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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/1 Love through the ages  
Report on the Examination

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7712  
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## **Introductory comments**

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/2A, 7712/2B and 7712/C (non-exam assessment), along with the mark schemes for those components. Reports on the components for the closely related AS English Literature A Specification (7711) might also prove useful.

It was evident from the marking of all three components 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 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.

## **Comparison**

Almost as much as historicism, 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. For example, this series' poems about wives appeared so different and yet the latter part of 'Wife' reveals that Limón's narrator, for all her modern feminist scepticism, is also expressing love and a desire to commit. This example confirms the idea that, as with all texts, structure is often an excellent way into meaning and ensuring that understanding is holistic.

Section C involves choosing wisely from the material in the novel and, in particular, from the poetry anthology as both choices are crucial to the success of the answer. Material is best selected so as to embed a clear argument. For example, one approach to Question 6 about love as a potential source of happiness and fulfilment involved selecting Jane Eyre's successful quest for happiness with Rochester alongside the failed relationships in 'At an Inn' and 'Song (Ae fond kiss)'. Another example would be an approach to Question 7 about true love being rarely achieved and never lasting using 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' and 'Non Sum Qualis' to shed light on Gatsby's doomed dream of true love with Daisy. On the other hand, an otherwise sound argument can be undone by poor choices such as:

- too many strands of the novel so the argument is lost
- more poems than are necessary to make the point
- 'The Garden of Love' alongside poems about romantic love
- Metaphysical or Cavalier poems chosen because the student knows them rather than because they fit
- too much recounting of the novel's narrative
- a rich, complex poem such as 'For My Lover' with insufficient attention to relevant methods.

Both questions worked best when time was taken with the novel to evidence love, either the happiness and fulfilment possible or the idea of true love. For example, the best answers on Jane Eyre quoted to support the idea of Jane happy and fulfilled, rather than simply asserting that those states are reached. Another example, would be using the narrative of The Great Gatsby to show in detail Gatsby's vision of true love. Arguments stand or fall on evidence, of course. Some students took the unusual step of arguing that Tom and Daisy or George and Myrtle are the only examples of true love in The Great Gatsby. Both sound implausible ideas until skilfully presented with evidence that was hard to refute.

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. These include:

- introductions and conclusions
- clean sentences
- clear paragraphs
- paragraphs that begin with topic sentences.

## 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 extracts are chosen with a clear beginning and end so as 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.

There is a clause in the preamble to the Mark Scheme which reads: 'In the case of a significant omission to an answer then the examiner should not give a mark higher than Band 4' ('Arriving at marks', paragraph 13, page 6). So, an answer that says very little about the extract is capped at Band 4. Examiners often came across otherwise strong answers on the Shakespeare play that attended to the given view and the wider play but under-used the extract so ended up with, at best, marks low in Band 4. These answers often had 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 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.

### **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 responding to 'significant' when answering the 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.

### **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, 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 features in ‘To My Dear and Loving Husband’ such as rhyming couplets, parallel structure, caesurae and end-stopped lines should be used as evidence for relevant points about meaning. Students need to explain how the effects they claim for these methods are actually achieved. Similarly, when discussing ‘Wife’ many were keen to exemplify Limón’s use of asyndetic listing, but did not explain how or why such a technique might reinforce the idea that the wife’s role seems to be such a chore. There is a tendency to see poetic technique in terms of opposite extremes where there is a completely uniform specific metre and regular rhyme scheme at one end of the continuum, and a total lack structure or patterning at the other. A lot of students claimed that because Limón’s poem is free verse, it uses no patterns and no structural devices, is “random”, even “messy” and “chaotic”. This kind of approach failed to look closer at how Limón creates the pun about ‘made into maid’, for example.

Perhaps the biggest test of understanding is in the role of methods 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 know a greater repertoire of dramatic and poetic methods than of prose. 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 is needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

AQA’s [Teaching guide: AO2 - The ways in which meanings are shaped](#) offers a productive way into thinking about the different ways in which meaning is shaped across the three different genres.

## **Feedback on specific questions**

### **Section A: Shakespeare**

#### **Question 1 – *Othello***

The most successful answers kept ‘naivety about men’ and ‘downfall’ in focus throughout, and used the given view as a lens through which to view the extract in detail.

Successful responses demonstrated understanding of the structural significance of the extract in terms of the arc of Desdemona’s: relationship with Othello; relationship with the other men in the play; and downfall.

There were some interesting debates about: her typicality/atypicality as a woman of her time; how changes in attitudes to women over time might take exception to the very idea of her being somehow to blame for her own downfall; ways of seeing how Desdemona changes over the course of the play.

**Question 2 – *The Taming of the Shrew***

The most successful answers kept ‘scorned by all men’, ‘victimised by patriarchy’ and ‘male attitudes’ in focus throughout, and used the given view as a lens through which to view the extract in detail.

Successful responses demonstrated understanding of the structural significance of the extract in terms of the arc of Katherina’s: relationship with the men in the extract; relationship with Petruchio; and ‘taming’.

There were some interesting debates about: her typicality/atypicality as a woman of her time; how changes in attitudes to women over time might take exception to how she is treated, even in a comedy; ways of seeing how Katherina changes over the course of the play.

**Question 3 – *Measure for Measure***

The most successful answers kept ‘function’, ‘simply to provide crude comedy’ and ‘the serious debate about love’ in focus throughout, and used the given view as a lens through which to view the extract in detail.

Successful responses demonstrated understanding of the structural significance of the extract in terms of the arc of the play’s plots and the relationships between different characters/groups of characters.

There were some interesting debates about: the role of the state in human affairs such as love, sex and what is deemed criminal; how changes in attitudes over time might affect comedy; ways of seeing how characters such as Lucio change over the course of the play and how the issues they raise are resolved by the end of the play.

**Question 4 – *The Winter’s Tale***

The most successful answers kept ‘relationship’, ‘built upon a foundation’ and ‘lies and deceit’ in focus throughout, and used the given view as a lens through which to view the extract in detail.

Successful responses demonstrated understanding of the structural significance of the extract in terms of Florizel’s and Perdita’s: royal origins; courtship in Bohemia; and role at the end in Sicilia.

There were some interesting debates about: their temporary happiness under threat of discovery in Bohemia; ways of seeing how they mirror their parents; and their function in bringing about resolution in Act Five.

**Summary of Section A**

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 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
- described the extract in narrative terms
- offered a paraphrase 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: Unseen Poetry**

### **Question 5 – 'To My Dear and Loving Husband' and 'Wife'**

The most successful answers kept 'conflicted' and 'the role of the wife' in focus throughout, and used the given view as a lens through which to view similarities and differences between the two poems.

When it comes to this comparative question, previous reports have urged students to concentrate on differences and that approach served students well here. At the same time, there were some illuminating similarities to explore such as the use of direct address to the husband, and the shared willingness to be a wife if love and mutual 'ownership' is the 'reward'. With poems from such different historical periods, it was a feature of successful answers that both poems were adequately contextualised.

There were some interesting debates about: the extent to which Bradstreet's narrator exemplified submissive behaviour or the opposite; the extent to which it was possible to read Bradstreet's narrator as 'conflicted'; possible readings of the domestic imagery in 'Wife'; and the ways in which 'Wife' can read as an encapsulation of the history of feminism to date.

## **Summary of Section B**

More successful comparative poetry answers:

- looked in each case at the whole poems with the given view/question focus in mind
- sustained a comparative approach
- 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, again being suitably tentative rather than assertively definitive
- showed awareness of typicality in the literature of love.

Less successful comparative 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 or inaccurate statements about context
- gave undue weight to the significance of punctuation and/or literary methods to do with verse form.

## **Section C: Comparing Texts**

### **Question 6**

The most successful answers kept ‘potential happiness and fulfilment’ in focus throughout, and used the question focus as a lens through which to view similarities and differences between the prose text and the chosen poems.

The best answers used ‘potential’ as a justification for looking at love as a source of unhappiness where fulfilment is frustrated.

There were some interesting debates about: what might constitute happiness and fulfilment, and how these were presented; various stumbling blocks thwarting the potential of love; the nature of love, how it manifests itself and how it can be presented in literary texts; and how the final destination of love relationships is presented.

### **Question 7**

The most successful answers kept ‘true love’, ‘rarely achieved’ and ‘never lasts’ in focus throughout, and used the question focus as a lens through which to view similarities and differences between the prose text and the chosen poems.

The best answers explored the phrase ‘true love’, sceptically or otherwise, and spent time scrutinising how the idea is presented in their texts.

There were some interesting debates about: what might constitute ‘true love’; how some fictional characters or speakers do not appear to aspire to it as an ideal; reasons why it is ‘rarely achieved’ and, in particular, ‘never lasts’; and the extent to which it is a literary concept.

## **Summary of Section C**

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

- chose material unwisely then forced it to fit the question making tenuous points and connections
- fell back on narrative/descriptive approaches
- failed to distinguish between poetic methods and prose methods
- wrote overlong answers that lost precise focus on the question
- wrote about a question from previous papers rather than from this one.

### **Final points**

- Examiners reported that it was relatively rare to find concise papers completed comfortably within the recommended 12-page answer booklet, and yet these tended to score some of the highest marks. Excessively long answers were often repetitious and used too much material exemplifying the same level of skill. Students should aim to spend time reading, annotating, planning and choosing the best material to use to suit the question. They should then build in time to compose each answer carefully, rather than rushing to write as much as possible.
- Historical and critical context should be used carefully and judiciously to ensure that it is explicitly relevant to the question so that it informs the argument, rather than appearing extraneous or even irrelevant.
- The most successful kind of analysis involves explaining why and how literary methods might create various effects on the reader or audience, rather than simply asserting that they do so. This approach enables points to be clinched; it strengthens and clarifies the argument. Such analysis of the best selected examples is much preferable to many examples at a lower level of analysis.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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