



AS LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7711/2: Love through the ages: Prose
Report on the Examination

7711
June 2022

Version: 1.0

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General

This report should be read in conjunction with the report on 7711/1, along with the mark schemes for these components. 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 wholes 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.** 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 success in this AS component. Students tended to do well when they:

- knew their set texts well in overview and in detail
- recognised that prose is a distinct genre with its 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 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.

In this seventh series of 'Love through the ages' examiners reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of both Sections A and B. In Section A an unseen extract from a prose text is reproduced on the examination paper to encourage students to read closely in the light of a given critical view. In Section B students answer one of two generic questions making detailed reference to the two set prose texts the centre has chosen. There were many engaged responses suggesting enthusiastic study of both texts.

A properly assimilated historicist approach involves more than simply using a lot of historical context. Knowledge about historical context was best applied to make precise and specific observations that were relevant and that illuminated the question, rather than being unhelpful sweeping statements. When it comes to the critical context, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism sometimes sharpened responses where they were applied very specifically to one aspect of a text or question. However, when each of the stances was rehearsed by mechanical rote then the discussion became generalised and was at the expense of looking closely at the text. Sometimes, when specific named critics were referenced, this 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 individual methods. For example, punctuation and tropes 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.

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 those where students wrote clearly, selectively and succinctly.

Section A: Unseen prose

Most students found the extract from *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields accessible and yet there were complexities to stretch and challenge the more able too. Attention to the structure of the extract was instructive. The extract opens with Daisy Goodwill, sitting on a train, writing in her journal in anticipation of meeting Barker Flett in Ottawa. The heat is oppressive and Daisy clearly feel anxious as she approaches the meeting. The narrative perspective then shifts to Barker, waiting at the station for Daisy to arrive as he considers what he will say to her as he paces the concourse. The extract ends from Barker's perspective, with Daisy walking towards him.

Students readily engaged with the idea of both Daisy and Barker being more troubled than excited by their meeting. Many were able to comment on the fact that Daisy was a young widow, travelling alone, seemingly surrounded by men and that this caused her to feel troubled. Responses often began with the example of Daisy underlining 'there' three times to demonstrate that she was either troubled or excited. Some students successfully analysed Daisy's appearance as the wind blew

her hair making it appear like a ‘halo’ or ‘a hat made of burnt fur’. The unbearable heat on the train was also used to exemplify Daisy’s feelings.

Some seized on Shields’ use of darkness and how this brought on a sense of foreboding, some successfully considered the ‘diamond dust’ in the Ontario skies and the beauty inherent in this image. The free indirect discourse in ‘She is powerless, anchorless, soft-tissued – a woman’ was successfully identified and analysed by many students and gave opportunity for some close reading. Such readings tended to be linked to contextual suggestions about changing attitudes to women between the novel’s 1936 setting and contexts of reception at the time of publication in 1993 and since. With such a wealth of material to consider regarding Daisy, some students dealt fleetingly with Barker’s feelings. However, the more successful were able to comment on his arrival at the station ten minutes early. The idea of him creating a ‘cushion of calm’ was used to demonstrate his feeling troubled or excited. Some picked up on the reference to Barker’s unsteady legs and that he felt everything was ‘at risk’ as evidence for his troubled feelings. Some students successfully considered Shields’ description of Barker’s posture and movement to comment on his character as he ‘wouldn’t dream...of sitting down’ and instead ‘pulls himself straight...his hands clasped behind his back’. Some seized on the way Barker seems to be trying to take his mind off of the meeting by looking around him at the building, examining it ‘carefully’. But thoughts of the impending meeting quickly return and students commented on Barker’s life being ‘on the cusp of change’. Some picked up on the reference to ‘Love’ and that perhaps this indicates that Barker is more excited about the meeting than Daisy in his hope that it would bring about love.

Summary

More successful unseen prose 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
- engaged fully with the task with an understanding of the whole extract rather than fragmented detail
- moved between the two viewpoints successfully
- considered the extract from an overview of its structure
- sustained focus on Shields’ prose narrative 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 gender roles from male and female perspectives
- explored and tested out the debate through alternatives
- 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 prose unseen answers:

- made sparse use of the details of the extract or neglected substantial sections
- neglected the given critical interpretation
- only considered Daisy
- made assumptions and assertions about alleged similarities between the attitudes of Daisy and Barker
- labelled simple/straightforward prose features
- lacked overview

- operated at word level analysis and constructed unconvincing interpretations out of this
- over valued the effect of punctuation
- were diverted by the need to write about other texts
- described the extract in narrative terms
- made little or no reference to prose narrative methods
- made inaccurate or sweeping assertions about context.

Section B: Comparing prose texts

These questions follow the typical frame of giving a critical view and a generic question focus, which students adapt to the two prose texts the centre has chosen to teach. Across the two questions *The Great Gatsby* was the most popular text and often, but not exclusively formed one of a pair.

Question 2

This question focused on exploring the given view that ‘lovers always have different expectations of relationships’. Many of the text combinations lent themselves to discussing a range of reasons for the different expectations: gender, class social conventions, repression, forces beyond the lovers’ control (such as war in *Atonement*). Text choices and interpretations differed widely in response. Where a debating approach was chosen students had to be careful not to contradict themselves when it came to interpretation. Perhaps the answer is to avoid sweeping generalisations in response to the given view and to accept that the complexities of the novels mean that it depends on the stage of the narrative. The more successful responses were able to approach the task in a more conceptual way and considered the differing expectations of lovers versus society. They also widened the debate through considering lovers who shared the same expectations.

Question 3

This question focused on exploring the given view that ‘in literature, marriage is often seen to be problematic’. Students identified interesting dichotomies, which they were able to argue were at the heart of the love stories concerned. For example, there were particularly interesting discussions about the conflicts between freedom and responsibility, particularly in relation to *The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening* and *Jane Eyre*. The best responses were able to: consider problematic in terms of unrealistic, idealise views on love; consider a range of marriages; reflect purposefully on the function of marriage and were able to consider unproblematic marriages.

Summary

More successful comparative prose answers:

- engaged with all keywords
- looked in each case at specific aspects of the novels in the context of the whole text with the interpretation/question focus in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details, as appropriate in an ‘open’ book examination

- analysed the writers' narrative prose methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary
- analysed the role of point of view and structure
- applied context in a considered way
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful comparative prose answers:

- fell into narrative/descriptive approaches, losing focus on the question and its key words
- left ideas undeveloped and unsupported and asserted sweeping interpretations
- described or labelled narrative prose methods, sometimes inaccurately, with no reference to meaning or simply asserted a link to meaning
- made sweeping, simplistic and inaccurate statements about context
- only considered similarities between texts.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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