



A-Level

English Literature A

7712/1 Love through the ages

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Performance is in line with last and previous years. Common discriminators remain as outlined in the guidance and priorities section below. Specific aspects of question performance are detailed in the individual question section below.

Areas where students excelled

- directly addressing the given view and key words as a way to explore interpretation.
- linking methods to meaning, stressing the relevance of chosen methods to the question.
- communicating a structured argument as the best way of answering the question.
- knowledge and understanding of the Shakespeare extract and wider play.
- grasp of the Shakespeare text as an example of its genre.
- considering Shakespeare as drama for the stage.
- sustaining a comparative approach in Sections B and C.
- understanding the forms of the poems in Section B.
- finding differences and distinctions between the poems in Section B.
- choosing relevant material from the novel and relevant poems from the chosen Anthology in Section C.
- considering the extent to which the question focus applies to the chosen material in Section C, eg where there **is** loyalty and faithfulness, rather than quickly moving on to disloyalty and infidelity.
- making relevant use of critics.

Areas where students struggled

- planning the argument and selecting material/detail carefully so as to stay relevant to the question – so much depends on planning and choosing, particularly in Section C.
 - shaping and structuring a clear and relevant argument – answering the question to a satisfying degree involves communicating a thesis.
 - exploring interpretation in a tentative and measured way – beware of sweeping statements, link points to where and when in the text.
 - making clear, relevant and sufficient use of the Shakespeare extract – the extract is reprinted on the examination paper with an express purpose.
 - linking poetry methods to meaning and the question in Section B – otherwise relevance cannot be established.
 - distinguishing between the speaker and writer in Section B – they are not necessarily the same.
 - misunderstanding ‘post-modern’ as a label of time rather than as a stylistic/philosophical choice.
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General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 2A/2B and NEA, along with the mark schemes for those components. Reports on the components for the closely related AS Specification (7711) might also prove useful.

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.

Guidance on priorities

In the first few series of this examination, the emphasis of reports and subsequent training was on New Historicism as the underpinning philosophy of the Specification. The following four areas of priority are designed to build on that foundation. They will also form the basis of autumn feedback training later this year.

Comparison

Comparison is a distinctive feature of this Specification. In Paper 1, two out 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. There are other kinds of comparison involved in Specification A tasks too, such as explicit or implicit comparison within the shared context to establish typicality or atypicality.

In Paper 1 there are two main comparative challenges: the unseen poetry comparison in Section B; and the comparison between the novel and at least two poems from one of the poetry anthologies in Section C.

Section B involves a particular set of challenges: a given view to interpret; unseen and therefore untaught poems to read, re-read and annotate; which poetic methods to engage and how to link them to meaning; how to make use of the shared context to illuminate the poems; and the construction of a co-ordinated comparison. All within a notional hour time slot.

Past reports have urged students to concentrate more on differences than similarities as areas for particular exploration. Similarities are almost a given in that love will be the theme and the lead examiner will have chosen the poems with a similarity of subject matter in mind. However, specific similarities should be exploited to help shape the answer. Identifying similarities is often a useful way into discussing differences.

Similar points can be made about Section C which involves choosing wisely from the material in the novel and from the poetry anthology, as both choices are crucial to the success of the answer. Material is best selected in order to embed a clear argument about the specific question focus. An otherwise sound argument can be undone by ill-judged choices such as

- too many strands of the novel so the argument is lost.
- too much recounting of the novel's narrative.
- using more poems than are necessary to make the point.
- poems chosen because the student knows them rather than because they fit the precise question.
- insufficient attention to relevant prose vs poetry methods.

Answers work best when time is taken with the novel to evidence the question focus.

More successful comparative answers:

- spent time carefully choosing the best question to suit their texts.
- selected material very carefully.
- sustained a focus on comparison.
- kept precise focus on the key words of the question.
- understood and explored the differences between poetic methods and prose methods.
- wrote succinctly.
- concentrated on shaping and signalling a coherent argument across the chosen texts.

Less successful comparative answers:

- wrote about the chosen texts separately or put texts side by side rather than writing a properly integrated comparison .
- complicated the task with too many poems and/or too many strands of the novel.
- chose material unwisely then forced it to fit the question making tenuous points and connections.
- fell back on narrative/descriptive approaches.

- neglected to distinguish between poetic methods and prose methods.
- wrote overlong answers that lost precise focus on the question.
- wrote with a previously answered question in mind, such as the question on barriers to love from the SAMs.

With three or more 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.
- discourse markers to signal similarity and difference.

Extracts

Particularly in Section A, students should remember that the Shakespeare extract is selected and printed on the examination paper for the express purpose of relevant analysis, so as to answer the question. Whereas it is rare for the poems in Section B to be noticeably under-used, under-use of the Section A extract is surprisingly still quite common.

The Shakespeare extract will have been chosen with a clear beginning and end to enable analysis of structure. The key words of the given view are intended as a lens through which to view the extract and wider play. Therefore, there is every reason to spend a substantial amount of this time slot analysing the extract given – not doing so is highly likely to be self-penalising.

Examiners often come across otherwise strong answers on the Shakespeare play that attended to the given view and the wider play but under-use the extract so end up with, at best, marks low in Band 4. These answers often have Band 5 potential, so it can be frustrating to see insufficient relevant attention to the details of the extract.

As the Shakespeare extract is from a play, it is particularly important to accessing dramatic methods that the text is seen as drama for the stage and not just the page. Precise relevant references to aspects of dramatic presentation and stagecraft are encouraged.

More successful **Shakespeare** answers:

- look at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of aspects of love and the key words of the given view.
- sustain focus on Shakespeare and his dramatic and poetic methods.
- analyse dramatic methods (irony, soliloquy, verse/prose etc.) in a relevant way.
- make relevant use of precise reference to specific productions.

- explore interpretation, ie agree with, disagree with **or** debate the given view.
- scrutinise the key words of the given view and use them to shape their answer.
- consider 'elsewhere in the play' by selecting relevant detailed references.
- make considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text.
- show awareness and understanding of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful **Shakespeare** answers:

- make sparse use of the extract or neglect a substantial section of it.
- neglect the given critical interpretation.
- write about the characters as though they are real people.
- describe the extract in narrative terms.
- offer a paraphrase of the extract.
- make little or no reference to Shakespeare or his dramatic/poetic methods.
- neglect 'elsewhere' or refer to it in general or in sweeping terms.
- make inaccurate or sweeping assertions about context.

More successful **comparative poetry** answers:

- look in each case at the whole poems with the given view/question focus in mind.
- sustain a comparative approach.
- support relevant readings with specific textual details.
- analyse the poets' methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary.
- analyse the presentation of the speakers/narrators as constructs, rather than assume it is the author.
- apply context in a considered way (paying careful attention the dates given), again being suitably tentative rather than assertively definitive.
- show awareness of typicality in the literature of love.

Less successful **comparative poetry** answers:

- work through the poems in a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific question and its key words.
- leave ideas undeveloped and unsupported.
- assert interpretations.
- confuse the speaker with the poet.
- describe methods such as rhyme and metre with no reference to meaning, or simply asserted a link to meaning.
- label methods inaccurately.
- make sweeping, simplistic or inaccurate statements about context.
- give undue weight to the significance of punctuation and/or literary methods to do with verse form such as rhyme and metre.

Question key words

The command words of questions in Section A do not vary. 'In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare...' will always be there, as will the references to 'in this extract and elsewhere in the play'. These command words underline the network of priorities that apply to these questions. At the heart of each question is 'discuss how', explicitly inviting relevant analysis of the extract which is crucial to progressing up the mark scheme

In Section B, questions might be framed as Question 5 was in this series, with a quoted or reported given view, complete with its own key words. The other possibility is that this question uses 'significance' to frame a focus. Students and centres need to remember that this is 'significance' in the semiotic sense of being 'encoded with meanings' rather than in the conversational sense of 'important'. It is the same sense in which it is used frequently in Papers 2A and 2B. Future preparation for Section B should involve considering the implications of using 'significant' to frame this question.

Section C questions always use 'Compare how the authors of two texts you have studied...'. There is often no given view as such, but the question focus has a slant that can be engaged in much the same way. 'Compare' is dealt with by many students by putting texts side by side and going from one to the other in a linear fashion. However, the best responses are fully comparative where detailed links are closely explored. The latter is a higher order skill that opens up the higher reaches of the mark scheme.

In all cases, it is useful for students to begin with an introduction that sets out a clear thesis on the question. If there is a such a rationale then students are already on their way to a coherent argument, one of the distinguishing features of Band 4.

Genre-specific analysis of methods

In Section A both dramatic methods and poetic methods are relevant. Plays have audiences, involve stagecraft and visual as well as aural effects. Dramatic irony is often at work and the student responds to dramatic methods as part of the wider audience. It is awareness of these aspects of extracts and plays that acts as the main discriminator in these questions. At the same time, Shakespeare's poetic techniques can be scrutinised as they are employed by speakers for rhetorical effect on other characters and the audience. Successful responses scrutinise interactions between characters at particular points in the extract and the wider play. This flexibility between dramatic and poetic methods is a particular demand of this question.

When it comes to Section B, students tend to know a lot about poetic methods but should remember that identification of methods is not an end in itself. Pointing out specific poetic methods should be as evidence for relevant points about meaning. Students need to explain how the effects that they claim for these methods are achieved.

Perhaps the biggest test of understanding is in the role of methods is in Section C, where novels and poems are compared. Previous reports have stressed the importance of being

able to explore specific prose methods so that an understanding of how novelists operate can be established by the student. It is still the case that many students have a greater repertoire of dramatic and poetic methods on which to draw. How novelists shape and structure the narrative by manipulating time and point of view is a rich area of study, and centres are encouraged to keep exploring prose methods with students. The other challenge is to be able to shift easily from prose to poetic methods as required. Prose can be poetic, of course, so boundaries can become blurred, but successful responses tend to be marked by an awareness and understanding of the genre under discussion, and that novelists and poets have different ways of working. Examiners understand that like is not being compared with like here, so a novelist's methods may need more exposition and reference to narrative than a pair of relatively short, elliptically expressed poems. The challenge is for students to demonstrate that different terminology and different metrics will be needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

AQA's **Teaching Guide to AO2** offers a productive 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>

Individual questions

Question 1

Othello

Extract from Act 4, Scene 1:

'Audiences are more likely to sympathise with Othello as a victim than to condemn him for his jealous suspicions towards his wife.'

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents Othello in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

What students did well

- addressed the debate in the given view by focusing on key words such as 'sympathise'/'victim' and 'condemn'/'jealous'.
- closely examined the relationship between Othello and Iago in the extract and set this in the context of their development as friends, colleagues and accomplices.
- discussed the staging and proxemics of this interchange, particularly when it comes to Othello's collapse and how this might be linked to Act 3, Scene 3 for example.
- picked up on the use of handkerchief as 'ocular proof'.
- linked Othello's jealousy to (a) the strength of his love established earlier in the play and (b) the extent of his abuse of Desdemona in the later play (choosing examples from each carefully).
- understood the complexities of Othello's presentation, e.g. his apparent self-justification for murdering Desdemona and the conflicted emotions around his suicide.
- saw his victimhood in the context of social attitudes.
- considered the significance of setting, e.g. ordered Venice vs chaotic Cyprus.

Common misunderstandings

- turned this into an essay about Iago as villain or Desdemona as victim.
- cited critics without linking their views to the question/argument.
- referenced other moments in the play without linking them clearly to the question/argument.

Question 2

The Taming of the Shrew

Extract from Act 2, Scene 1:

'Audiences enjoy the ways in which Petruchio takes charge.'

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents Petruchio in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

What students did well

- considered Petruchio's speech and behaviour in the context of the play as a comedy.
- examined different attitudes over time to the idea of a man taking charge.
- concentrated on 'ways' in the plural, allowing for slapstick comedy, for example, in other scenes.
- explored other readings of Petruchio including that the idea that he, too, is tamed and made to appreciate love.
- alluded to scenes where he is working with others, including sharing jokes with Katherina, rather than seeking to control.
- kept 'audiences' and the dramatic context in focus.

Common misunderstandings

- wrote a character study of Petruchio.
- described/narrated the taming process.
- neglected the comedic genre to discuss Petruchio as no more than a materialistic, misogynistic abuser and Katherina as no more than a passive victim.

Question 3

Measure for Measure

Extract from Act 4, Scenes 4 and 6:

'In Measure for Measure, the trust between men and women is completely broken.'

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents relationships between men and women in this extract and elsewhere in the play

What students did well

- focused on the extract as a whole seeing the scenes as part of a narrative strand at this point in the play .
- appreciated the stagecraft of exits and entrances.
- noted the revealing nature of Angelo's soliloquy, including self-awareness but also a combination of confidence and fear of what is to come.
- looked across the scenes to see men to include the Duke, Friar Peter, etc. as well as Angelo.
- examined the collusion between Isabella and Mariana against Angelo via the bed trick
- tended to distinguish between Angelo's deception and manipulation for selfish purposes and the higher-minded deception of the Duke seeking to restore order and justice.
- considered the dramatic irony of the Duke in disguise.
- acknowledged that the ending of the play, that this extract is prelude to, is ambiguous and could be read in different ways.

Common misunderstandings

- neglected 'completely' as a prompt to debate.
- struggled to link the extract to the wider play in a relevant way.

Question 4

The Winter's Tale

Extract from Act 5, Scene 3:

'The extent of Leontes' grief completely restores sympathy for him.'

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents thoughts and feelings about Leontes' past actions in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

What students did well

- concentrated on the extract to evaluate sympathy for Leontes in the light of his past words and actions, the views of Paulina and the others present.
- allowed for sympathy to include audiences, the other characters in the play and particularly those on stage here.
- saw the scene as a prelude to the play's climax with Leontes noting the lifelike aspects of the statue.
- appreciated Paulina's role in challenging Leontes, perhaps defying the expectations of women at the time.
- looked beyond Leontes vs Paulina to consider the roles of Perdita, Polixenes and Camillo.
- considered the relevant impact of staging and proxemics.
- understood the holistic structure of the play as tragi-comedy/romance and the arc of development towards a conclusion.

Common misunderstandings

- neglected 'completely' as a prompt to debate.
- gave narrative accounts of before and after this scene.

Question 5

'I Am No Good at Love' by Noel Coward and 'Never Give All The Heart' by W.B. Yeats

'Both speakers blame their own strong feelings for the pain of failed love.'

In the light of this view, compare and contrast the presentation of the pain of failed love in the following poems.

What students did well

- readily engaged with the pain of failed love in both poems **and** addressed the issue of blame.
- distinguished between Coward's speaker's self-blame and Yeats' speaker's blaming of 'passionate women'.
- explored the idea in both poems that love is a game best played by the other party.
- unpicked the warning tone, perhaps particularly evident in Yeats' poem.
- compared the endings as summary statements of loss and devastation.
- analysed language in support of the feelings identified.
- considered the lyric form of Coward vs the subverted sonnet form of Yeats and how both contributed to meaning.

Common misunderstandings

- asserted that both poems were post-modern, assuming that 'post-modern' is a label of time rather than a stylistic choice.
- neglected the issue of blame.
- conflated the writer and the speaker in an assertive fashion.
- identified poetic methods without linking them relevantly to meaning.
- labelled the rhyme scheme(s) incorrectly.
- labelled Yeats' sonnet form incorrectly, often as Shakespearean.
- neglected form and structure as methods to analyse.
- missed the hyperbolic humour of Coward, overly characterising the speaker as embittered and despairing.
- wrote narrative/descriptive commentary with embedded quotations as a substitute for analysis.
- concentrated on Coward as the perceived easier option.
- made assertions about context with little or no evidence, eg about Coward's experience in WW1 and WW2, and about Yeats being a Victorian with typically Victorian attitudes.

Question 6

Compare how the authors of two texts you have studied present ideas about the loyalty and faithfulness of lovers.

You must write about at least two poems in your answer as well as the prose text you have studied

What students did well

- made careful choices of relevant material from the novel, relevant poems and relevant details from those poems.
- adjusted terminology and approach to distinguish between prose and poetic methods.
- addressed the twin focuses of loyalty and faithfulness directly, seriously considering them as concepts and themes – rather than immediately reaching for disloyalty and infidelity as preferable alternatives.
- distinguished where appropriate between loyalty and faithfulness.
- sustained a comparative approach without sacrificing a clear line of argument.

Common misunderstandings

- took an indirect, sometimes obtuse approach about characters'/speakers' loyalty/faithfulness to things other than their significant other, eg to social expectations, to money, to the Church, etc.
- neglected 'of lovers' and wrote essays about loyalty and faithfulness.
- resorted to sweeping binary judgements about male characters/speakers being the disloyal/unfaithful parties, often ignoring textual evidence about female characters/speakers.
- chose inappropriate poems, eg 'The Garden of Love'.
- tried to write about too many poems to no clear advantage.

Question 7

Compare how the authors of two texts you have studied use the openings of their texts to explore ideas about love.

You must write about at least two poems in your answer as well as the prose text you have studied.

What students did well

- had a clear sense of what they meant by 'openings'.
- chose poems linked to the novel with related ideas about love.
- examined opening chapters/incidents/episodes/stanzas/lines closely.
- used openings as perspectives from which to view ideas about love in the whole texts.
- considered the structural significance of the openings.

Common misunderstandings

- wrote without a clear focus on opening chapters/incidents/stanzas/lines, writing too much about the whole texts.
- neglected to consider the openings as structurally significant.
- neglected to explore ideas about love.

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)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Professional development

Attend one of our feedback [courses](#) where you can review example responses from students and commentaries from our examiners.

Contact us

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