

AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7711/1: Love through the ages: Shakespeare and poetry
Report on the Examination

7711
2022

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General

This report should be read in conjunction with the report on 7711/2. It might also be relevant to consult to the report for the equivalent A level component, 7712/1.

It was evident from the marking of Papers 1 and 2 that the historicist philosophy of the Specification is positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. 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 historicist approach is the focus on a shared context. In both Paper 1 and Paper 2 this is the diachronic context of Love through the ages.

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 best advice to students is to concentrate on answering the question set and let the assessment objectives look after themselves.** Because the quality of written expression is crucial in enabling literary skills, students should be particularly mindful of **how** they answer the question too.

There were many indicators of the success of this AS component. Students tended to do well when they:

- knew their set texts well in overview and in detail
- recognised that drama and poetry texts are distinct genres each with their own methods and terminology
- appreciated each text as a construct of the author open to different interpretations
- understood that attitudes change over time and these changes are apparent from the texts themselves and from the ways in which they have been and continue to be interpreted
- saw connections between texts as aspects of typicality within a shared context of the literature of love
- spent an appropriate time reading and planning.

Also, students did well where they avoided the pitfalls of:

- 'bolting on' contextual knowledge, rather than finding relevant contextual references within the text
- balancing the given view with a counter-argument out of a sense of obligation rather than authentic conviction
- making explicit connections to other texts when not required by the question, out of a sense of obligation rather than to illuminate meaning
- asserting erroneous, sweeping statements about historical context

- misreading the extract reproduced on the examination paper or other texts.

These findings suggest that students continue to be well prepared for the academic and practical demands of the paper and that the paper made reasonable expectations of students. In the initial series there was a tendency by some to use context in an unassimilated way that did not inform the question set. **Evidence suggests that context is now used more judiciously and this is testament to more effective teaching and learning.**

In this seventh series of 'Love through the ages' examiners reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of 'closed book' conditions in both Sections A and B. In Section A an extract from the chosen Shakespeare text is reproduced on the examination paper to encourage students to read closely in the light of (a) a command to consider how Shakespeare presents love and (b) a given critical view. Similarly, in Section B a poem from the chosen anthology is reproduced also to encourage close reading, the latter being an obvious discriminator in both sections. 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 suggesting enthusiastic study of both texts.

Knowledge about historical context was best applied sparingly and to make precise and specific observations that were relevant and that illuminated the question, rather than being tempted into unhelpful sweeping statements. It arises best out of the extract/text itself rather than 'bolted on' in a way that seems intrusive. When it comes to the critical context, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism sometimes sharpened responses when they were applied very specifically to one aspect of a text or question. Also, where specific named critics were referenced, this often focused the argument in a helpful way. On the other hand, students who led with their own considered and informed critical opinions often came across as impressively independent readers not afraid to take up a clear stance on the question.

To engage with texts in detail involves analytical scrutiny of methods. However, examiners continue to report an unhelpful tendency to ascribe more significance than could be justified to punctuation and to literary techniques such as enjambement and the use of caesurae. Punctuation and such literary methods might be part of a larger discussion about methods as a means of conveying meaning, but it was unhelpful where students saw these features as the primary focus and as ends in themselves. Whatever methods were under discussion, analysis worked best when students linked methods to meanings and explained the rationale, rather than relying on assertions about the possible effects of methods. The lowest level of analysis is simply labelling methods used by authors. The next is to ascribe an effect or effects to the usage. The optimum level of analysis is to then go to **explore why and how** that method might create that effect. This latter approach enables points to be clinched because it strengthens and clarifies the argument. Such analysis of the best selected examples is much more preferable to many examples at a lower level of analysis.

Once more examiners reported that careful reading, planning and taking due time to compose well-crafted responses worked best, rather than hurrying to write longer answers. Examiners often reflected on how much the success of answers came down to careful and judicious choices, and appropriate time and reasoning should be spent on this skill. The best scripts were from students who wrote clearly, selectively and succinctly. Students should try and build in planning and composition time so that answers can be carefully and rationally constructed. Students should aspire to use: a meaningful introduction that does more than reiterate the question; paragraphs with topic sentences; discourse markers to signal the argument to the reader; a conclusion that avoids unnecessary repetition but stresses what has been achieved.

Section A: Shakespeare

All four questions share a common approach and structure using two bullets. In response, there is no required approach. Some students deal explicitly with the bullets as discrete tasks, others concentrate on the second bullet and embed responses to the first bullet within their answer. As far as treatment of the extract is concerned it is important for students to recognise the shape and structure of the extract itself as well as its place in the narrative arc of the play as a whole. Genre awareness is always a discriminator but it is often most noticeable when students consider play texts as drama for the stage and not just the page. It often helps to refer to it as a play (rather than a 'text' or 'book'), with an audience and stage directions as appropriate. Relevant references to specific productions and the history of a play's staging often prove illuminating where they are closely linked to the extract or some other aspect of the play relevant to the question. When referring to historical context, more accurate students realise that 'Elizabethan' is appropriate for *The Taming of the Shrew* but 'Jacobean' is a more appropriate and useful context for the other three plays. Despite this, examiners recognise that Elizabethan values and social structures prevailed into the Jacobean period. There is still a tendency for some students to make sweeping comments particularly about the role of women in Elizabethan or Jacobean society. For example, when discussing patriarchal attitudes, it is not true to say that all women of the time would be treated in the same way or had a comparable quality of life. Similarly, it seems unlikely and perhaps simplistic to assume that an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience would be 'shocked' to see atypical representations and yet this was a frequent conclusion.

In the case of *Othello* and the other plays that contain tragic aspects or potential, ie *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*, the use of Aristotelian terminology can be a mixed blessing. Precise use of such terms can be illuminating but care is needed. More successful responses avoid the clumsy overuse of such terms as 'hamartia', 'hubris', 'peripeteia', 'anagorisis' and 'catharsis'. It is best to use these terms only where relevant, and to treat them as concepts to be engaged with rather than simply labels. **Such terms are now beginning to be used more judiciously and less mechanically.**

Question 1 *Othello*

This remains by far the most popular play at AS. The vast majority of answers agreed with the given view and sought to expand upon it in their answers. The best response to the given view kept 'passive victims' in holistic focus, rather than looking more at 'passive' or 'victims'. Students tended to concentrate on Desdemona with some references to Emilia and/or Bianca. Given the wording of the question some attention to women in the plural was preferable to an answer purely focused on Desdemona. Most students demonstrated a sound grasp of the tragic arc of Desdemona's development and could fit the extract into that arc to see it as a key turning point in the narrative. Many also pointed out the complementary nature of Emilia's character development and fate.

In terms of the extract itself, students made relevant reference to:

- the importance of the use of 'whore' (in the deterioration from the terms of endearment between the lovers earlier in the play through to increasingly abusive and violent terms used in the lead up to Desdemona's murder; how Desdemona claims to be unable to say the word)

- the pathos in Desdemona's statements ("It is my wretched fortune" and "And his unkindness may defeat my life But never taint my love")
- the naïve vulnerability of Desdemona kneeling
- Desdemona's and Emilia's references to heaven
- Emilia's role in articulating outrage at Desdemona's treatment
- the use of foreshadowing in Emilia's reference to hanging
- Iago's 'performance' as feigned friend to Desdemona (the use of exclamatives in his apparently sympathetic responses)
- Iago's silencing of both Emilia and then Desdemona

In terms of links to the wider play students made good use of: where and how Desdemona, in particular, is praised; Desdemona's earlier apparently more equal role in her marriage; when Desdemona is struck and then her murder; Emilia's and Desdemona's interactions together (the discussion about the nature of men and the Willow Scene); Cassio's treatment of Bianca.

Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew*

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

Question 3 *Measure for Measure*

There was a range of answers on this play. There were some brief references to Isabella's other qualities, but the majority of answers agreed with the given view. The best answers focused on her 'love' of truth and justice and were able to see Isabella's wider role in the play's debate about love involving her: religious service; temptation by Angelo; role in 'the bed trick'; and her marriage to the Duke at the end. Confident students were able to question her love of truth and justice when she becomes involved in 'the bed trick'.

In terms of the extract itself, students made relevant reference to:

- the significance of Isabella kneeling
- her repetition of 'justice'
- her reference to Angelo as 'devil' and her other epithets to describe him
- the use of rhetorical devices in her 'Most strange' speech

Students tended to neglect references to reason vs madness towards the end of the extract.

In terms of links to the wider play students made good use of: the temptation scenes between Angelo and Isabella; scenes between or about Isabella and Claudio; 'the bed trick'; and the final scene where her marriage to the Duke is announced.

Question 4 *The Winter's Tale*

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

Summary

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
- 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
- scrutinised the key words of the given view and used them to shape their answer
- considered 'elsewhere in the play' by selecting relevant detailed references
- made considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text
- showed awareness and understanding of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful Shakespeare answers:

- made sparse use of the extract or neglected a substantial section of it
- neglected the given critical interpretation
- wrote about the characters as though they were real people
- described the extract in narrative terms
- offered a 'translation' of the extract
- 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.

Section B: Poetry

These questions follow the typical frame of giving a critical view and a specific question focus. Students are prepared by studying the chosen Anthology text within the shared context of Love through the ages. In previous series, responses have been hampered by forced links to other poems as a way of addressing AO4 in the mistaken belief that such links are mandatory and the only way of accessing the idea of connections across texts. This tendency was less prevalent this year and responses were better as a result.

Question 5

This question was by far the most popular choice and, on the whole, worked very well for the majority of students. They appeared to find 'Song (Ae fond kiss)' and the given view engaging and accessible. Almost all students were keen to agree with the given view and to explore how Burns presents the pain and suffering following the end of a love affair. A clear grasp of the key word 'consolation' was crucial. Some had only a loose 'definition' in mind, such as seeing 'consolation' as the equivalent to: the ability to move on; positive feelings; and hope – all of which are not quite the same as 'consolation'. A lack of clarity on the word could also lead to some false debates where they appeared to wholeheartedly agree with the given view, and yet went on to provide what read like an adequate counter-argument citing the narrator's consolations. Successful answers explored methods, of course, and those who analysed the structure of Burns' argument found rich meanings. There was some particularly interesting debate around stanza four and the extent to which Burns' narrator regrets his love affair with Nancy. Those students who knew about the biographical basis for this poem made best use where they could also see the construction of a

narrative voice beyond the poet's own life experiences. Students often found real engagement with the pathos of the narrator's voice – the anguish, heartache and distress, but also the philosophical and generous nature that emerges. Attentive students noted the significance of the song/Scottish ballad form.

In terms of the details of the poem, students also made relevant reference to:

- the repetition (of the title phrase, and of various key words, phrases and structure)
- the choice of language and imagery to express different aspects of pain
- the cyclical structure of the poem with the repetition from stanza one in stanza six
- the use of couplets
- the final dash in each stanza
- the use of exclamatives
- the incorporation of a blessing to Nancy: 'Peace, Enjoyment, Lover and Pleasure'

Unfortunately, the metre was often misread as iambic pentameter.

Question 6

Although the post-2000 Anthology is slightly less popular, it often produces relatively high-quality answers and that was the case again this year. Most students who attempted Question 6 appeared to enjoy writing about 'For My Lover, Returning to His Wife'. Many agreed with the given view, but others were keen to argue that the mistress' voice also wields power.

In terms of the details of the poem, students made relevant reference to:

- possible ways of seeing structure to the narrator's arguments within the ode
- the various rich and vivid images and how they might be interpreted
- the use of free verse
- the use of contrast with reference to Michelangelo.
- the interplay of different stanza, line and sentence lengths, including minor sentences such as 'A luxury'
- the disruptions in the final stanzas
- the final stanza with its 'watercolor' imagery.

Summary

More successful poetry answers:

- looked in each case at the whole poems with the interpretation/question focus in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details
- analysed the poets' methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary
- analysed the presentation of the speakers as constructs
- applied context in a considered way
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful poetry answers:

- worked through the poems 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 such as rhyme and metre with no reference to meaning or simply asserted a link to meaning
- labelled methods inaccurately
- made sweeping, simplistic and inaccurate statements about context
- gave undue weight to the significance of punctuation and/or literary methods to do with verse form.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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