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# Modern times: Literature from 1945 to the present day - resource package A

## A-level English Literature A (7712)

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For teaching from September 2015

### Introduction

We have developed a range of resources to help you plan your teaching and to create practice exam questions for each component of A-level English Literature A. In this package, you will find a variety of resources related to Modern times: Literature from 1945 to the present day, including:

- creating your own questions guidance document, which gives you the power to create your own practice exam questions
- sample assessment materials, which include question papers and mark schemes
- specimen question commentaries, which explain how a question taken from the sample assessment materials addresses the assessment objectives, and which give some suggestions of how the task might be approached
- exemplar student responses with marking commentary, including two responses of different mark bands are given to a specific question from the sample assessment materials.

### Resources in this package

- Creating your own questions - Paper 2B, Section A
- Exemplar student response - Paper 2B, Section A - band 2 - *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- Exemplar student response - Paper 2B, Section A - band 5 - *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- Specimen question commentary - Paper 2B, Section A - *A Streetcar Named Desire*

### How to use these resources

These documents are clearly an excellent starting point when planning your teaching. If you haven't yet decided on which texts or text combinations to teach, the specimen assessment materials give you details about some of the aspects of Modern times the texts cover, which can help you decide. Don't forget to consult the specification for a list of possible aspects. Once you have decided, these documents will help you to focus your teaching on those aspects and to work towards the relevant exam question in the specimen assessment materials. The exemplar student responses with marking commentary act as models for the students and help you to assess their work.

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# Creating your own questions

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## Introduction

Below you will find instructions on how to use the accompanying resources to create your own exam practice questions. This example shows you how to use the Modern times resource package A to set questions for Paper 2B, Section A.

## Paper 2B, Section A

If you have used the relevant questions from the specimen assessment materials or want to set a question on a different aspect of the text and Modern times: Literature from 1945 to the present day, you can use these documents in the following way:

1. Look at how the relevant questions from the specimen assessment materials are constructed, for example:

‘Examine the view that *A Streetcar Named Desire* fails because the relationship between Stella and Stanley is ‘inconceivable’.’

The question stem (Examine the view that...) can remain unchanged. You will need, however, to construct a different ‘view’ depending upon the aspect of Modern times in the text you want the students to explore.

2. Read the specimen questions to help you construct a different ‘view’ to debate. Other sources can be used to construct a view:

- Look for aspects of Modern times which occur in the text but don’t forget that the absence of aspects in a text is equally valid for debate.
- Look at the list of aspects of Modern times in the specification and make up a critical view around one of these
- Research critical views on this text around which to structure a debate
- Research critical views on another text about ‘Modern Times’ (non-set texts included) and adapt the quote in a more general sense so that students can consider how far this can be said to be true of the text they have studied

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# Exemplar student response and examiner commentary

A-level English Literature A (7712)

Modern times – resource package A

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Paper 2B, Section A

Examine the view that *A Streetcar Named Desire* fails because the relationship between Stella and Stanley is ‘inconceivable’.

## Band 2 response

In this essay I am going to explain why I think the relationship between Stella and Stanley is not a failure.

Stella does not come from New Orleans, she is from the ‘Old White South’ and so you would think she is going to be a fish out of water in a place which is inhabited by people from different countries, including black Afro-Americans, who eat different things and play different music. Stanley is not totally at home there either, although he seems less out of place in the poor Elysian Fields than Stella does, because he is working-class, which Blanche picks up on more than once.

‘He acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits.’

and

‘these poker players impossible to live with’

Since he left the army at the end of the war, Stanley has worked for an engineering company like his friend Mitch. They both play poker and go bowling. Blanche cannot understand how her sister Stella came to marry a ‘common’ man like that who has bad eating habits and swears and gets angry when he is losing at cards. But perhaps she has not made allowance for the fact that Stella found Stanley attractive to look at, in his uniform.

There is another side to their characters which sort of cancels out these different social backgrounds. They are in love and have been right from the word go. Even though Stanley hits Stella in Scene III (The Poker Night) he soon feels guilty about what he has done and wants to be

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forgiven. First of all Stella had left the room saying 'I want to go away', but soon she is catching his head and comforting him.

If we only saw Blanche's view of things, we would come to the conclusion that the marriage is a disaster, which she tries to undermine.

'I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with.'

and

'A man like that is some one to go out with – once – twice – three times when the Devil is in you. But live with? Have a child by?'

But Stella is able to tell her sister that 'there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark', referring to sex. Ironically Blanche doesn't need to be told that as we find out later on she has been promiscuous in Laurel and married herself.

Belle Reve was 'lost' because members of the family squandered their fortunes and had to sell off property, and in the end there was nothing left. Stella got out before the worst happened, where as Blanche stayed to the bitter end and now she is homeless. Stella must of recognised that New Orleans and married life with Stanley was a much safer alternative than Belle Reve.

'The best I could do was make my own living, Blanche.'

And now she is having Stanley's baby, which gives her even more reasons to stay with him. Blanche tells Stella that Stanley is driven by an animal like 'desire' and hopes to come between them, but Stella soon shows Blanche that she likes him that way.

Stella has embraced him with both arms, fiercely, and in full view of Blanche. (Stage direction)

Blanche of course wants Stella to protect her from the future which she is frightened of. Stella also criticises Blanche for having a 'superior attitude' which is obviously going to weaken her argument.

Although Stella is not prepared to accept that her husband has raped her sister it could be said that her relationship with Stanley will never be quite the same again. But she knows which side her bread is buttered. The ending of the play is very tearful (sobbing) but the last thing we see is Stanley kneeling down beside Stella and opening her blouse with his fingers, which she is presumably happy about.

So in conclusion I think the marriage of Stella and Stanley does not fail. There is too much at stake for both of them, and having the baby will help keep them together. Although Blanche finds it hard to believe in their marriage (inconceivable) a theatre audience would not, on the evidence of what they have seen and heard.

## Examiner commentary

### AO1

The argument is somewhat disjointed and poorly sequenced. Although a number of potentially useful facts and opinions about the characters have been assembled, they lose impact because

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their presentation is flawed. Expression tends to the colloquial and is therefore imprecise. There are some errors, notably of syntax.

### **AO2**

Since this is an Open Book examination, the candidate has been able to quote directly from the text – more or less accurately – though the selected quotation does not always sit well with the point being made. Some of Stella's words are given but Stanley is represented in a generalised way, only in terms of his actions and Blanche's opinion of him. Many other ways in which 'meanings are shaped' are overlooked.

### **AO3**

This AO is generally better addressed than AO2. There is at least some simple awareness of contexts and a (very) brief mention of the play as theatre. There is also oblique reference to the stormy nature of the marriage.

### **AO4**

The placing of the text in the context of modern literature about the clash of class, gender and culture within marriage, for example, is not implied or directly commented upon.

### **AO5**

In a fairly simplistic way the candidate has shown that the marriage does not fail and that the relationship is believable. By introducing Blanche's view of Stanley's bestiality etc. and Stella's readiness to discount it, the student has gone some way towards managing a balanced debate.

Overall: This response seems to fit the Band 2 descriptors.

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# Exemplar student response and examiner commentary

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Paper 2B, Section A

Examine the view that *A Streetcar Named Desire* fails because the relationship between Stella and Stanley is ‘inconceivable’.

## Band 5 response

It is arguable that Williams’ representation of the very different characters of Stella and Stanley make their relationship unrealistic. Whereas Stella is an aristocrat from the Old South, clearly upper-class and well-spoken, Stanley is a second generation Polish immigrant, ‘born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it’ who uses working-class demotic language and is presented as the modern ‘alpha male’. It could be argued that opposites attract, however it may be difficult for any audience – contemporary or modern – to really understand how these two characters not only got married, but ever even crossed paths.

Perhaps their relationship becomes less unbelievable when taking into account the historical, social and cultural context in which the play was produced and set, which seem to have created the perfect storm for this couple to have met. During the Second World War the social differences between the pair would likely have been diminished in such a time of upheaval; Stella coming to New Orleans for work and Stanley being a respectable soldier seems to have blurred the boundaries of their social divide. On the other hand, other audiences may still challenge the idea that the couple is at all ‘conceivable’ as Stanley’s reaction to Blanche – whose social status is identical to Stella’s – is extremely hostile, as is evident when he mocks her snobbish attitude and pretentious actions; ‘You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile!’ Meanwhile Blanche’s equal dislike and prejudice can be seen as she frequently refers to him as a ‘Polack’ or ‘ape-like’. So why is the relationship between Stella and Stanley not the same? Perhaps Stanley’s dislike is partly insecurity; that Blanche will convince Stella that she has made a mistake and should return to her aristocratic roots. Ironically however, Williams suggests that Stella subconsciously likes the fact that Stanley is so different from all the Old Southern gentlemen back home; this seems evident in her confession to Blanche that on their

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wedding night Stanley 'smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of my slipper!' Blanche is horrified and asks if she 'Didn't run, didn't scream?' At this point Stella actually admits 'I was sort of thrilled by it.'

With this in mind, their relationship may be 'conceivable' in terms of their sexual passion. The fact Stella's pregnancy marks time visibly for the audience throughout the play is a physical reminder that is ever-present to show that the couple are sexually active. Furthermore, at the start of the play Stanley throws a package of raw meat at Stella, who catches it. This sexual innuendo foreshadows and physically connotes their passion and the fact that Stella catches it suggests her obsessions and transfixion with Stanley. For him, the action of bringing home the raw meat and throwing it around reinforces his primal, animalistic character.

One way in which it can be argued that the Kowalskis' relationship is genuinely 'inconceivable' is the infamous Poker Night scene where Stanley gets drunk and hits Stella, who seeks refuge with her neighbour Eunice. His animalistic violent nature is seen here and even recognised by Stella who calls him an 'animal thing'. He even roars 'STELL-LAHHHH!' and the stage directions indicate this sounds like a 'baying hound'. Yet upon hearing this Stella returns to him and they reinforce their sexual passion as they 'come together with low animal moans'. When Blanche goes to see Stella the next morning, she is shocked and horrified to see that they have had a passionate lovemaking session and all is forgiven. This is where, perhaps, a modern feminist audience may see the relationship as 'inconceivable'. The soap-opera like dramatic impact of the Poker Night seems like something from a television melodrama, and the fact that Stanley hits his pregnant wife and is forgiven so quickly seems questionable. Williams seems to suggest that Stella's sexual obsession with her husband means she ends up turning a blind eye to his violence. Perhaps some audiences just do not want to believe that domestic violence can be so easily ignored by everyone involved.

Stella's infatuation with Stanley poses more trouble in the final scene of the play when she chooses to believe Stanley over Blanche, confessing to Eunice that she 'couldn't believe her story' about the rape. This is again arguably evidence that their relationship is 'inconceivable' given Stella finds it easier to believe in Blanche's 'madness' than her truth, maybe in denial and through feeling life has to go on for the baby's sake. Contextually, you have to wonder what other choices a young woman with a baby would have actually had in 1947. However another question has to be, to what 'conceivable' extent is Stella's infatuation with Stanley so strong that she would choose him over her own flesh and blood, especially with such a troubling account of events totally in line with what someone of Stanley's character would do?

Therefore, it seems that while some audiences may prefer to interpret Williams' representation of the relationship as 'inconceivable', the social, historical and cultural context of the play in fact suggests it is more than likely.

## Examiner commentary

### AO1

A disciplined answer that serves well the ideas informing it. The conduct of the debate is assured both in overall structure and in the use of discussion 'markers' at key points. Technical accuracy is of a uniformly high standard; the vocabulary is particularly impressive, showing maturity and appropriateness in almost every sentence. The question is answered and focus on most of the key words is sustained. We do have to infer whether or not the play 'fails'.

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**A02**

Assertions are supported with direct or indirect reference to the text of the play. The words and actions of significant characters are foregrounded, even when contextual matters are under discussion (see A03). Quotations of varying length are well-chosen and skilfully embedded, and always accompanied by perceptive explanation and/or analysis connecting them closely to the text and to the argument. There is a secure awareness of the text as a play for the stage.

**A03**

The candidate is fully aware of the play's various contexts and is able to discuss its 'reception' and impact on audiences, thereby enhancing the argument in no small measure.

**A04**

The clash between cultures and the clash within marriage between two individuals – most of the time seen as representatives of those cultures – are thoroughly explored and so connect with the representation of one of the central issues of modern literature.

**A05**

Alternative interpretations are investigated and expounded with understanding at a sophisticated level, with assurance and with perception. There is much evidence of a personal and considered response to the play and of a well-honed skill in constructing and conducting a balanced debate.

Overall: This response would seem to fit comfortably into Band 5.

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# Specimen question commentary

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## Introduction

This resource explains how a question taken from the specimen assessment material addresses the assessment objectives, with some suggestions of how the task might be approached. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every point that could be made but it gives teachers and students some guidance that will support their work on this paper.

## Paper 2B, Section A

Students have access to their texts in the examination and they should be using those texts to select relevant material to provide detail in their answers.

## Sample question

### Question 8: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Examine the view that *A Streetcar Named Desire* fails because the relationship between Stella and Stanley is 'inconceivable'.

## How the question meets the Assessment Objectives

In this question, as throughout the paper, the assessment objectives are all assessed. As a result, almost all the words in the question should be addressed, either as potential content (relationship, Stanley, Stella) or as direction for the debate (examine, view, fails, 'inconceivable'), as these are clearly connected to the assessment objectives

**AO1** is tested through the ways students organise and express their ideas as they are examining the view. Value is placed on technical accuracy, appropriate terminology and the structure of the argument.

To satisfy the requirements for **AO2** students must be able to analyse the methods used by Williams to achieve his effects, which will include aspects of the dramatic form. This is an Open Book examination, therefore students are expected to illustrate their answers with as much textual detail as possible – with quotations and other close reference – to support the points in their discussion.

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**AO3** is addressed when students demonstrate an understanding of the literary, dramatic and cultural contexts in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* is placed. In exploring changing attitudes to marriage, students should engage not only with the specific context of Modern Times: Literature from 1945 to the present day but also with the context of when the play was written and how it has been 'received'. In their exploration of meanings and interpretations, they should demonstrate their awareness of how the text is constructed and written.

To address **AO4** students should be able to consider the roles of men and women within marriage, thereby making connections with the representation of one of the central issues of Modern Times: Literature from 1945 to the present day. From their reading of other texts from this period students should bring to their study of the play – and their answers to this question – an understanding of relevant concepts, e.g. gender, class and culture, power and patriarchy.

**AO5** tests students' skill in debating what they perceive to be the truth or otherwise of the proposition or 'view' expressed in the question, by exploring alternative interpretations of the relationship between Stanley and Stella.

## Possible content

Students might choose to write about the following and thereby address **AO2**: aspects of dramatic form and genre, e.g. melodrama, comedy and tragedy, social realism; structure, e.g. crisis–climax–resolution, forward-moving action with 'flashback' (Blanche's discovery of her young husband's homosexuality and his subsequent suicide); setting in the Elysian Fields quarter of New Orleans; naturalistic effects: the use of music (the 'Negro' Blue Piano, the Polish Varsouviana), sound (thunder, passing train) and lighting (described in meticulous detail in the stage directions); dialogue (Stanley's is colloquial, working-class and assertive while Stella's is higher register but sensible and down-to-earth); action (Stanley can be violent, clumsy, impetuous, but also tender and always passionate, while Stella answers his passion in equal measure and in behaviour that bespeaks a wife who, motivated by self-interest as well as by love, will unquestioningly stand by her man).

To address **AO3** students will need to show how the marriage of Stanley and Stella is embedded in a specific historical context, i.e. that of America immediately after the Second World War. The essential nature of that marriage is also determined by their differing class backgrounds and values. During the war Stanley served as an NCO in the US Army; now a civilian, he is employed as a commercial traveller at the same engineering 'plant' as Mitch with whom he plays poker and goes bowling. Stella, like Blanche, is a product of a bygone colonial era; she made her way to New Orleans during the war where she met Stanley and the two fell in love. In determining the inconceivability or otherwise of their relationship, students will want to take account of the tremendous social and cultural disruption which the war brought about, making their meeting a possibility against the odds.

**AO4** will be addressed if and when candidates explore the roles of men and women within marriage, so connecting with the representation of one of the central issues of modern literature. They may cite examples of the differences between the social backgrounds and personalities of Stanley and Stella. He is working-class, 'common', from a European immigrant family, an arrogant, assertive alpha male; insensitive, coarse, bestial, capable of raping his sister-in-law while she is a guest under his own roof. She is refined but from a ruinously decadent aristocratic family, submissive, loyal, rejoicing in her new motherhood, protective towards her sister but unwilling to accept the accusation of rape. They are both sexually passionate (which leads to some 'stormy'

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scenes), but also capable of showing tenderness towards each other, of giving and taking pleasure; both are needy and self-centred, both are materialistic.

Exploring different interpretations, the requirements of **A05** are met if students conduct a debate around the notion of the Kowalskis' marriage being 'inconceivable'. If they accept the proposition set up in the task they may focus on some of the following: Stella's previous life in Belle Rêve; the differences between them as seen in their respective values, speech and actions; Blanche's difficulty in understanding the attraction they have for each other. In addition, they might like to consider Williams's themes (the 'ambiguous nature of sexuality, the betrayal of faith, the corruption of modern America, the over-arching battle of artistic sensitivity against physical materialism') and whether or not the relationship between Stanley and Stella ties in with those themes. Some candidates may decide that Stella's migration from Belle Rêve to the Elysian Fields is not entirely plausible. If they do not accept the 'view' of inconceivability, they will probably focus on the magnetic attraction that the two characters experience for each other which is sexual, powerful and undeniable; the presentation of Stanley as physically attractive, but also persuasive and manipulative; the presentation of Stella's 'narcotized tranquility', her tolerance of Stanley's brutish behaviour and his weaknesses.

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