
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern times: Literature from 1945 to
the present day
Report on the Examination

7712
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Introductory comments

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/1, 7712/2A and 7712/C (NEA), 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.

This summer’s Modern Times paper proved highly accessible to students and it was evident that schools and colleges had prepared their students very well for its demands following the challenges of the pandemic. However, there were some problems noted by senior examiners.

- Students labelling any/every text within this shared context as ‘postmodern’, including the unseen prose extract, when this is far from true. Postmodernism is not a date stamp to be applied to every text published after 1945, but a specific literary concept/genre/text type.
- A 12-page answer book is used for this paper. Exceptionally long scripts that went well beyond this almost always showcased work consistently at the same level, thus doing nothing to move up the mark bands. Overly wordy responses tended not to be clear or coherent: two key Band 4 descriptors.
- Very few rubric infringements were seen, but a minority of students made irrelevant comparative references to Shakespeare plays and other literature (often studied for the Love through the Ages unit) that were not applicable to the post-1945 shared context of this component.

Question key words

The command words of the single text questions on this paper can be framed with a quoted or given view complete with key words, or using the key word ‘significance’ to frame a focus for debate. Students and centres must remember that this specification uses ‘significance’ in the semiotic sense of being ‘encoded with meanings’ rather than in the conversational sense of ‘important’. Future preparation should involve considering the implications of using ‘significant’ to frame a debate around the given topic.

The central premise of a ‘significance’ question is an invitation to discuss a range of possible encoded meanings around a specific element, theme or character within a text. Students who misinterpret ‘significance’ as merely a synonym for ‘relative importance’ will struggle. For example Question 1 on Carol Ann Duffy’s *Feminine Gospels* invited students to examine ‘the significance of men’ within the collection. Many students wrote illuminatingly about male characters such as Mark Antony in *Beautiful*, Adrian Henri in *Death and the Moon*, *The Long Queen*’s rejected suitors and swashbuckling adventurers, and so on. Students who simply asserted that men were ‘insignificant’ (as in ‘relatively unimportant’) when compared with women essentially twisted the question to discuss women as opposed to men, and therefore did not address the task set.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

Both poetry set texts are collections, not anthologies. Some students used these terms interchangeably, showing a lack of understanding that poets plan, design and structure their texts just as carefully as novelists and dramatists do. These collections are coherent bodies of work put together by the poets themselves; anthologies are much broader selections put together by editors. The implications here are profound in terms of what students can say about the overall design and purpose of *Feminine Gospels* and *Skirrid Hill*.

Feminine Gospels* by Carol Ann Duffy*Question 1**

More effective answers:

- looked at a range of male characters across the text
- used the dedication to Duffy’s four brothers to illuminate her possible reasons for wishing to appeal to men
- made appropriate relevant reference to critical ideas, such as Cixous’s ‘écriture féminine’ and Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- wrote about men as ‘insignificant’ and/or barely visible in the collection
- tended to ‘go through’ a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that were unconvincingly linked to the actual question set
- wrote about individual poems without linking them to the ideas network of the collection as a whole.

Question 2

More effective answers:

- looked at a range of poems that might be seen to express anger and/or bitterness and examined why this might be so
- showed an awareness of the difference between the characters and speakers in the poems and Duffy herself
- noted that many poems present women as happy, fulfilled and content, thus contesting the given view
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- tended to 'go through' poems that didn't seem to be very well understood
- made simplistic and generalised assertions before briefly noting at the end of a lengthy section how this proved that Duffy was 'angry and bitter'
- wrote about individual poems without linking them to the ideas network of the collection as a whole.

Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers*Question 3**

More effective answers:

- examined a variety of aspects of love in terms of familial or romantic bonds
- looked at love for Wales, its culture and landscape
- analysed Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods in writing about love
- challenged the given view in terms of examining poems felt to show a darker and more complex/ambiguous side of love
- examined broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally before claiming 'so this shows ...' in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- Used a generalised 'checklist' approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to 'prove' the given view correct or incorrect
- failed to distinguish between the poems and the poet, often making dubious accusations about Sheers' 'sexism' or 'toxic masculinity'
- wrote about individual poems without linking them to the themes of the collection as a whole.

Question 4

More effective answers:

- examined a variety of poems that seem to celebrate the power of women
- examined a variety of poems that seem to present the power of women as possibly negative or ambiguous
- examined a variety of poems that seem to present women as lacking power

- linked Sheers' ideas network and poetic methods effectively
- analysed broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- 'went through' poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- 'went through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points without linking the discussion to the task
- wrote about individual poems without linking them to the themes of the collection as a whole.

Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts

***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams**

Question 7

More effective answers:

- analysed Williams' possible concerns and dramatic methods with regard to the friendship between Stanley and Mitch
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the role of working class men in post-war America and the idea of the American Dream.

Less effective answers:

- described the characters of Stanley and Mitch separately as opposed to looking at their relationship
- wrote about characters as if they were real and criticised their behaviour in ways that suggested a weak grasp of the contexts of production and reception
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that did not focus on Williams as a dramatist.

Question 8

More effective answers:

- showed an impressive understanding of Williams' representation of the South
- analysed Blanche's function as an emblem of the declining South
- were clear about both the romanticised South and its dark side
- examined broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the play as a whole, often looking relevantly at specific performances.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about the key concepts in the given view
- imported elements of Williams' biography and made unsubstituted assertions about their importance to the text and task
- wrote inaccurately about the contexts of the play
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance.

***Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill**

Question 9

More effective answers:

- showed clear understanding of the given view of the play as ‘nothing more than an attack upon the political ideals of Margaret Thatcher’ and wrote well about the play’s implicit criticisms of Thatcher and Thatcherism
- challenged the given view by analysing the experiences of the dinner party guests, tracing connections between the women from the past and those located within the 1980s context
- wrote well about the play in performance, eg the doubling of parts, the transhistorical elements and the non-linear structure.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about the key concepts in the given view
- made little of the implied debate in the given view, which was highlighted by the words ‘nothing more than’
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance.

Question 10

More effective answers:

- showed clear understanding of the significance of the role of Joyce in terms of how she helps to symbolise the great political and cultural debate of the 1980s
- examined how while her sister Marlene espouses classically Thatcherite views about the primacy of the individual, Joyce takes a socialist perspective, defending the traditional working class
- analysed the play’s implicit criticisms of Thatcher and Thatcherism
- wrote well about the play in performance, eg the doubling of parts, the transhistorical elements and the non-linear structure.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about the role of Joyce and struggled to write about her in depth
- wrote in a descriptive way about what happens to Joyce as if she were a real person rather than a fictional construct
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance.

Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts

***Waterland* by Graham Swift**

Question 13

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

Question 14

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

The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood*Question 15**

More effective answers:

- analysed the various purposes and meanings of the Ceremony itself, along with rituals such as the shopping trips, births and stylised greetings, as well as the impact of public ceremonies like the Prayvaganza and the Salvaging, plus the terrifying Particicution and the denunciation of Janine at the Red Centre
- linked the rituals and ceremonies to Atwood's representation of Gilead's attempts to control its citizens
- saw the rituals and ceremonies as typical of the dystopian genre
- wrote well about Atwood's narrative methods.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about what the rituals and ceremonies were
- adopted a listy and generically descriptive approach which 'went through' various rituals and ceremonies but did not address the key word 'significance'
- did not look in detail at Atwood's narrative methods.

Question 16

More effective answers:

- discussed the final words of Offred's narrative in terms of its openness and ambiguity
- linked the final words to Atwood's representation of Offred's narrative as possibly unfinished, and the fact that it is followed by the Historical Notes
- analysed how Professor Pieixoto undercuts Offred's narrative by imposing a male version of 'history'
- compared Offred's last line with the last line of the whole novel, Pieixoto's address to the conference delegates, 'Are there any questions?'
- wrote well about Atwood's narrative methods and the dystopian genre.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about what Offred's last words might mean
- drifted into a generalised discussion of Offred's character and what had happened leading up to her arrest
- did not address the key word 'significance'
- did not look in detail at Atwood's narrative methods or the dystopian genre.

Section B: Prose and Poetry Contextual Linking**Questions 5, 11, 17**

The unseen prose extract was chosen with a clear beginning and end to enable more thorough analysis. The key words of the given view are intended as a lens through which to view the extract. Therefore, a substantial amount of time should be spent analysing the extract given in the light of the stated theme: in this series **changing social attitudes**.

Students should avoid irrelevant references to other texts when instructed to write about the significance of a given theme in the extract provided. Whereas less effective responses to Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1956) tended to paraphrase the extract via a 'narrative-with-text' approach plus attendant feature-spotting, better responses engaged enthusiastically and skilfully with this text and found plenty of illuminating things to say about her narrative methods. Some writing of exceptionally high quality was seen here. Better answers, while acknowledging that the extract is only a tiny part of a much longer text, wrote well about its internal structure and cohesion, eg the beginning, development and denouement of the scene.

The best answers distinguished effectively between Metalious's third person narrative stance and the manner in which the events were mainly focalised through the character of Tom Makris. Students who could not recognise Metalious's narrative viewpoint were disadvantaged from the outset, since correctly identifying this opened up the overall tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track when this core aspect of the text was misunderstood. Claiming that this straightforward third person, past tense narrative, comprising dialogue and description was 'postmodern', was inevitably self-penalising.

Less able students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert moral messages about Constance's 'backward' or 'sexist' social attitudes without showing an awareness of the contexts of production and reception. Accusing a fictional character (or, indeed, the writer herself) of holding 'archaic' views, and appearing to offer well-meaning advice on how to be more 'modern', was a self-limiting approach to literary-critical analysis. Urging Constance to 'talk more openly to Allison about dating boys' suggested that some students were treating the characters as real people rather than fictional constructs. Assertions about Constance being a scandalous divorcée were unhelpful, since the extract said nothing about why she was no longer with Allison's father: better answers looked at the relevant issue of the second marriage more subtly.

Questions 6, 12, 18

Almost as much as historicism, comparison is a distinctive feature of this Specification. In Paper 1, two out of 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, of course, such as explicit or implicit comparison within the shared contexts to establish typicality or atypicality.

To connect texts successfully within the framework of this question, students must remember that they have been instructed to **compare and contrast** the presentation of the given theme – **changing social attitudes** – across **two texts from different genres**. Sometimes even relatively strong candidates did not take full advantage of exploring these differences, and the weakest responses almost always insisted, often very unconvincingly, that their comparative set texts dealt with the given theme in 'very similar' ways. Some students defaulted to using the connective 'similarly' before going on to make a point that actually pointed to a major *difference* between the texts.

When comparing any two of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, it is crucial to analyse how they differ. There is no point in asserting that two texts are similar simply because they both deal with the same given theme – all the comparative set texts must do so, or the question could not have been set. The focus of the response must be on *presentation*, not merely *content*; the *how* as much as the *what*.

Previous reports have stressed the importance of being able to explore specific poetic, dramatic and prose methods so that an understanding of how writers operate can be established by the

student. Successful responses tend to be marked by an awareness and understanding of the genre under discussion, and that poets, dramatists and novelists have different ways of working. Examiners understand that like is not being compared with like here, so a novelist's or dramatist's methods may need more exposition and reference than those of a poet. The challenge for students is to demonstrate that different terminology and different metrics will be needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

Many students connected texts by putting texts side by side and going from one to the other in a linear fashion. However, the best responses were fully comparative where detailed similarities and differences were closely explored. The latter is a higher order skill that opens up the higher reaches of the mark scheme.

Better students worked through thoughtfully developed links between their texts that focused on how the writers' poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked to illuminate the theme of changing social attitudes. Crucially, they also clearly identified the nature of the changing social attitudes to be found within their texts, eg in relation to the role of women, sexuality, class, race etc. Weaker answers showed a tendency to off-load preconceived ideas about context and typicality without successfully relating them to the given theme, and/or failed to clarify exactly how and what social attitudes were changing in their chosen texts.

At times a bolted-on historical, political, psychological or sociological contextual overlay swamped the chosen texts. Potted histories of various waves of feminism or the struggle for civil rights, for example, are not asked for. When exploring their comparative set texts in an open book examination, accurate textual detail is crucial; well-chosen aspects of authorial method must form the bedrock of any successful comparison.

Students should refrain from adopting a lexical approach to AO2. Writing two or three paragraphs about, for example, the impact on the audience of Tennessee Williams's use of alliteration in a single stage direction from *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not a productive approach. 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.

With two 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 that relate back to the central theme
- discourse markers to signal similarity and difference.

On the whole, however, many excellent comparative essays were seen that analysed how each text represented the theme of changing social attitudes in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, norms and ethics. Truly original and fascinating connections were traced across the chosen texts in relation to a wide variety of possible issues and areas that might give rise to changing social attitudes, including gender, class, race, sexuality, religion and mental health. Some students compared how specific characters within their texts respond to changing social attitudes in various ways, and acknowledged how these may be viewed very differently over time. As with this type of very open question in previous examination series, the best answers here were simply outstanding and illuminated the chosen comparative texts in innovative, complex and fascinating ways.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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