
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2A: Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath
Report on the Examination

7712
June 2022

Version: 1.0

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Introductory Comments

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/1, 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.

Section A: Core set text questions

In this set text section, secure textual knowledge and recall is essential. An ‘open book’ assessment quickly differentiates the quality of responses. Students who really know their set text can quickly engage with the keywords of a question. In successful responses, secure textual knowledge often supports more independent thinking that is developed through precise analysis of well-chosen textual detail. Invariably less successful answers were produced by students who were less familiar with their set texts and were unable to select and consider textual material relevant to the demands of the question. In these responses, students often just tended to ‘go through’ poems in an irrelevant way or resorted to broad narrative approaches to novels and plays. Importantly, students who purposefully engaged with all the key words of the question were able to produce more thoughtful work which skilfully drew together contextual awareness and literary analysis. Such work did not rely on received, unassimilated ideas or reworked material from past questions.

Successful students:

- focused on all the keywords of the question
- avoided using rehearsed material
- used literary analysis as a way of developing an argument rather than just illustrating the use of literary methods

- used context as a way of developing a literary interpretation
- developed strong independent arguments without feeling obliged to create sometimes irrelevant counter arguments.

Option 1 Section A: Poetry Set Text

***Up the Line to Death:* ed Brian Gardner**

Question 1

Successful responses to this question focused on all aspects of the given view through thoughtful consideration of all keywords. Confident students were able to develop perceptive debates about Brian Gardner's construction of the anthology and could consider the poetry selections in 'Tipperary Days' in the context of the editor's wider choices. Many students took Service's poem *Tipperary Days* as a starting point and were able to explore the retrospective nature of the poem that presents both the anticipation and the reality of combat.

Less effective responses tended to fall back on more generalised comparisons of early and later war poetry without fully engaging with the keywords of the given view.

Question 2

Confident responses were built on thoughtful text choices that allowed discussion of all aspects of the given view. An understanding of Gardiner's work as an editor was also important and allowed successful students to contextualise selected poems within the chronological phases of the anthology. Examiners saw good work on Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' which was often compared with earlier poems such as McCrae's 'In Flanders Field'.

Less effective answers largely focused on 'loss of youth' without any consideration of the varying forms and uses of 'lament'.

***Scars Upon My Heart:* ed Catherine Reilly**

Question 3

The two questions for this anthology were equally popular and elicited some thoughtful responses built on interesting text choices. Successful responses to this question ranged widely through the anthology and focused on the keywords 'accept', 'condemn' and 'suffering' to fully debate the given view. Students often used Wedderburn Cannan's 'Since they have Died' as an exemplar of 'acceptance' to compare with poems such as Brittain's 'The Lament of the Demobilised' that 'condemn' the suffering of war and adopt freer verse forms.

Less successful responses had an imprecise grasp of the given view and tended to go through individual poems with little focus on the question itself.

Question 4

Many students began by considering the source of the anthology's title, Brittain's poem 'To My Brother' and then ranged more widely throughout the collection. Successful responses were able

to consider how the trauma of war are echoed in the home front and could consider the title's metaphor through exploring varying forms of grief and bereavement.

Less successful responses often moved away from the poems themselves to more generalised discussion of women's experience of war which was not developed through literary analysis.

Option 2 Section A: Drama Set Text

***Oh! What a Lovely War:* Joan Littlewood**

Question 7 and 8

Very few students chose these questions and the Lead Examiner and the senior examining team did not see any responses for this set text. In the past students who have answered questions on this play have confidently discussed dramatic methods through considering the influences of Brecht, agitprop and music hall and had a secure understanding of the context of the play in the counter culture of the 1960s.

***Journey's End:* R C Sherriff**

Question 9

This was clearly the most popular question for this set text and examiners were impressed by the quality of the responses. The given view invited some interesting debates and, as ever, the ability to focus on the keywords of the task was an important discriminator. Many students aimed to produced balanced arguments and could relevantly consider Stanhope's strengths and weaknesses as a leader through considering loyalty, professionalism, duty as well as discussing his temper, erratic decisions, and alcoholism. Many students chose to discuss Stanhope's confrontation with Hibbert as a way of assessing his leadership, as well as examining the dramatic methods employed in this scene. Some more perceptive responses argued that Stanhope's sense of duty was not a selfless patriotic act to die for his country, but more a death wish brought on by the trauma of war that will, in turn, lead to the death of his men.

Less successful responses were more generalised and showed a more limited understanding of military leadership and the contextual significance of the German spring offensive in 1918.

Question 10

Although far less popular, this question produced an interesting range of responses. Many students considered the pre-war relationship between Raleigh and Stanhope as a 'back story' that created the tensions and dynamics at play between the officers. Other responses adopted a broader approach that focused on pre-war class relationships and the extent to which this is still evident on the front-line. Such responses were successful when there was a strong literary focus that considered the presentation of characters such as Trotter and Mason.

Less successful responses made sweeping generalisations about class or attempted to answer a past question on the significance of social class in the play. Such work largely ignored important keywords such as 'pre-war roles and relationships' and how they might be presented in the play.

Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text***Regeneration: Pat Barker*****Question 13**

The ability to fully focus on all aspects of the given view was a key discriminator in the responses to this question. Many students quickly discussed the significance of Rivers and Burns as individuals but often failed to explore the presentation of their relationship. Stronger responses were fully focused on relationship; perceptive students were able to consider the relationship as a key aspect of the novel's structure and could explore the climactic nature of chapter 15 with assurance.

Question 14

This popular question allowed students to respond in varying ways. Many largely supported the given view and looked at a range of conflicted male characters. More developed answers were able to look at the presentation of character through the broader contextual framework of attitudes to masculinity during the war and from the perspective of the writer and her time. Successful responses were able to discriminate between different forms of conflict through considering protest, medical ethics, class, male identity and trauma. Less successful responses focused on a list of simple character sketches without any overview.

Birdsong: Sebastian Faulks**Question 15**

This was a popular choice amongst students who engaged with the keywords of the given view in a range of ways. A common approach was to focus mostly on the physical degradation of war and discuss the presentation of death and suffering in combat. In less successful responses students often failed to consider the presentation of 'degradation' and only used quotation to illustrate contextual points about the scale and nature of death and injury in the war. Stronger answers considered degradation through considering the varying forms of trauma within the novel; there was some good work that considered Stephen Wraysford's alienation and the plight of veterans such as Brennan, for example. Perceptive, confident responses challenged the given view by considering the common humanity and friendship between soldiers that can transcend the degrading nature of war. Such responses often considered the significance of Stephen's rescue by a German soldier in part 6 of the novel.

Question 16

This less popular question elicited some interesting, varied responses. Many students considered the presentation of the relationship between Jack Firebrace and Stephen Wraysford as a way of exploring the significance of comradeship in the novel. More developed responses considered the presentation of their relationship through exploring the setting of the tunnelling war in section 6 of the novel where emotional intensity is mirrored in the claustrophobic entrapment of the two characters. The most successful responses demonstrated secure, confident knowledge of the novel as a whole. Such work was able to examine how the relationship is part of the novel's

narrative structure and is a bridge to the present-day sections where Stephen's promise to have children for Jack is 'honoured' by Elizabeth's naming of her son. Less successful responses could only offer character sketches of the two without considering their relationship. Such work produced descriptive accounts of plot rather than focusing on the presentation of their relationship and its function in the novel as a whole.

Section B: Unseen Prose: Questions 5, 11, 17

The extract, taken from *Wake* by Anna Hope, proved to be an accessible text which enabled students to explore the significance of sacrifice in a range of interesting ways. The focus of a son leaving for the front-line is a key aspect of First World War literature which allowed most students to consider typicality and context in a relevant way. Engagement with the focus of 'sacrifice' was a key discriminator. More generalised responses considered sacrifice as a synonym for death whilst more successful answers considered the more precise 'sacrifices' experienced by mother and son. The most assured responses were able to develop interesting discussions about power and agency through considering what was willingly sacrificed compared to what was forced on individuals. The varying time contexts of the extract were also quickly grasped by the majority of students. Many were able to consider the late war context of the extract, allowing for discussion of changing attitudes and the presentation of conscription as a biblical 'sacrifice' of the young. The perspective of a novel published in the centenary year of the war was also considered together with the gender of the writer. The best responses used this contextual discussion as a literary tool for interpretation rather than a digressive 'add on'. For example, the analysis of the 'weather-faded' Kitchener poster allowed for some focused examination of the fading of early war attitudes in the time of conscription. Students who had a secure grasp of the shared context of WW1 literature had read widely and used this experience in their analysis of the extract. Successful students also planned well and could focus on the presentation of 'sacrifice' rather than just producing a step-by-step commentary on prose methods.

Many students quickly engaged with the task through exploring the mother's perspective and her pain of 'giving up' her son to the war. Successful responses analysed how the extract closes with the minor sentence 'her son' juxtaposed with the 'six digits' of her son's military identity. Such answers were able to explore how the role of the mother was taken from her by the army who now 'cares' for her son and can even teach him how to sew. Examiners were impressed by the varying interpretations of sacrifice. Many could consider the sacrifice of youth as Ada's son must quickly become the man that the army expects him to be. Many responses focused successfully on the wider sacrifice of identity because of war. Most could consider how the son changes because of war; more confident students could explore female identity. Some perceptive responses even claimed that Ada's identity is 'sacrificed' to motherhood because of her responses to her son. Sophisticated responses often focused on the temporal aspects of the extract through considering the fading Kitchener poster, the seasonal change to autumn when 'the days began to shorten' and the quickening pace of the extract leading to son's pulse 'keeping time'. The forced sacrifice of conscription was explored by many through consideration of the biblical references in the extract; students were able to discuss the murder of the innocents, the nature of Christian sacrifice as well as considering other Old Testament sacrifices together with apocalyptic ideas of 'rapture'. To some conscription was also examined as a kind of illness that 'took hold' of the country.

More successful prose unseen responses:

- reflected clear, careful reading and a strong overview of the extract as a whole

- were fully focused on the significance of sacrifice and used this to plan and structure argument
- used context in an integrated way to develop literary interpretation
- selected and discussed textual detail in a thoughtful and thorough way
- considered the use of prose methods through exploring the significance of sacrifice.

Less successful prose unseen responses:

- reflected rushed reading or poor planning
- picked out disparate textual details and had no sense of the extract as a whole
- resorted to feature-spotting and could only offer a fragmented response to the text
- unloaded pre-planned discussion of context and typicality that was largely unintegrated and irrelevant
- considered other texts in a digressive way and moved too quickly away from the focus of the extract.

Section B: Questions 6, 12, 18

Students who wrote successful responses compared their chosen texts to consider the presentation of sacrifice in a variety of ways. Secure textual knowledge was key here; students who knew their texts well were able to move confidently between texts and could consider telling differences rather than just a broad account of similarities. The best responses explored comparisons that always considered the presentation of sacrifice rather than just a thematic approach to their chosen texts which grouped together linked examples of sacrifice with little analysis.

The most successful responses were able to explore the significance of sacrifice through pursuing perceptive links built on close consideration of literary methods. Such work, for example, was able to explore the ways in which Barry's presentation of Jessie Kirwan's political sacrifice can be linked to the sacrifices presented in Brooke's war poetry. To make these more assured links, students often used their understanding of context as a useful tool for literary analysis. The consideration of war trauma, for example, allowed many students to explore the true nature of the sacrifices that soldiers make in war. One student was able to perceptively compare the presentation of Bowe in *My Boy Jack* and the speaker in Owens's *Dulce et Decorum Est* from the perspective of survivors who are traumatised by their experiences of war that need to be shared with others.

Less successful answers often adopted a more schematic approach that focused on the difference between early and later war attitudes or the difference between home-front and front-line experience without a clear examination of the presentation of sacrifice in their chosen texts. Successful students were able to develop comparative responses that explicitly considered literary methods through the presentation of sacrifice. Through considering the presentation of mothers in *My Boy Jack* and *Scars Upon My Heart*, for example, some students were able to compare dramatic and poetic methods as a way of considering the female experience of sacrifice. Many examiners noted, however, that consideration of prose methods is often much less developed and often limited to word level analysis which was often flawed because of misunderstood grammatical terminology.

Less successful responses were poorly planned and were written before the student had a secure enough understanding of 'sacrifice'. In these rushed responses, the thinking was generalised and sacrifice was largely considered in its euphemistic sense as death in combat. Unfocused

responses also strayed from their chosen texts to consider other texts as a way of considering context and typicality. Such work was often digressive and often considered texts out of the time frame of the component, such as Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. These students would have benefited from exploring the idealistic presentation of 'sacrifice' within their chosen texts.

More successful comparative responses:

- did not just focus on similarities, but considered the differences between texts
- built well supported links between the two texts
- established a clear thesis on the significance of sacrifice and developed this throughout the response
- purposefully considered the differences between genres
- wrote succinctly.

Less successful comparative responses:

- struggled to compare and could only consider the similarities between texts at a narrative level
- developed assertive readings in an attempt to answer the question
- tended to resort to paraphrase rather than analyse literary methods when discussing prose texts
- unloaded poetic analysis which was often irrelevant to the topic
- used contextual knowledge as a 'bolt on' rather than integrating it into literary analysis
- wrote at length, paraphrasing content rather than debating and analysing the presentation of sacrifice.

Change to post-2000 drama text

This is a reminder that, from first teaching in 2021 and first exam in 2023, we've introduced a new post-2000 drama text and ***My Boy Jack* is no longer classified as a post-2000 text.**

If you follow the Option 3 route through the exam paper you'll need to teach our new post-2000 drama text *The Wipers Times* by Ian Hislop and Nick Newman (Samuel French LTD published 2016, ISBN: 978-0573113512).

If you wish to continue to teach *My Boy Jack*, you'll need to follow the Option 1 route through this exam paper and pair this drama text with one of the post-2000 prose text options: *A Long, Long Way*, *The First Casualty* or *Life Class*.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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