'similarly' or 'on the other hand'. In contrast, more thoughtful work seamlessly integrated discussions of both texts and purposefully analysed well-chosen textual details to construct a convincing comparison. To achieve higher marks, students should establish comparative links by thoughtfully and precisely selecting textual details, rather than attempting to demonstrate familiarity with their texts through narrative-driven work that may become digressive.

The chosen theme of 'team spirit and shared values' was accessible to the majority of students. Importantly, many students produced responses that focused on how 'team spirit and shared values' differed and could become a source of conflict. Such work considered conflict within the military hierarchy where 'team spirit and shared values' were often very different. The dramatic conflict between Hibbert and Stanhope in *Journey's End* was often purposefully considered as Sherriff's way of presenting the necessity of 'team spirit' on the front-line. In *The Wipers Times* 'shared values' was often explored through considering the conflict between Roberts and the military hierarchy represented by Howfield who opposes the newspaper and states that 'The battlefield is not the place for humour'. Students also compared how presentations of 'team spirit and shared values' differ because of time. These responses purposely compared early and later war poetry through a comparison with characters such as Raleigh or Stanhope from *Journey's End*, or Burns and Sassoon from *Regeneration*. Students also successfully compared the differing presentations of home-front and front-line values. Such work considered the 'team spirit' presented in Jessie Pope's poetry or the lack of 'shared values' that soldiers experience when they are away from the front-line in *Regeneration* or *Birdsong*.

Successful work shows that understanding different contexts can help explore meaning in a precise and nuanced way. However, many students discuss context in a way that becomes digressive and moves away from close textual analysis. For instance, discussing 'the shared values' represented in propaganda and jingoism should be integrated into an analysis of the characterisation of Howfield in *The Wipers Times* or Hamilton's poem *The Jingo-Woman*.

Less successful students often focused on individual words rather than considering form and structure. This led to assertive interpretations based on sometimes inaccurate linguistic analysis. In this work there was also a tendency to misapply poetic analysis to other genres. AQA's Teaching Guide to AO2 offers a better method for understanding how meaning is constructed across genres.

<https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-a/teach/teaching-guide-ao2>

More successful comparative set text answers:

- consider the given view through comparing the two chosen texts
- move fluently between texts often exploring difference rather than just similarity
- carefully select relevant textual details to support ideas
- have a secure understanding of poetic, dramatic and/or prose methods
- always link literary analysis to meaning
- integrate an understanding of context into literary analysis
- can consider how texts may shape meaning in a more tentative fashion when necessary
- show awareness of typicality in the literature of WW1 and its aftermath.

Less successful comparative set text answers:

- lose sight of the given topic and resort to narrative paraphrase
- tend to unload ideas often leading to digressive work which can be rushed and incomplete
- tend to be assertive and are not supported by well-chosen references
- can only 'feature spot' sometimes inaccurately and can only link methods to meaning in an assertive unconvincing way
- make generalised references to context and typicality that lead to assertive, inaccurate arguments.

Secure AO1 is essential when comparing two texts using a central argument. Students who effectively used these AO1 tools often gave more successful responses:

- clear introductions and conclusions that focus on the keywords and frame the response
- clear paragraphing to build structured comparison
- purposeful discourse markers to highlight comparative thinking

- clear succinct expression that avoids imprecise, overlong sentences
- clear use of topic sentences to guide a purposeful argument.

Option 1

Many centres still took the opportunity to use *My Boy Jack* as they were able to compare the text with the post-2000 novels *A Long Long Way* or *Life Class*. Those who chose *The Wipers Times* as the post-2000 text could choose texts such as *Regeneration*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Birdsong*. Many students purposefully compared the 'shared values' of the home-front and the front-line. Through precise consideration of Sassoon's characterisation in *Regeneration*, students were able to explore the conflict between protesting against the conduct of the war and his duty towards his men.

Option 2

Successful responses chose precise textual material for focused comparison. For example, students studying *Regeneration* could examine the theme through the relationship between Sassoon and Rivers or focus on Rivers' empathetic methods conflicting with military discipline. Relevant poems were aptly linked, and comparisons focused on the presentation of early war versus post-Somme shared values. While 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was a popular choice, many students struggled to discuss it relevantly, often relying on pre-prepared content about the horrors of war. Stronger responses examined 'team spirit' in the poem by considering both the officer's actions and his enduring trauma. More sophisticated analyses addressed the second-person narrative and the writer's intention to challenge pro-war attitudes, reflecting his duty towards the common soldier.

Option 3

The Wipers Times is now the only post-2000 drama text. Students are approaching it with greater confidence and understanding of its dramatic methods. Many focused on the 'team spirit' between the men, especially the relationship between Roberts and Pearson. Successful responses examined humour thoroughly, seeing it as more than just a coping device. They understood satire as a protest against patriotic home front values and analysed the dramatic presentation of the ironic adverts from the original newspaper. These responses also explored humour and satire in war, comparing the play with satiric poems like Sassoon's 'The General'.

Feedback on selected single set text questions

the More detailed information on student performance is to be found in the indicative content of the mark scheme for this unit.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

Up the Line to Death – ed. Brian Gardner

Question 1

Better answers:

- engaged purposefully with the keywords 'powerful', 'passive endurance' and 'active combat'
- considered the context of time relevantly though considering how later war poetry often focused more powerfully on 'passive endurance'
- purposefully considered 'powerful poetry' through well selected analysis of poetic methods
- fully debated and challenged the given view through considering varying ways in which 'active combat' is presented
- demonstrated an accurate understanding of Gardner's selection and organisation of the anthology.

Less effective answers:

- only had a superficial grasp of the keywords of the given view and tended to resort to pre-planned material that compared early and post-Somme poetry a broad way
- did not select appropriate poems and often over-relied on predictable, heavily rehearsed readings of *Dulce et Decorum Est*
- tended to unload comments on poetic methods rather than considering how these techniques shape meaning
- used context in a generalised way rather than using it as a relevant literary tool to explore meaning.

Question 2

Better answers:

- fully engaged with the keywords 'significance', 'fate' and 'chance'
- set a purposeful agenda that quickly established a clear understanding of 'fate' and 'chance'

- demonstrated a precise understanding of the differences between 'fate' and 'chance' and used this to build structured arguments
- confidently considered patriotic and religious imagery as a way of considering 'fate'
- discussed well-chosen poems as a way of showing the varied ways in which 'fate and 'chance' are presented in the anthology.

Less effective answers:

- misunderstood 'significance' as 'importance'
- adopted a list-like approach itemising poems loosely linked to 'fate' or 'chance'
- over-relied on pre-prepared responses to poems that they understood, rather than choosing to discuss more relevant poetry
- tended to 'feature spot' and assumed that, for example, describing rhyme schemes without reference to meaning was a legitimate form of analysis.

Scars Upon My Heart – ed. Catherine Reilly

Question 3

Better answers:

- engaged with all keywords in the given view
- offered a nuanced approach to the debate that explored men presented as both 'heroes' and 'victims'
- were able to debate the keywords through thorough analysis of poems such as Postgate Cole's *The Veteran*
- shaped debates that also acknowledged that the anthology focused more on women as 'heroes' or 'victims'
- considered poems such as Hamilton's *The Ghouls* to confidently argue that men were victims of home-front values and attitudes
- confidently considered men as victims not just of war, but of nationalistic patriotic attitudes.

Less effective answers:

- built responses around well-rehearsed readings of poems without fully engaging with the given view
- 'went through' poems and tended to feature spot rather than consider how meaning is shaped through poetic methods
- unloaded context in pre-planned introductions which sometimes ignored the task
- often built distorted, assertive readings based on minimal textual detail
- failed to use paragraphs and discourse markers to shape a clear argument
- over-used discourse markers in a haphazard way.

Question 4

Better answers:

- engaged with all keywords in the question and considered 'never' with subtlety
- clearly set up an agenda which recognised that the anthology was created to challenge the existing male dominated First World War canon
- reflected secure textual knowledge and understanding of the anthology as a whole and could make relevant, thoughtful selections
- purposefully considered the differing aspects of 'male authority' through considering religion, politics and over-arching patriotic and nationalistic ideals
- skilfully used context as a literary tool through discussing the empowerment of women demonstrated in poems such as Pope's *War Girls*.

Less effective answers:

- produced 'context heavy' responses that considered the changing roles of women during the war and could only focus on some textual details as a form of cross-reference
- made poor poem selections because of an insecure grasp of the whole anthology
- did not engage with all the keywords of the given view and were unable to set up a convincing agenda from the start
- over-relied on familiar, well-taught poems which were not always relevant to the task.

Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts

Oh! What a Lovely War – Joan Littlewood

The entry was very small for this text, making it difficult to provide a meaningful report.

Journey's End – R C Sherriff

Question 9

Better answers:

- engaged with the given view to develop a focused discussion on Osborne's presentation by considering his authority and interactions with other characters.
- were able to consider his dramatic function within the play and discuss how he is used to present Stanhope through his interactions with Hardy and Raleigh
- purposefully debated the view through considering his relationships with Raleigh and Stanhope

- used contextual knowledge of public-school culture to consider Osborne and his relationships with the other men
- confidently considered the dramatic significance of Osborne's death through considering props such as Osborne's bed and the varying reactions to his death.

Less effective answers:

- treated Osborne as a real person and could not discuss his dramatic presentation
- used the given view as a simple essay frame to list Osborne's qualities as a teacher in a generalised, assertive way
- did not consider dramatic methods other than paraphrasing the stage notes on Osborne on the first page of the play
- largely ignored the presentation of his death and the repercussions on the other characters
- failed to comment on the common public-school background that unites Osborne, Raleigh and Stanhope.
- made mistaken assertions that Osborne was a headteacher.

Question 10

Better answers:

- fully engaged with 'the significance of loyalty' and confidently discussed varying aspects of loyalty through considering personal relationships, military discipline and loyalty to country and its war effort
- considered Sherriff's intentions as a writer, and saw the play as an act of loyalty to his regiment and all who fought in the war
- fully considered how loyalty to fellow soldiers is explored in the confrontation between Stanhope and Hibbert
- considered the conflict between personal and military loyalties through considering the varying reactions of the Colonel, Stanhope and Raleigh to Osborne's death in the trench raid
- explored the significance of loyalty through exploring the tensions and final resolution of Stanhope and Raleigh's relationship.

Less effective answers:

- failed to establish an overview on the differing aspects of loyalty and could only offer simple examples in a list-like way
- resorted to using pre-written material on past questions
- failed to consider dramatic methods and treated characters as real people or as if they were part of a prose text

Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text

Regeneration – Pat Barker

Question 13

Better answers:

- explored significance through considering setting in terms of the physical place, its role as an institution and its literary function in the novel as a whole
- considered the use of an historical location to offer a fresh perspective on war experience and trauma away from the front line
- were able to consider the physical presentation of Craiglockhart and how it is used to convey the claustrophobic nature of post-traumatic stress
- could explore Craiglockhart's function to present the conflict between military duty and discipline with the more empathetic talking cure employed by Rivers
- set an agenda that drew together contextual knowledge of Craiglockhart and historical characters into discussions about the writer's use of the setting.
- demonstrated expert textual knowledge through well-chosen textual evidence supported by relevant analysis of prose methods.

Less effective answers:

- failed to set an agenda about the significance of the setting at the start of the response
- offered a narrative paraphrase of Sassoon's arrival at Craiglockhart at the start of the novel and then focused on character rather than setting
- unloaded contextual knowledge of Craiglockhart, but failed to discuss its function as a literary setting
- resorted to pre-planned material based on past questions that focused on characters rather than setting
- resorted to narrative paraphrase
- confused 'significance' with importance
- failed to comment on prose methods.

Question 14

Better answers:

- fully engaged with all keywords of the given view.
- offered a subtle contextual overview of the extent to which traditional masculine values could reinforce trauma or inhibit its treatment
- could purposefully debate the difference between 'cured' and 'overcome' through comparing Yealland and Rivers' varying treatments
- confidently considered the presentation of war trauma through comparing the differing experiences of characters such as Burns and Prior

- confidently selected textual material to show that trauma could not be escaped and could still be experienced away from the frontline
- thoughtfully explored the imagery of possible recovery from trauma and made good use of the pivotal Chapter 15
- confidently considered Barker's intentions as a writer and her female perspective on the male experience of trauma.

Less effective answers:

- produced list-like responses that paraphrased the traumatic experiences of the characters without engaging with all the keywords of the given view
- developed less relevant responses based on past question material
- unloaded contextual references to 'shell shock' without integrating this into a more literary response
- failed to structure the response through clear introductions or conclusions and failed to signpost ideas through appropriate topic sentences and discourse markers.

Birdsong – Sebastian Faulks

Question 15

Better answers:

- demonstrated expert textual knowledge and considered material from all of the novel's time frames
- confidently considered the Somme setting in the pre-war, war and post-war sections
- produced conceptual approaches that considered the pastoral aspects of the natural world presented in the prewar section on the visit to the Somme as a contrast to the 'fall from grace' shown in the presentation of the battle
- considered remembrance and memorialisation through focusing on Elizabeth's journey to Thiepval and her discovery of the truth about her grandfather's wartime experiences.

Less effective answers:

- produced generalised work which largely just offered a narrative paraphrase focusing on the horrors of war
- ignored the relevant pre- and post-war sections of the novel
- failed to consider prose methods
- produced work that sometimes echoed past questions.

Question 16

Better answers:

- fully focused on all key words in the given view
- always considered Faulks' presentation of women within the wider context of his representation of war
- could consider a range of characters such as Isabelle, Jeanne and Elizabeth in a purposeful, relevant way
- confidently considered Elizabeth's function as a surrogate for reader within the post war time frame. Explored the ways in which she is 'crucial' in a late twentieth century perspective on the war
- demonstrated an understanding of how the brutalisation of war is shown in Stephen's treatment of the prostitute and Isabelle's physical scarring
- considered the extent to which women could help men overcome the trauma of war through discussing Jeanne's role within the novel as well as debating the significance of the birth and naming of Elizabeth's child at the conclusion of the novel.

Less effective answers:

- were list-like responses that showed some knowledge of female characters, but failed to engage with all the keywords of the given view
- supported thinking by narrative paraphrase rather than considering literary methods
- discussed female characters as 'real people' rather than considering their function within the text
- were often assertive and saw women as peripheral in a male-dominated novel
- either ignored the contemporary sections of the novel or struggled to engage with Elizabeth's function within Faulks' representation of war.

Further support

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