
AS LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7711/1 Love Through the Ages: Shakespeare and Poetry
Report on the Examination

7711/1
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Part One: General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the report on 7711/2. It might also be relevant to consult to the report for the equivalent A level component, 7712/1.

It was evident from the marking of Papers 1 and 2 that the historicist philosophy of the Specification is positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. Historicism sees texts not in isolation but as products of their time. As such, it encourages the exploration of the relationship between texts and the contexts in which they are written and then in which they read and interpreted, along with how they have been interpreted over the intervening time period. Key to the engagement with a historicist approach is the focus on a shared context. In both Paper 1 and Paper 2 this is the diachronic context of Love through the ages.

Importantly, this specification aims to encourage confident, independent readers who are able to 'make meaning' through both close textual analysis and a wider understanding of the contexts that might inform their literary study. Students are encouraged to pursue clear, authentic arguments with conviction.

Such responses are best rewarded by the holistic marking of five Assessment Objectives using a 25-mark scale divided into five bands. The holistic use of assessment objectives allows for a flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage independent work not limited by formulaic constraints. Holistic marking enables responses to be assessed as organic 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 best advice to students is to concentrate on answering the question set and let the assessment objectives look after themselves. Because the quality of written expression is crucial in enabling literary skills, students should be particularly mindful of how they answer the question too.

Part Two: Priorities

In the first few series of this examination, the emphasis of reports and subsequent training was on historicism as the underpinning philosophy of the Specification. The following areas of priority build on that foundation:

Extracts

It is important to remember that the Shakespeare extract in Section A is selected and printed on the examination paper for the express purpose of relevant analysis and to allow a full and detailed answer to the question. It is surprisingly still quite common for students to under-use the extract. The extract is chosen with a clear beginning and end, to enable analysis of structure. The key words of the given view in the second bullet 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 details, methods and contexts embedded in 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.

As the Shakespeare extract is from a play, it is particularly important to access dramatic methods. Precise relevant references to aspects of dramatic presentation and stagecraft are encouraged. Reference to specific productions is often used to good effect and this is also to be encouraged.

There are, of course two bullets to the extract question and it is worth noting that there are different acceptable approaches. Some tackle them separately. Others concentrate on the second conflating the first into it as part of the natural focus on love taken by the Specification as a whole. The latter approach is probably more popular and rarely involves ignoring or under-valuing aspects of love, so Centres can be assured that this approach is acceptable and not an obstacle to success.

The poetry questions in Section B tend to involve fewer pitfalls. As the 'extracts' here are, of course, complete poems, there is no immediate 'wider play' issue to worry about and there is a single focus on the given view. At the same time, it is worth stressing that the reproduction of the text is still an invitation to read closely and concentrate efforts on exploring the methods and contexts revealed by the text.

At the same time, both Section A and Section B extracts are parts of a greater whole and questions still come up about how much time should be devoted to the wider play in Section A and to the rest of the Anthology for Section B. The wider play is explicitly referred to in Section A questions so it is a requirement of the answer; in Section B it is not a requirement so, aside from references perhaps to poetic typicality, explicit reference to other poems is not required and not recommended as it can compromise the relevance of the answer. In Section A references to the wider play should be limited to specific, carefully chosen cross reference to scenes, moments or quotations of direct relevance to the extract as points of similarity or difference. Students should avoid unnecessary narrative or exposition about other points in the wider play. Reference to other plays by Shakespeare is rarely helpful. These tend to be made as an attempt to address typicality rather than as part of an authentic direct answer to the question.

Question key words

The command words of questions in Section A do not vary. The first bullet is always: How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this extract? 'How' places immediate emphasis on methods and implies the need for detail and explanation of techniques and effects. The second bullet always begins: Examine the view that, in this extract and elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare presents... Again, 'examine' puts immediate emphasis on the need to look closely. Engaging with both these injunctions is crucial to progressing up the mark scheme.

Likewise, in Section B, questions will always begin: Examine the view that...'Examine' here encourages thorough attention to the given view and to the poem that follows. Both 'how' and 'examine' are prompts to analyse within a clear, coherent argument. This is a higher- order skill that opens up the upper 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 moments 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 engage readily with poetic methods to show the application of their learning. However, they should choose aspects of methods that (a) are relevant to the question and (b) they are confident about. It is common for students to engage at the word level and then go on to mis-label word classes in the process. There is no need to label word classes but if students choose to do this as a chosen aspect of methods then they have an obligation to do so accurately. Similarly, there is no obligation to scan poems for metre or to use letters to label rhyme schemes, but if students take this path, then they must get it right. There are two crucial priorities here: (i) choosing relevant methods that are of genuine interest to students in answering the question and (ii) the need to link methods clearly to meaning so that methods are not simply identified. Effects need to be explained rather than simply asserted.

AQA's **Teaching Guide to AO2** offers a productive way into thinking about the different ways in which meaning is shaped across the three different genres.

<https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-a/teach/teaching-guide-ao2>

Part Three: Feedback on specific questions

Section A

Question 1 Othello

Othello is by far the most popular Shakespeare text and this question yielded a full range of responses. Students welcomed the opportunity to write about Iago and the complexities of his Machiavellian shape-shifting. Those who used the question simply as a prompt to write about the presentation of Iago with little reference to the extract and the given view did less well. As always, the key words of the given view – 'intelligence', 'like' and 'condemn' – proved to be the main discriminators. Those who could discuss Iago's intelligence using the extract, rather than simply relying on his language and behaviour elsewhere in the play, tended to do well. Students who engaged with Iago's wit did so in various ways. One way was by fitting the extract into the narrative of Iago's dissembling; appearing as friend and supporter while all the time plotting against Othello and Desdemona. Another way was to explore Iago's clever use of imagery, puns, riddles and rhymes in his interaction with Desdemona and Emilia. The speech where he paints a portrait of a 'deserving' woman was a particularly rich source for those who could analyse his rhetorical skills. When it came to 'like' and 'condemn' students were quick to examine the misogyny underpinning Iago's language and behaviour, as well as his duplicitousness and malice. Those who argued that Jacobean audiences might 'like' Iago for his patriarchal banter, but modern audiences 'condemn' Iago for his offensiveness, risked sounding a little too simplistic. New Historicism is interested in acknowledging social change and changing attitudes, but, at the same time might recognise that audiences then as now are made up of individuals with different

attitudes and values. Those who looked at the first bullet in isolation explored the dysfunctions of the relationship between Emilia and Iago in the extract and elsewhere in the play, and the ways in which Desdemona intervenes on Emilia's behalf. Some went on to link the fates of Emilia and Desdemona as wives who are starved of love and punished for the opposition to patriarchy.

Question 2 The Taming of the Shrew

Students appeared to find the dismissive nature of the given view accessible. The best answers showed appropriate knowledge and understanding of the subplot and its elaborate complexities as a source of comedic writing about love. The majority agreed with the given view and explored the idea of role play and disguise in the game of love. Some were able to examine the framing device structure and to see this extract as a dramatic motif of eavesdropping on attempts to seduce and court Bianca, used elsewhere in the subplot too. In weaker responses there was often not as much engagement with the extract as would be expected, and students seemingly found it easier to engage with Petruchio and Katherine's relationship in the wider play. This did tend to mean that opportunities for analysis of methods and contexts were missed as a result.

Question 3 Measure for Measure

The given view invited a range of responses. Many grouped the men together to agree with the view. Others used the given view as a way of separating the male characters and debating their worth. Opinions were interestingly divided on the Duke and on Claudio. Perhaps the most convincing answers saw the debate in terms of the moral ambiguities associated with the genre of the problem play. Clear engagement with Angelo in the extract provided a clear and obvious launchpad into the wider play. Likewise, Isabella's role in the extract led to discussion of how men treat women in the play. A few of the best responses broadened out the debate to consider the role of the comedic characters, to comment on the impact of class on honour in the play, including Lucio.

Question 4 The Winter's Tale

The strongest answers engaged readily with the presentation of the couple's love affair, how they act and speak to one another and how they are seen by others. However, some students misunderstood Florizel's lines which led to some weaker engagement with the debate. The best students, as always, were able to engage with the given view and break it down – to examine key words such as 'idealised' and 'perfect' and to form robust conclusions based on these.

Section B

Question 5

This was the most popular poetry option and students readily engaged with the given view, with which the majority agreed. Some conflated 'power, control and ownership' into shorthand for patriarchal dominance, whereas others considered them as separate strands of the discussion. Both approaches worked well. In support of the given view, students persuasively cited a range of features about the narrator: his emphasis on physical exhaustion; his awareness of his audience of peers and a sense of competition with others; his use of the image of trying to catch the wind in a net; his realisation in the volta that the 'hynde' is manifestly under the power, control and ownership of 'Cesar'; and the final reference to taming. Many also cited the whole notion of the extended

hunting metaphor as a way of objectifying women. In terms of counter-argument, some observed that the Petrarchan sonnet form and the extended hunting metaphor were typical ways of discussing love in the courtly love tradition and that the narrator's efforts and exasperations are evidence of

the strength of his passion. Most made use of their awareness of Wyatt's love life and relationship with Ann Boleyn within the court of Henry VIII. Despite the evidence that Wyatt was drawing on his own experiences, it is still perhaps best practice to refer to the narrator or speaker. It was interesting how many students claimed, influenced by feminist criticism, that the woman in the poem has 'no voice'. A twist on this is that the narrator puts the final couplet in the first person and in inverted commas to give the illusion of these words being a declaration by the 'hynde' herself, when it is more likely a statement of ownership written by 'Cesar' himself.

Question 6

Again, this question yielded some engaged answers demonstrating the accessibility of the given view. The majority agreed, with the riders that the narrator links them together as their child and that they are still living together. Students cited relevant evidence for the couple's lack of connectedness: the separate beds; the separate books; their physical distance from one another; the apparent lack of interaction; and the 'flotsam' image. There was some sensitive exploration of the 'thread' and 'feather' imagery. Those who knew about Jennings' background picked up on the religious imagery – the allusion in the title and the references to 'confession', 'chastity' and fidelity – as affirmations of their resilience as a couple. Students are often keen to engage with aspects of poetic form such as stanzas, rhythm and rhyme but there was surprisingly little attention to these methods as ways of reinforcing meaning in this particular poem.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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