



A Level **English Literature A**

7712/2B

Report on the Examination

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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.

This summer’s Modern Times paper proved highly accessible to students, but in some cases, these problems were still being noted by senior examiners despite having been red-flagged for several years running:

- Students labelling any/every text within this shared context – including the unseen prose extract - ‘postmodern’ or ‘modernist’ when this is absolutely not true. ‘Postmodernism’ is not a date stamp to be applied to every text published after 1945, but a specific literary concept/genre/text type. Moreover ‘Modernism’ is a genre

strongly identified with the literature of the 1920s, and thus well outside the historical scope of this unit.

- A 12-page answer book should be used for this paper. Exceptionally long scripts that went well beyond this almost always showcased work consistently at the same level, thus doing nothing to move up the mark bands. Notably prolix and diffuse responses call into question the students' ability to write clearly and coherently: two key Band 4 descriptors.
- Very few rubric infringements were seen, but a tiny minority of students made irrelevant comparisons to pre-1945 literature studied for the Love through the Ages unit such as *The Great Gatsby*. Such texts cannot possibly shed any light on this unit's *post-1945 shared synchronic context* and in fact call into question the students' fundamental understanding of this examination.

Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Most 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. 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 attempted to recycle previous work on past questions. In addition:

- examiners reported that this year there were fewer over-long answers that ranged beyond a twelve-page answer booklet
- examiners also reported that responses receiving higher marks tended to have a brief but meaningful plan
- historical and critical contexts should be used carefully and judiciously to ensure that it is explicitly relevant to the question so that it informs the argument, rather than appearing extraneous or even irrelevant
- the most successful kind of analysis involves explaining **why** and **how** literary methods might create various effects on the reader or audience, rather than simply asserting that they do so. Linking methods clearly to meaning remains a key discriminator
- clear, accurate expression and well organised ideas are hallmarks of successful essay writing.

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
- 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'

- better use of varying contexts: lengthy contextual ‘add-ons’ and digressive reference to other texts were less evident, with more students 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 are rarely highly rewarded. Loosely structured work usually prevents students from writing clearly and coherently, which are key descriptors of Band 4 in the mark scheme.

Questions and Summary

Unseen prose extract (Section B: Questions 5, 11, 17)

The unseen prose extract has been chosen with a clear beginning and end to enable more thorough analysis. The key words of the given view are intended as a lens through which to view the extract. Therefore, there is every reason to spend a substantial amount of time analysing the extract given in the light of the stated theme: in this series *the struggle for identity*. As the extract is always from a novel published after 1945, it is particularly important to write about prose narrative. Precise relevant references to aspects of narrative methods are encouraged. Essential to success in this question is for students to have undertaken sufficient practice in unseen critical analysis, and to avoid irrelevant references to other texts when instructed to write about the significance of the given theme of loneliness and social isolation *‘in this extract’*.

Whereas less effective responses to William Boyd’s *Restless* (2006) tended to paraphrase the extract via a ‘narrative-with-text’ approach plus attendant feature-spotting, better responses engaged enthusiastically and skilfully with this text and found plenty of illuminating things to say about her narrative methods. Some writing of exceptionally high quality was seen here, especially when students correctly identified the genre of the text as a historical spy thriller. Better answers, while acknowledging that the extract is only a tiny part of a much longer text, wrote well about its internal structure and cohesion, eg the beginning, development and denouement of the scene. Weaker answers made assertions that showed a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the task, such as claiming that Boyd began writing ‘in media res’ when actually AQA had selected the extract, or stating that his purpose was, for example, ‘to explore male mental health’ through his writing. Clearly the theme of the struggle for identity was selected by AQA for the purposes of this examination and *not* by Boyd himself nearly twenty years ago.

The best answers commented effectively on Boyd’s use of a third-person narrative point of view often focalised through his central protagonist, Eva Delectorskaya. Students who were unable to recognise Boyd’s viewpoint were disadvantaged from the outset, since correctly ascertaining this opened up the overall tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track when this core aspect of the text was misunderstood. Too many students asserted that Boyd’s third-person narrative stance necessarily ‘distanced’ both the reader and (oddly) himself from Eva – a simplistic cliché that showed a lack of close reading. Eva’s thoughts, ideas and actions are tracked throughout the extract; the reader follows her every step of the way from the bombed-out ruins of the East End to the posh cafés of the West End. Readers are capable of empathising with and understanding the motivations and actions of fictional protagonists without the first-person narrative voice being employed. One wonders

why any writer would use the third-person stance if it was as useless and retrograde as some students claimed.

Less able students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert that when Boyd wrote the novel in 2006, he must have been thinking about the aftermath of 9/11, or indeed any major world event or conflict situation they could think of that took place after or around 2000. This type of comment shows a very limited grasp of the contexts of production and reception. Urging protagonist Eva to get a job and become a feminist, or to stop drinking alcohol and trying to find a man, suggested that Boyd's character was being seen as a real person rather than as a fictional construct; while wondering if Boyd the writer 'could not identify with Eva because he is a man' was equally irrelevant and limited. Students who put context before text placed themselves at a disadvantage by making speculative claims that Boyd predicted the 2017 #MeToo movement or the arrival of immigrants from Eastern Europe in the 2000s. Asserting that Boyd was 'really' writing about issues from his own day was digressive and impossible to substantiate in their responses. Had they analysed the extract as part of a *historical novel set during World War II*, their answers would have been far more pertinent, relevant and insightful.

More successful *extract-based* answers:

- look at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of the set topic and its significance – and understand that in this specification, 'significance' does not mean 'relative importance', but is an invitation to create a sharply focused argument about the possible meanings encoded in the set topic (see also below for more about this key term)
- sustain focus on the extract and the writer's narrative methods
- make considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text
- show awareness and understanding of the typicality of the set topic within this shared context.

Less successful *extract-based* answers:

- make sparse use of the extract, or neglect parts of it, or impose one narrow view upon it and attempt to prove its 'correctness'
- do not pay attention to the writer's narrative methods
- write about the characters as though they are real people
- describe or paraphrase the extract
- make inaccurate, unsubstantiated, irrelevant and/or sweeping assertions about context.

Comparative 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.

To connect texts successfully within the framework of this question, students must remember that they have been instructed to *compare* the presentation of the given theme – *the struggle for identity* - across *two texts from different genres*. Sometimes even relatively strong candidates did not take full advantage of exploring these differences, and the weakest responses almost always insisted, often very unconvincingly, that their comparative set texts dealt with the given theme in ‘very similar’ ways. Many students defaulted to using the connective ‘similarly’ before going on to make a point that actually pointed to a major *difference* between the texts.

When comparing any two of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, it is crucial to analyse how they differ. There is no point in asserting that two texts are similar simply because they both deal with the same given theme – all the comparative set texts must do so, or the question could not have been set. The focus of the response must be on *presentation*, not merely *content*; the *how* as much as the *what*.

Previous reports have stressed the importance of being able to explore specific poetic, dramatic and prose methods so that an understanding of how writers operate can be established by the student. Successful responses tend to be marked by an awareness and understanding of the genre under discussion, and that poets, dramatists and novelists have different ways of working. Examiners understand that like is not being compared with like here, so a novelist’s or dramatist’s methods may need more exposition and reference than those of a poet. The challenge for students is to demonstrate that different terminology and different metrics will be needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

Many students connected texts by putting texts side by side and going from one to the other in a linear fashion. However, the best responses were fully comparative where detailed similarities and differences were closely explored. The latter is a higher order skill that opens up the higher reaches of the mark scheme.

Better students worked through thoughtfully developed links between their texts that focused on how the writers’ poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked to illuminate the theme of the struggle for identity. Crucially, they also clearly identified the nature of this topic as shown

within their texts, eg in relation to the role of women, sexuality, class, race. Less able students tended to off-load preconceived ideas about context and typicality without successfully relating them to the given theme – and/or their responses failed to clarify exactly how and where the struggle for identity was to be seen within their chosen texts.

At times, a bolted-on contextual overlay swamped the chosen texts, with some students losing focus that this examination is in English Literature (not history, politics, psychology or sociology). Potted histories of various waves of feminism or the struggle for civil rights, for example, are not asked for or required. When exploring their comparative set texts in an Open Book examination, accurate textual detail is crucial; well-chosen aspects of authorial method must form the bedrock of any successful comparison.

Students who adopt a lexical approach to AO2 often self-penalise. Writing two or three paragraphs about, for example, the impact on the audience of Tennessee Williams's use of alliteration in a single stage direction from *A Streetcar Named Desire* is *not* a productive mode of literary analysis. Moreover, it is remarkable how many of the students who choose this unhelpful 'dissection' approach inevitably do not succeed in getting the basics right; there were numerous over-confident identifications of a specific part of speech in which 'the adjective' was in fact a noun, pronoun or adverb. The resultant display is not of knowledge and understanding but the exact opposite. AQA's *Teaching Guide to AO2* offers a clear way into thinking about the different ways in which meaning is shaped across the three different 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:

- look at both texts with the question focus of the struggle for identity in mind
- sustain a comparative approach
- support relevant readings with specific textual details
- analyse poetic, dramatic and/or prose methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary
- apply context in a considered way, again being suitably tentative rather than assertively definitive
- show awareness of typicality in the literature of modern times.

Less successful *comparative set text* answers:

- work through the texts a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific task focus of the struggle for identity
- leave ideas undeveloped and unsupported
- assert over-confident, generalised and speculative interpretations

- describe poetic, dramatic and/or prose methods in isolation, with no reference to meaning, or simply assert an unconvincing link to an alleged meaning
- label methods and word classes inaccurately
- make sweeping, simplistic or inaccurate statements about context and/or typicality in the literature of modern times.

Some students used an ornate style of writing which was presumably felt to be ‘academic’, but which, in its convoluted syntax and elaborate (and often inaccurate) word choices, actually impeded the clear communication of meaning. With two texts to consider and an argument to build, comparisons are best constructed with the tools of clear AO1 in a way that signals the argument to the reader and guides them accordingly:

- introductions and conclusions
- clean sentences
- clear paragraphs
- paragraphs that begin with topic sentences that relate back to the central theme
- discourse markers to signal similarity and difference.

On the whole, however, many excellent comparative essays were seen that analysed how each text represented the theme of changing social attitudes in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, norms and ethics. Truly original and fascinating connections were traced across the chosen texts in relation to a wide variety of possible issues and areas that might give rise to changing social attitudes, including gender, class, race, sexuality, religion and mental health. Some students compared how specific characters within their texts respond to the struggle for identity in various ways, and acknowledged how these may be viewed very differently over time. As with this type of very open question in previous examination series, the best answers here were simply outstanding and illuminated the chosen comparative texts in innovative, complex and fascinating ways.

Feedback on selected single set text questions

More detailed information as to the standard content of student answers – that is, the aspects of the texts they wrote about – is to be found in the indicative content of the mark scheme for this unit.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

Both poetry set texts are collections, not anthologies. Some students used these terms interchangeably, showing a failure to understand that poets plan, design and structure their texts just as carefully as novelists and dramatists do. These collections are coherent bodies of work put together by the poets themselves; anthologies are much broader representative selections put together by editors. The implications here are profound in terms of what students can say about the overall design and purpose of *Feminine Gospels* and *Skirrid Hill*.

***Feminine Gospels* by Carol Ann Duffy**

Question 1

Better answers:

- looked at the implications of the title and applied it to a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole
- used the key word ‘significance’ as a springboard for debate
- chose their illustrative poems wisely, and linked them clearly and specifically to the title

Less effective answers:

- spelled the poet’s name and/or the collection’s title incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- referred to the collection as an ‘anthology’
- wrote about poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- ‘went through’ the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming ‘so this shows ...’ in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- used a generalised ‘checklist’ approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to ‘prove’ the given view correct or incorrect.

Question 2

Better answers:

- wrote about 'grief and mourning' with insight and sensitivity
- went on to explore examples of women expressing other strong emotions – e.g. love, anger or pride - in order to create an effective counterargument
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the poet's name and/or the collection's title incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- referred to the collection as an 'anthology'
- tended to 'go through' poems that didn't seem to be very well understood
- claimed that another theme was in fact dominant and twisted the question to write about that instead
- wrote about poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming 'so this shows ...' in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- used a generalised 'checklist' approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to 'prove' the given view correct or incorrect.

Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers

Question 3

Better answers:

- examined a variety of poems about aspects of Wales within the collection
- used the key word 'significance' as a springboard for debate
- linked Sheers' ideas network and poetic methods effectively
- analysed broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the poet's name and/or the collection's title incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- referred to the collection as an 'anthology'
- wrote about poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task

- ‘went through’ the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming ‘so this shows ...’ in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- used a generalised ‘checklist’ approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to ‘prove’ the given view correct or incorrect.

Question 4

Better answers:

- examined a variety of poems about aspects of time within the collection
- used the key word ‘significance’ as a springboard for debate
- linked Sheers’ ideas network and poetic methods effectively
- analysed broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the poet’s name and/or the collection’s title incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- referred to the collection as an ‘anthology’
- did not address the key word ‘significance’
- wrote about poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- ‘went through’ the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming ‘so this shows ...’ in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- used a generalised ‘checklist’ approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to ‘prove’ the given view correct or incorrect.

Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts

***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams**

Question 7

Better answers:

- looked at the implications of the title and applied it to a conceptualised understanding of the play as a whole
- used the key word ‘significance’ as a springboard for debate
- chose their illustrative points wisely, and linked them clearly and specifically to the title

Less effective answers:

- spelled the dramatist's name incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- did not address the key word 'significance'
- wrote very generally about characters as if they were real and criticised their behaviour in ways that suggested a weak grasp of the contexts of production and reception
- asserted that Williams' homosexuality automatically meant that he was oppressed and lived in fear, when the most cursory knowledge of the dramatist's life would strongly suggest otherwise
- wrote about elements of Williams' biography, eg the tragic history of his sister Rose, and made unsubstantiated and simplistic assertions irrelevant to the text and task
- wrote inaccurately about the contexts of the play
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that did not focus on Williams as a dramatist.

Question 8

Better answers:

- showed an extremely impressive understanding of Williams' characterisation of Stanley, and how this is open to multiple interpretations
- analysed the play's very different contexts of production and reception, and how these might affect interpretations of Stanley's dramatic function
- examined broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the play as a whole, often looking relevantly at specific performances.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the dramatist's name incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- asserted that Williams' homosexuality automatically meant that he was oppressed and lived in fear, when the most cursory knowledge of the dramatist's life would strongly suggest otherwise
- wrote about elements of Williams' biography, eg the tragic history of his sister Rose, and made unsubstantiated and simplistic assertions irrelevant to the text and task
- wrote inaccurately about the contexts of the play
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that did not focus on Williams as a dramatist.

***Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill**

Questions 9 & 10

- These questions were answered by a very small minority of students, so detailed feedback cannot be given.

Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts

***Waterland* by Graham Swift**

Questions 13 & 14

- These questions were answered by a very small minority of students, so detailed feedback cannot be given.

***The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood**

Question 15

Better answers:

- looked at the implications of the title and applied it to a conceptualised understanding of the novel as a whole
- used the key word 'significance' as a springboard for debate
- chose their illustrative points wisely, and linked them clearly and specifically to the title
- wrote well about Atwood's narrative methods and the dystopian genre.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the writer's name incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- adopted a list-like and generically descriptive approach which did not address the key word 'significance'
- did not look in detail at Atwood's narrative methods and the dystopian genre.

Question 16

Better answers:

- showed clear understanding of the significance of freedom in the novel

- examined how various characters' experienced freedom (and of course the lack of it) to illuminate a strong debate
- wrote well about Atwood's narrative methods and the dystopian genre.

Less effective answers:

- spelled the dramatist's name incorrectly in an Open Book examination
- wrote in a descriptive way about what happens to various characters as if they were real people rather than fictional constructs
- drifted into a generalised discussion of Gilead's oppressive nature
- did not address the key word 'significance'
- did not look in detail at Atwood's narrative methods or the dystopian genre.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [results statistics](#) page of our website.

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

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Contact us

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