

AS

English Literature A

Component 1: Love through the ages: Shakespeare and poetry
Report on the Examination

7711
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It was evident from the marking of both components that the historicist philosophy of the Specification using the shared context of love through the ages has been positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. Importantly, this new 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 to produce work with a clear, authentic voice. Teachers, students and examiners have welcomed 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 more flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage more independent work. The AS specification is an important precursor to the A-level specification because of the historicist approach and the holistic mark scheme that is common to all components. Therefore, as well as a retrospective document on this first series, this report will be useful to inform not just future AS but also A-level study.

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. At the same time, it is appreciated that teachers and markers need to understand how the assessment objectives function as discrete concepts within a holistically applied marking process. The five assessment objectives may be familiar skills from previous specifications but how they might be applied in the context of this specification is worth reiteration and clarification.

In the new specification the way AOs 2-5 are assessed has changed and it is vital that these changes are understood:

AO1 continues to underpin the success of any response. It requires clarity, accuracy, literary register and the selection of relevant evidence of knowledge and understanding.

Analysing the **ways** in which meanings are shaped requires students to look closely at the characteristic methods of that genre. AO2 can now be approached without considering the hierarchical aspects of ‘form, structure and language’; students now have the freedom to analyse which aspects of method they find most relevant.

The historicist philosophy of this specification means that time is a **context** of special importance. As such it is crucial to apply historical context accurately and in a way that avoids sweeping

assertions, for example about how women in the seventeenth century behaved and were seen. More confident students are able to integrate apt contextual points which do not lead them away from the text and help to establish a more informed understanding.

The legacy of wider reading from the previous specification perhaps accounts for a tendency to see **connections** only in terms of explicit links to other named texts. The danger is that such links often appear tenuous and are made out of obligation rather than in pursuit of genuinely interesting lines of enquiry. These other texts considered in detail lead away from the question set and into problems of time management. A consideration of typicality where connections are implicit is, for many, a safer and more effective strategy.

As far as exploring different **interpretations** is concerned, the evidence is that, on the whole, students took advantage of the flexibility that now exists in arguing for or against a given view. This meant that fewer answers involved needless contradiction. However, some students had been drilled to offer generalised feminist or Marxist views that largely undermine a more coherent reading of the text. ***It should be noted that AO5 is used as a primary focus for framing questions. Direct engagement with AO5 will ensure that the question is answered. The other AOs will inevitably be involved in doing so because they are either explicitly (in the case of AO2) or implicitly integrated into the wording of the question.***

In short, the aim is to produce responses where the language used by students and the attention to methods, contexts, connections and interpretations are all relevant to the question, clearly linked to the meaning of texts and authentic rather than artificial arguments.

Another important necessary adjustment is to the time constraints of both examinations. At AS students have 45 minutes to read, plan and write each question. Therefore it is crucial that students make effective use of that time to craft effective answers to questions.

There were many indicators of the success of both AS components. There were relatively:

- high numbers of candidates assessed in Bands 4 and 5 of the Mark Scheme
- very few assessed in Band 1
- very few unfinished responses.

These findings suggest that students were well prepared for the academic and practical demands of the papers and that the papers make reasonable expectations of candidates.

It should be noted that, above all, the two components are genre-specific. A student's choice of terminology, methods, contexts, connections and interpretations should reflect those genre differences.

7711/1 Shakespeare and poetry

In this first series of 'Love through the ages: Shakespeare and poetry' examiners reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of this closed book examination. In both sections an extract that is reproduced on the examination paper is considered closely in the light of a critical interpretation. Close reading is an obvious discriminator when assessing the Shakespeare extract in Section A and the poem in Section B. At the same time, the questions enable students to set the texts in the context of the literature of 'Love through the ages'. There were many engaged responses reflecting thorough study of the chosen Shakespeare play and the chosen poetry anthology. However, examiners reported a clear trend for Shakespeare answers to be stronger and this perhaps reflects the overall amount of teaching time devoted to Shakespeare.

Unfortunately some students referred to other genres by making reference to their prose texts in spite of the fact that they were tackling a paper entitled 'Love through the Ages: Shakespeare and poetry'. It was clear that some students had benefited from considering different types of love at a philosophical level. However, sometimes terms such as 'Agape' were used without demonstrated understanding or application. In both sections explicit connections to other texts sometimes proved tenuous or distracting. Achievement in AO4 is often reflected holistically in other areas through a more thorough understanding of dramatic or poetic methods or through considering the typicality of a character's presentation, predicaments or genre features, for instance.

Section A Shakespeare

Students have a choice here in terms of negotiating the two bullets that make up the question: looking at them separately or in an integrated fashion. The advantage of the former is that it lessens the danger of neglecting the generic first bullet about the presentation of love in favour of the critical interpretation that forms the basis of the second bullet. Integrated approaches were often seen working successfully and paying more or less equal attention to both bullets. The second bullet inevitably attracts much attention, and it is important that students focus on key words and distinctions in order to shape the selection of material and the structure of the argument or arguments put forward.

There are three other key discriminators at work in Section A:

- The first bullet names Shakespeare and uses ‘present’ so it is important that students recognise the role of the author at work constructing the text, rather than treating characters and events as ‘real’.
- Implicitly the above is a reminder that verse drama is the genre here so it is important to acknowledge dramatic and poetic methods. This can be as fundamental as referring to ‘audience’ rather than ‘reader’ but can, of course, extend much further.
- The second bullet instructs students to look closely at ‘this passage and elsewhere in the play’ so it is important to consider specific related aspects or incidents in order to give a full answer to the question.

Examiners reported that students were often well prepared to reference ‘elsewhere in the play’. At best this was done with precision, with a view to the structure of the play and with support from detailed reference and/or quotation despite the closed book conditions.

When referring to historical context, more accurate candidates realised that ‘Elizabethan’ is appropriate for *The Taming of the Shrew* but ‘Jacobean’ is a more appropriate and useful context for the other three plays. There were a minority of responses that either ignored the extract or ignored ‘elsewhere in the play’.

More successful Shakespeare answers:

- looked at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of aspects of love and the key words of the given view
- gave due weight to both bullets
- sustained focus on Shakespeare as a verse dramatist and his dramatic and poetic methods
- explored interpretation, ie agreed with, disagreed with **or** debated the given view
- considered ‘elsewhere in the play’ by selecting relevant detailed references
- made considered and accurate use of context
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful Shakespeare answers:

- made sparse use of the extract
- neglected either the presentation of love or the critical interpretation
- wrote about the characters as though they were real people
- made little or no reference to Shakespeare or his dramatic/poetic methods
- neglected ‘elsewhere’ or referred to it in general or in sweeping terms
- made inaccurate or sweeping assertions about context.

Question 1 *Othello*

Othello was by far the most popular text in this first AS series and there was a good deal of sympathy for how Shakespeare presents the plights of both Desdemona and Emilia. The interpretation foregrounded in the second bullet stresses Emilia and Desdemona ‘as wives’. The best answers recognised and sustained this focus rather than attempting a shapeless comparison of the two characters’ presentations. Much was made of Desdemona’s naivety as opposed to Emilia’s pragmatic cynicism. More confident answers went on to look at how Emilia’s rhetoric develops in this intimate setting and how it reflects her changing role in the play, through to her open conflict with Iago and her death. Similarly, astute students saw the conflict between Desdemona’s relative passivity here in the latter part of the play and her earlier confidence. Many were able to give detailed references to incidents where Emilia had been submissive and Desdemona more forthright. Despite the idea of both characters as outspoken heroines, many candidates ultimately saw them both as victims of patriarchy.

The ability to sustain a close reading of the text is invariably a discriminator in extract questions and Shakespeare seems to prompt unforced errors from those candidates who need to take more time and care when analysing. It was relatively common for candidates to read Emilia’s use of ‘marry’ as reference to marriage (when the discussion is about married wives committing adultery) rather than as a discourse marker meaning something like ‘listen’ or ‘well’. This misreading led to considerable confusion for some. There was also a tendency to label any question as ‘rhetorical’ when Emilia’s penultimate speech involves a series of five questions all of which she answers. More successful answers recognised the class differences between the two women and this helped to avoid sweeping generalisations.

Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew*

Again, candidates appeared to be sympathetic to both presentations and readily engaged with the interpretation of Petruchio offered. Views varied from those who cited his physical struggles with Katherina as evidence of agreeing with the given view to those who were quick to argue that his emphatic final speech in this extract and his ultimate ‘success’ disprove that he ever underestimated the challenge. Those who analysed in detail looked at the irony of Petruchio’s use of courtly love terms and imagery before the abrupt change to ‘plain terms’ towards the end of the passage. There were also different views of Katherina including those who saw even her final speech in the play as an ironic pose of submission. ‘Elsewhere in the play’ often involved

referencing other scenes of either Petruchio's apparent cluelessness or his guileful strategies with her when he takes her back to his house after the wedding.

Question 3 *Measure for Measure*

Students were able to apply both bullets readily to this extract. Different aspects of love were identified and different stances taken on the Duke's motivations and the effects of his conduct. The best linked the bullets to the debate about justice in the play and moved beyond simply denigrating the Duke to look closely at the ambiguity of his presentation. Candidates were able to discuss dramatic irony and the various implications of the Duke's role in the fates of other characters and their predicaments. There were a number of responses that became preoccupied with descriptive narrative based on the various plotlines and this tended to distract from the commands to look at 'how' and to 'examine'. Students who did follow the commands to look closely often considered the Duke's earlier speeches about Angelo and Mariana, but tended to neglect his later speeches and the role of Isabella. As far as 'elsewhere in the play' was concerned, students referenced scenes between Isabella and Angelo and Claudio, as well as the ending and the Duke's proposal to Isabella.

Question 4 *The Winter's Tale*

The first bullet led students to discuss the harmony in the relationship between Hermione and Leontes before jealousy takes full hold, as well as to the friendship between Polixenes and Leontes. The best responses appreciated that these courtly exchanges are between friends and demonstrations of learned wit. At the same time, some of the subjects touched upon such as imprisonment, misogyny and 'fall' foreshadow the dark events to come. The second bullet was well handled with students keen to agree with the given interpretation, some arguing that Hermione's apparent passivity is, in fact, an active expression of nobility or even revenge on Leontes. Students often relished discussions of 'elsewhere in the play' as opportunities to discuss the significant changes across time in the lives of those characters involved in the extract and the extraordinary ending of the play.

Section B Poetry

Students have a single poem to consider in this section and a single question stem. Again, in each question, the writer is named and 'presents' is used, and both should prompt candidates to look at texts as constructs. The methods prompted by 'examine' are, of course, poetic methods and it is important that named texts are treated as poems. More thoughtful responses looked closely at the narrative voice and did not simply accept the speaker as the poet writing autobiographically. Both

named texts were short lyric poems making use of rhyme and regular metre. Students are free to explore what methods they think are relevant so there is no obligation to analyse such features. However, if students choose to explore rhyme and metre, they are obliged to be accurate as well as to explain how these methods support meaning and are relevant to the question. Sometimes these aspects of technique were analysed with illuminating effect. However, in a large number of cases, there were inaccuracies and/or a failure to make such observations relevant to the meaning of the poem and to the question.

More successful poetry answers:

- looked at the whole poem with the interpretation in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details
- analysed the poet's methods by linking them to meaning, often in a tentative fashion
- analysed the presentation of the speaker as a construct
- applied context in a considered way
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love

Less successful poetry answers:

- worked through the poem in a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific question and its key words
- left ideas undeveloped and unsupported
- asserted interpretations
- confused the speaker with the poet
- described methods with no reference to meaning or simply asserted a link to meaning
- labelled methods inaccurately
- made sweeping, simplistic and inaccurate statements about context.

Question 5 AQA anthology of pre-1900 poetry 'The Garden of Love'

This question was by far the more popular of the two and examiners reported a whole range of responses to Blake's poem. The question focused on the idea that religion and love are 'opposites' in the poem and stronger responses kept this precise focus in mind.

There were those who read the poem as an allegory of sexual liberation where "play" was euphemistic and "sweet flowers" were feminine symbols. Such readings were often supported by biographical claims about Blake's beliefs, some asserting that 'free love' was his 'invention'. These interpretations often appeared forced and assertive, as well as tending to the view that religion and love in this sense could never be compatible. More persuasive readings looked at the child-like

naivety of the narrator and the idea that love in the poem is perhaps more to do with a broader attitude to life, freedom, happiness and feelings of acceptance and forgiveness- akin to Blake's interpretation of New Testament Christianity. Some argued convincingly that love is opposed by *organised* religion rather than religion per se, suggesting that Blake's critique focuses on puritanical dogma and an over-reliance on concepts of sin and judgement, rather than being explicitly anti-Catholic, anti-Anglican or anti-Non-Conformist. Some confident students read the sacrificial imagery of the last line as a suggestion that the speaker is a Christ-like martyr tortured for their humanity.

Unfortunately, it was common for students to assert that the poem is iambic and to misread 'midst' as 'mist'. The latter led to considerable confusion. On the other hand, there were those who looked closely and carefully at the shift to internal rhyme and longer lines in the final stanza. As long as students understood 'Romantic', it tended to be helpful context to see Blake in these terms. Many discussed the typicality of celebrations of childhood and freedom as well as the typicality of unconventional stances against established institutions. There were some successful links to poems from the same period where students chose to make explicit links to other texts.

Question 6 AQA anthology of post-1900 love poetry 'After the Lunch'

This question was less popular but still produced a wide variety of responses on which to report. The interpretation offered was that the attitude to love in the poem is 'trivial'. The best answers were based on a clear, coherent definition of 'trivial' carefully applied to possible evidence from the poem and/or likewise counter-argued. 'Trivial' proved tricky for many candidates who tried unconvincingly to argue that feelings of happiness, euphoria and indecisiveness amounted to the same thing.

There were those who read the text as a break-up poem with the narrator in despair and even contemplating suicide. This was based on the reference to "goodbyes", "tears", "black", some imported context about Waterloo Bridge as a popular site to commit suicide or references to Cope's own love life. These interpretations seemed to ignore so much evidence to the contrary and tended to ignore or misunderstand the focus on 'trivial'. Many tried to argue, with the given view in mind, that the speaker was irretrievably trivial and incapable of being serious or caring. Again, such readings tended to sound sweeping and missed the point of the 'head vs heart' debate and the conclusion of the poem. More convincing work was seen which balanced the speaker's rational voice with the dawning certainty that what the speaker feels is more than joie de vivre.

Many dealt well with the use of parallel structure and the ways in which the two voices interact within the verse form. Effective explanations were offered of the way in which the Battle of Waterloo has become an everyday proverb for an ultimate obstacle or challenge. There was some use of the modern context to illuminate the poem. The juke-box image was often explored illuminatingly and contextualised within the coffee bar culture of the Sixties. Some discussed the use of Waterloo Bridge as a romantic or poignant setting in modern films such as *Alfie*, and in the Kinks' *Waterloo Sunset*. Some had learned about the use of female labour in the construction of Waterloo Bridge but tended to assert this as part of an unconvincing feminist reading of the poem which tended to be based on misreading. Some tried to link the use of the bridge as a suicide spot to the alleged 'despairing' tone of the poem. Unhelpfully, some tried to argue that the poem was written soon enough after World War Two and therefore evokes post-war uncertainty. Beyond these references context was referred to much less frequently than when discussing Blake in Question 5. Rhyme and metre were often linked to 'trivial' and sometimes this link was made accurately and persuasively. However, discussion was often at the level of a 'sing-song' or 'nursery rhyme' rhythm rather than a confident and developed analysis of the lyric form.

Looking ahead to A-level

Students going on to A-level should make a special note of the key messages that arise from this report. They should remember to:

- make a priority of answering the question, recognising the importance of looking closely at the given critical interpretation
- offer substantial closely-read analysis of extracts and texts under discussion
- explore writers' methods relevant to meaning and the question (rather than working through a checklist of 'form, structure and language')
- integrate precise contextual observations so as to illuminate changing attitudes over time (rather than making sweeping generalisations and assertions)
- concentrate on implicit connections which highlight typical genre features and the shared contexts of the literature of Love through the ages and WW1 and its aftermath or Modern times: literature from 1945 to the present day
- explore interpretations of genuine interest (rather than feeling obliged to balance the debate or offer readings from different critical viewpoints)
- carefully co-ordinate the structure of text comparison questions
- read questions carefully and plan answers properly giving appropriate attention to command words.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.