
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/C: Independent Critical Study: Texts across time
Report on the Examination

7712
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Introductory comments

The overall quality of non-exam assessment (NEA) submissions this summer was impressive, bearing in mind the disruption that students and centres have experienced during the last few years. Moderators encountered many examples of thorough and productive internal centre moderation, and teacher annotation was often full and informative. The range of texts studied seemed to have increased since the last submission in 2019, and there was also a pleasing sense that a wider range of study areas had also been offered.

However, there are areas that could benefit from further improvement. Perhaps understandably, there were some uncertainties and misjudgements about the principles and practice of this component and these will be addressed later in this report. Inevitably, this will involve some repetition of previous advice. Not all texts and tasks, even those which seemed to have clear potential, proved ultimately productive. Nevertheless, moderators had many positive things to say about the originality and imagination displayed by many centres and students in their choice of material. It was significant, but hardly surprising in a component called ‘Independent Critical Study’, how often what seemed to be genuinely individual choices of texts and tasks ultimately resulted in the most impressive work.

Assessment

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all students. Understandably, therefore, the marks of some centres required adjustment. The most usual reason for these adjustments was that students produced work which – in terms of the marks awarded by the centre – matched neither the assessment criteria nor the standards suggested by the NEA standardising materials. It was notable that when centres made comparative reference to these materials their final marking tended to be more accurate. As stated above, there was some pleasing evidence of internal moderation, but at times this process seemed to invariably move the marks upwards, often away from a more accurate initial assessment.

Centres are reminded that Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) can be accessed through Centre Services via the AQA website.

Historicism

AQA English Literature Specification A is interested in a historical approach, as signalled in this component by the title ‘texts across time’. The objective of a historicist reading is to show how the time when a text is written will have an impact on its ideas, and the time when it is read will influence how it is received. Students are therefore encouraged to consider the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they are written, received and understood.

It must be stressed that the purpose of this consideration is to open up ways of exploring different readings of literary texts. These texts should not be used as documents whose primary purpose is to illustrate the nature of life during a particular period of history. Such approaches tend to deliver socio-historical description rather than literary interpretation. Feminist and Marxist readings of literature do not in themselves necessarily offer a historicist approach, especially if the general argument is that nothing has essentially changed over the years.

There was some very uncertain historical understanding in evidence this year. The term ‘Victorian’ proved especially problematic. Texts written in 1840 were treated as if their context of production was identical to other texts written in 1900. This problem was exacerbated when ‘Victorian’ was taken as a synonym for ‘nineteenth century’, and Norwegian texts (*A Doll’s House*) or Russian texts (*Crime and Punishment*) were routinely described as ‘Victorian’.

In this NEA component, students can demonstrate their understanding of historicism in two ways: one, through a diachronic approach, is to study two texts – at least one of which must be pre-twentieth century – separated by a significant period of time; the second is to take a synchronic approach whereby both texts are from the same time period, which must be pre-twentieth century.

The Assessment Objectives and English Literature A

When choosing texts and setting tasks, it is important that centres and students consider whether their choices will allow them to address all the assessment objectives. What is also important is that centres recognise that the AQA Literature A specifications take a holistic view of assessment, reflecting the belief that the assessment objectives work best together, producing a rounded and holistic view of English Literature.

Exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations (AO5)

This specification sees the starting point for literary discussion as being a literary and critical debate based on an understanding of the significance of contexts. This sort of discussion is at the heart of AO5. When tasks were built around AO5, students found it much easier to deliver well shaped and coherent arguments.

AO5 encourages an understanding that meanings in literary texts are not fixed, and that multiple readings are possible. Interpretations of a text can be generated through discussion, through reference to a given critical view, or through reference to critical theory, although this last route needs to be used with discretion. There were many examples of sweeping generalisations of what a feminist critic would necessarily say about a text, and these generalisations often swamped any evidence of the student’s own interpretation of what they had read.

Some tasks tended to encourage description of content rather than exploration of different interpretations. It is important to recognise that identifying differences between two texts in terms of their content does not necessarily deliver AO5, particularly that aspect of AO5 which addresses the different ways in which any individual text can be interpreted. Reference to critical opinion is most effective when it is woven into the student’s own argument, not randomly inserted.

Several students made good use of the concept of ‘significance’, an important term in this specification. It derives from semiotics and involves weighing up all the potential contributions to how a text can be analysed. It can be used to provide access to all the AOs, including the opportunity to debate meanings. For instance, considering the significance of the country house as presented by Waugh and Ishiguro would allow both exploration of the different ways in which the authors represent their fictional worlds and what different possible readings emerge.

Exploring connections across literary texts (AO4)

Interpretations should be seen as naturally deriving from the connections established between the two selected texts. The most effective connections were carefully integrated into the argument and prioritised significant distinctions between the texts rather than forced comparisons. At times connections proved restrictive rather than liberating, and there was a sense that the complexities of a text were being sacrificed through a determination to establish some very debateable common ground.

The exploration of literary connections between texts often proved very productive. Many students established very effective links through a consideration of aspects of genre. It should be emphasised that, in terms of delivering AO4, there is no requirement to make wider reference to any texts other than the central pair selected.

Demonstrating understanding of the significance of contexts (AO3)

Contextual material works best when it emerges naturally from a consideration of the text and is clearly being used in service of the task. AO3 and AO5 should be thought of as working closely together. Top band responses integrated contextual material in a meaningful and economical way. They demonstrated an assured use of contexts to explore connections between texts and develop perceptive arguments. Lower band responses tended to take refuge in poorly assimilated and poorly understood contextual material. Biographical details at times tended to get in the way of literary analysis or generated unhelpful and speculative theories about authorial intention.

The more effective responses used contexts in a discriminating way which informed different interpretations of the texts. Since English Literature A prioritises a historicist approach to the study of literature, consideration of the context of time should be central to any NEA response.

Analysing ways that meanings are shaped (AO2)

The most effective responses to this assessment objective demonstrated understanding of voice, form and structure. Less effective responses operated largely or wholly at word-level analysis.

There was a great deal of unproductive dissection of lexical items. The delivery of AO2 was at times limited to a series of statements connecting single words or phrases with what was asserted to be an unvarying reader response, at times at the level of simple paraphrase: 'this word means that [...]'. This sort of narrow focus is unlikely to identify the most significant authorial methods employed in the lengthier narratives of a play or novel.

Drama was often not well treated in terms of AO2. Close attention to dramatic form and method was the exception rather than the rule. Frequently, those responses which compared a play and a novel gave little or no indication that these texts were being seen as generically different in form. Poetry texts were more evident this year. Again, those responses which treated the poems as poems proved most effective.

It was often the case that tasks which foregrounded AO2 through the use of such phrases as 'are presented as being' assisted student focus on this assessment objective.

It is important to recognise that this assessment objective is not best served by isolated feature-spotting. References to authorial method need to be integrated into the wider argument and support interpretations of the texts.

Articulating responses to literary texts (AO1)

Much work seen this summer was well organised, clearly argued and accurately expressed. However, many moderators commented that AO1 seemed at times to have been largely ignored when centres arrived at their final mark.

A significant and recurrent problem was paragraphing, or the lack of it. Effective use of paragraphing helps to develop and shape an argument for writer and reader. Some responses used no paragraphs at all, with many adopting a pattern of one paragraph per page. This sort of unstructured approach led to repetitious and excessively descriptive responses. There was often little evidence of any consistent use of topic sentences and clear, cohesive signposting.

When students used literary terminology with confidence and accuracy, their work benefited. When they had limited grasp of the meaning of the selected terms, they tended to draw attention to the limitations of their understanding. There were again many references to critical terminology that suggested that the terms had been misunderstood. ‘Post-modernist’ was routinely used to describe anything that was loosely situated in modern times. Many students employed grammatical terms inaccurately, occasionally attracting no adverse comment in the centre’s marking.

Moderators reported that proof-reading was sometimes ineffective; at times even names of authors and the base texts were consistently misspelt. The titles of texts were routinely left unmarked. With texts such as *King Lear* and *Lolita*, this can lead to some serious confusion. A problem which was particularly prevalent at the higher mark bands was over-writing, where an apparent straining for effect led to occluded or opaque expression which did not ultimately advance the argument. At the other end of the scale, the casual use of colloquialisms did not assist literary analysis.

There were occasional problems with the use of quotations. Some were inaccurate and some only had a very tangential connection to the task. Successful students incorporated sharply selected quotations into their arguments and where appropriate indicated exactly where the quotation occurred within the text – often central to its relevance. Excessively lengthy quotations bulked out the essay to no purpose.

The construction of a 2500 word argument requires skill and care, and students had not always paid attention to the necessary techniques involved.

Texts

The appropriateness of any textual choice is dependent on the other text to which it is connected and the accompanying task. There was more evidence this year that students had selected their own pairs of texts, and this approach frequently delivered fresh and individual responses that suggested a high degree of personal engagement. It was very pleasing to see how many centres had clearly encouraged their students to explore the very wide opportunities for text choice in this component.

Some centres taught a common text and allowed their students to select a second text from a set of ‘satellite’ texts. This approach worked when the connections established did not seem forced and involved something more than similarities in content. The choice of the common text is clearly very important here. Some texts proved very limited in the opportunities they offered, and this had an adverse effect on treatment of the second texts. When a common text is used it is very important that any teaching of that text does not lead the students down very similar interpretative and critical paths. *Great Expectations*, for instance, tended to prove a more productive choice in this respect than *A Doll’s House* or *The Bell Jar*.

It should also be re-emphasised that the list of texts offered in the specification as suggestions for NEA use are only ‘recommended’ as possible choices for centres new to this component. They are not in any way a set text list, and the choice of any individual text from the list must not be seen as a guarantee of success. Centres should have the confidence to select texts based on their assessment of what is in their students’ best interests.

A careful judgement should also be made as to whether the selected texts provide clear opportunities for the students to address all the assessment objectives. Will they, for instance, encourage engagement with authorial method (AO2), or offer opportunities to explore different interpretations (AO5)? Texts which seem superficially attractive to students may prove to be lacking in the depth and complexity necessary for detailed literary analysis. It is important that the two selected texts are well balanced, both in terms of their potential and in the treatment they receive in the students’ responses.

Very popular texts this year included *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Bloody Chamber* and *Frankenstein*.

There was elsewhere encouraging evidence that students are increasingly being encouraged to read widely. *The Little Stranger*, *Anna Karenina*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Lovely Bones*, *A Handful of Dust*, *The Remains of the Day*, *Fingersmith*, *Moon Tiger* and *Normal People* were among many texts which elicited individual and interesting arguments.

There was more poetry in evidence this year. Rossetti was popular, and there were some challenging interpretations of *Paradise Lost*, *Aurora Leigh*, various selections from *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Waste Land*. Selection of drama texts was largely limited to Ibsen and Shakespeare. Collections of short stories were sparingly used. Centres should remember that when short stories (or short poems) are selected, the expectation is that at least two will be closely studied and there will be some evidence of awareness of the wider collection or anthology of which they are a part. If the collection is being used as the pre-1900 text then all the stories studied must have been written before 1900. A similar requirement applies to collections of poetry.

The use of a text in translation is permissible. We expect, however, that such texts will have been influential and significant in the development of literature in English. In the spirit of a specification entitled ‘English Literature’, we would normally not expect two such texts to be used together.

When students selected young adult or children’s books, they often found it difficult to use these works to successfully deliver all the assessment objectives. The use of what might have also been GCSE texts was at times limiting, particularly when the selected theme was a familiar one from past GCSE studies.

There were examples of centres choosing inappropriate or ineligible texts, either those which operate as set texts elsewhere in the specification, or those which as single short poems or short stories did not fulfil the text requirement for this component.

Centres are reminded that set texts from 'Love through the ages' or 'Texts in shared contexts' cannot be used for non-exam assessment (see page 21 of the specification). None of the texts from set text lists are acceptable for use in non-exam assessment. This is a requirement regardless of whether or not students have studied the set text for exam purposes.

While some moderators only saw a relatively narrow range of texts, many others commented appreciatively on the range of texts being studied. It is to be hoped that centres will continue to broaden the choices available to their students.

Tasks

The three units in this specification emphasise particular approaches to the study of literature. If centres set tasks that offer meaningful opportunities to respond to all five assessment objectives, they will not only be increasing their students' chances of success, but also be reinforcing good practices that will benefit responses to the two written units.

As with the possible text list, the list of themes identified in the specification as possible subjects for comparative study are only suggestions, offered as a starting point for centres during the early stages of this specification. Centres are not limited to these suggestions in any way. At times, students who chose one of these themes for study seemed uncomfortable with the selected topic and might have benefited from a wholly original choice, derived from wider discussions between the student and the centre.

There were occasions when the whole cohort of students from a centre essentially selected the same theme for study, often based on a feminist reading of the texts, but there were also many examples of unfamiliar and imaginative subjects being selected, for example the representation of childhood, the nature of fear, grief, monstrosity, religious faith, the significance of setting, and revenge.

Some tasks focused on themes which proved to be too wide for effective treatment in 2500 words (eg 'the influence of society in texts x and y'). Others lacked any explicit requirement to address authorial methods, with the result that the essays tended to retreat into straightforward descriptions of the nature of the fictional worlds.

Task wordings should encourage students to address different possible readings of the texts (AO5). Some tasks offered propositions which were self-evident ('Consider the view that women are restricted in a patriarchal society'), or effectively invited simple agreement ('Show how these two texts demonstrate that women are oppressed by men'). Some texts seemed to have been chosen simply to substantiate a given world view. It is usually more productive to start with a key idea from within the text(s) and work outwards into contexts and readings.

Many centres again used the task format of a quotation followed by a 'compare and contrast' formula. This format is often helpful, but is in no way obligatory. When there was a productive relationship between the quotation and what followed it worked well, but this was not always the case. In such cases, student responses were unable to use the quotation to deliver any meaningful interpretation of the texts. Some responses made no reference to the quotations at all.

The externally examined papers place considerable emphasis on the importance of students attending to the precise wording of the set questions. Those who shape their answers judiciously and consistently in response to the view set up in the tasks are likely to do well. Consistently relevant and coherent arguments are no less important in NEA submissions.

Centres are reminded they can contact their NEA advisers if they would like assistance with wording of tasks. Please contact english-gce@aqa.org.uk if you require your centre's NEA adviser contact details.

Word Counts

The specification clearly states that the upper word count for work in this unit is 2500 words. Quotations are not included in this figure. There is no tolerance limit applied to the word count. It is expected that every piece of work will be accompanied by an accurate word count. Some students provided two word counts: one including quotations, and another indicating the total once quotations had been deducted. This was particularly useful. In some responses the quotations were so numerous and lengthy that the final total word count exceeded 4000 words. It was difficult to regard these responses as being well structured.

While there is no automatic penalty for exceeding the word count, we expect responses to be within this figure. It must be stressed that responses do not gain an advantage from exceeding this total, and indeed such excess is often self-penalising. Centres should stress this fact to their students.

The majority had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits and the responses benefited as a result.

Marking and Annotation

Many moderators commented on the correlation between effective centre annotation and accurate application of the assessment criteria. The most valuable centre comments were again those which offered an honest assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of the work. Summative comments are an important method of conveying centres' overall judgements. These judgements are best conveyed through the teacher's own words, but with appropriate and selective reference to the criteria. When the marking criteria were simply copied out and certain areas highlighted, relatively little was conveyed to the moderator.

It was pleasing to note frequent evidence of internal moderation and that a genuine dialogue had clearly taken place. This was usually of assistance to the moderator.

Some centres made reference to past TOLS materials when arriving at their final marks. This is a very helpful and productive practice.

The holistic approach that AQA specifications take to marking and assessment must again be stressed. It is not appropriate practice for centres to assign separate marks to the different AOs and then add them together to produce a total. Teachers can find good examples of centre annotation in past TOLS materials.

Annotation which assists the moderation process will:

- occur at intervals throughout the work
- include detailed summative comments
- show awareness that the final audience for the work is the moderator and shape comments accordingly
- acknowledge both the strengths and the weaknesses of the scripts
- only use ticking within the scripts which has a clear purpose
- avoid underlining sections of the scripts
- indicate the degree to which and in what ways the assessment objectives have been addressed through precise reference to what is happening in the script. To merely identify different assessment objectives is of very limited value. Simply putting 'AO2' in the margin, for instance, could justify a variety of marks.
- ensure that the summative comment makes sense in terms of the final mark awarded. There were some examples this summer when it was difficult to see the connection between the two.

Administration

The presentation of scripts matters, as does adherence to deadlines. There was much evidence this summer of excellent administrative practice.

Work can be moderated more efficiently if centres:

- secure scripts with treasury tags rather than paper clips or plastic wallets. Staples tend to unfasten. Plastic wallets are cumbersome to deal with
- ensure that bibliographies (including the editions of the central texts), an appropriately academic form of referencing, and accurate word counts are provided
- present the folders in the sample in candidate number or descending rank order
- adhere to deadline dates. The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15th or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres to submit to AQA, not for students to submit to centres

Conclusion

While exam reports inevitably have to spend time identifying areas for possible improvement, many moderators commented on the very high quality of some of the work seen. Yet again, the best work seen offered a maturity, independence and literary insight that was deeply impressive and at times representative of a standard above and beyond normal A-level study. Many students seemed to have been genuinely engaged by the tasks they had been set, and produced coherent and well-shaped responses that were a pleasure to read.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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