
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/1 Love Through the Ages
Report on the Examination

7712/1
June 2023

Version: 1.0

Further copies of this Report are available from [aqa.org.uk](https://www.aqa.org.uk)

Copyright © 2023 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Part One: General Remarks

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

It was evident from the marking of all three components that the New Historicist philosophy of the Specification is positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. New 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 New 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.

Part Two: Priorities

In the first few series of this examination, the emphasis of reports and subsequent training was on New Historicism as the underpinning philosophy of the Specification. The following four areas of priority are designed to build on that foundation. They will also form the basis of autumn feedback training later this year.

Comparison

Almost as much as New 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. In stark contrast, Specification B never asks students to compare one text with another. 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. Identifying similarities is often a useful way into discussing differences.

Similar points can be made about Section C which involves choosing wisely from the material in the novel and from the poetry anthology, as both choices are crucial to the success of the answer. Material is best selected in order to embed a clear argument about the specific question focus. An otherwise sound argument can be undone by poor choices

- too many strands of the novel so the argument is lost
- too much recounting of the novel's narrative.
- more poems than are necessary to make the point
- poems chosen because the student knows them rather than because they fit the precise question
- insufficient attention to relevant prose vs poetry methods

Answers work best when time is taken with the novel to evidence the question focus.

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 or put texts side by side rather than writing a properly integrated comparison
- complicated the task with too many poems and/or too many strands of the novel
- 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 with a previously answered question in mind, such as the question on barriers to love from the SAMs

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:

- introductions and conclusions
- clean sentences
- clear paragraphs
- paragraphs that begin with topic sentences
- discourse markers to signal similarity and difference

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 Shakespeare extract will have been 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 given.

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 come across otherwise strong answers on the Shakespeare play that attended to the given view and the wider play but under-use the extract so end up with, at best, marks low in Band 4. These answers often have 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 to accessing dramatic methods 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.

More successful **Shakespeare** answers:

- look at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of aspects of love and the key words of the given view
- sustain focus on Shakespeare and his dramatic and poetic methods
- explore interpretation, ie agree with, disagree with **or** debate the given view
- scrutinise the key words of the given view and use them to shape their answer

- consider ‘elsewhere in the play’ by selecting relevant detailed references
- make considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text
- show awareness and understanding of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful **Shakespeare** answers:

- make sparse use of the extract or neglect a substantial section of it
- neglect the given critical interpretation
- write about the characters as though they are real people
- describe the extract in narrative terms
- offer a paraphrase of the extract
- make little or no reference to Shakespeare or his dramatic/poetic methods
- neglect ‘elsewhere’ or refer to it in general or in sweeping terms
- make inaccurate or sweeping assertions about context

More successful **comparative poetry** answers:

- look in each case at the whole poems with the given view/question focus in mind
- sustain a comparative approach
- support relevant readings with specific textual details
- analyse the poets’ methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary
- analyse the presentation of the speakers/narrators as constructs, rather than assume it is the author
- apply context in a considered way (paying careful attention the dates given), again being suitably tentative rather than assertively definitive
- show awareness of typicality in the literature of love

Less successful **comparative poetry** answers:

- work through the poems in a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific question and its key words
- leave ideas undeveloped and unsupported
- assert interpretations
- confuse the speaker with the poet
- describe methods such as rhyme and metre with no reference to meaning, or simply asserted a link to meaning
- label methods inaccurately
- make sweeping, simplistic or inaccurate statements about context
- give undue weight to the significance of punctuation and/or literary methods to do with verse form such as rhyme and metre

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 using 'significant' to frame this 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 as they are 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 specific poetic methods should be as evidence for relevant points about meaning. Students need to explain how the effects that they claim for these methods are achieved.

Perhaps the biggest test of understanding in the role of methods is 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 have a greater repertoire of dramatic and poetic methods on which to draw. 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 will be needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

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*

More successful answers:

- looked closely at the extract and scrutinised the 'marriage' vow as a way into discussing stagecraft and proxemics
- examined both bonds and their inter-relatedness
- used the wider play to show the history of the bonds to date, and looked forward to the tragic outcomes at the end of the play
- reflected on productions in a specific, detailed and relevant way

Less successful answers:

- wrote about Iago without sufficient focus on the given view
- made little or no reference to the Desdemona-Othello bond
- discussed verse/prose differences which were not relevant to the extract
- neglected some sections of the extract
- asserted, rather than explored, queer readings of the Iago-Othello relationship
- stitched together critical opinions, often at the expense of the student's own voice and opinion
- discussed contextual matters such as patriarchal societies without clear links to the extract and/or the given view

Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew*

More successful answers:

- detailed similarities and differences from the extract and wider play
- saw the extract and given view as aspects of the taming narrative
- reflected on relevant wider play links; for example, there was some interesting discussion of Katherina's final speech and the extent to which she is being submissive or perhaps joining in with Petruchio in a mutually beneficial game against the others
- considered the significance of actions such as Petruchio 'seizing' Katherina and how the scene might be staged

Less successful answers:

- relied too much on assertions about Petruchio's and Katherine's stubborn behaviour without exploring or considering other similarities
- tended to ignore the role of the other characters in the extract and the public nature of the scene
- were distracted by the earlier accounts of the wedding and/or later scenes of taming
- spent little time analysing the verbal and rhetorical devices used in the extract

Question 3 *Measure for Measure*

More successful answers:

- examined the first part of the given view about the Duke's strategy being 'cruel and manipulative' and the second about 'justice...at the expense of love and compassion'
- referred to such matters as his disguise, the bed trick and the orchestration of the ending, without losing sight of the extract or resorting to too much narrative or exposition
- considered the staging of the extract scene and how productions present the Duke
- wrote confident critiques of the Duke's behaviour from a modern perspective

Less successful answers:

- ignored or left underdeveloped the second part of the given view
- spent too long on the mechanics of the plot and subplot
- spent little time analysing the verbal and rhetorical devices used in the extract

Question 4 *The Winter's Tale*

More successful answers:

- carefully examined Leontes' position as king
- considered compatibility in the light of Leontes' character development, and other changes such as the identities of Florizel and Perdita within their courtship
- explored Paulina's own circumstances and the dramatic irony of her position
- considered how staging might reinforce the presentation of Paulina and Leontes, as well as highlighting the dramatic significance of Dion and Cleomenes

Less successful answers:

- tended to neglect the given view's reference to the social order
- missed the centrality of Dion's speech
- spent too long discussing the wider play and the mechanics of the plot strands

Section B Unseen Poetry

Question 5 ‘Pershore Station, or A Liverish Journey First Class’ and ‘Somewhere Along the Line’

More successful answers:

- tended to characterise Betjeman’s poem as one about the narrator’s regret for the possibly permanent separation, and equated Armitage’s with a less despairing separation which might be reparable or, at least, can be appreciated in retrospect (the kind of glitch that tends to happen in romantic relationships ‘somewhere along the line’)
- focused on the fact that Betjeman’s poem is about the aftermath of separation, whereas in Armitage’s poem we witness the separation itself from the narrator’s point of view
- considered how the settings are presented and how they might relate to the lovers’ circumstances
- understood how the structure of the poems present a narrative as well as reflecting the development of ideas and mood: for example, there were some excellent close reading of the differences between the two stanzas in Betjeman’s poem, and some thoughtful exploration of imagery in the concluding lines of Armitage’s poem (particularly the image of a film reel created by the passing of the Leeds train)
- understood who did what to whom, where and when; and made tentative suggestions/speculations about the circumstances of the separation
- discussed the poems in the context of twentieth century poetic styles and subject matters

Less successful answers:

- made inaccurate assertions, for example about Betjeman being a Victorian or Armitage writing in 1963
- used ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ as date stamps rather than stylistic choices
- made unconvincing claims about the effect of rhyme and metre in Betjeman and/or inaccurate claims about rhyme and metre in Armitage
- struggled to link the description of Pershore and its station to the rest of Betjeman’s poem
- dismissed Armitage’s poem as less interesting/important because of its short length or saw it as ‘light-hearted’, with no supporting evidence
- exaggerated the poems to create binary opposites (eg despair vs comedy, profundity vs triviality, negative vs positive)

Section C Comparing Texts (see discussion on Comparison in Part Two of the report above)

Questions 6 and 7

More successful answers:

- kept ‘compatibility between lovers’ or ‘conflict between lovers’ clearly in focus
- could clearly identify and exemplify compatibility or conflict in the chosen material
- had a clear idea of what might constitute compatibility or conflict
- compared various relationships within the novel with confidence
- understood the ironies and complexities around the relationships that endure, eg Daisy and Tom, Catherine and Heathcliff, Cecilia and Robbie, etc.

- restricted material from the novel to only that which is strictly relevant
- chose fewer poems
- carefully planned the structure of the comparative discussion
- signalled the argument clearly to the reader using connectives and discourse markers

Less successful answers:

- missed the question emphasis on ‘between lovers’
- chose to write about compatibility but spent most of the time discussing conflict, or vice versa
- tried to fit ‘The Garden of Love’ into a romantic love context
- discussed aspects of the novels at length without making relevance to the question clear, eg the green light from *The Great Gatsby*
- changed the key question focus from ‘compatibility between lovers’ to barriers to love, or from ‘conflict between lovers’ to destructive love or violence

Final points

- Examiners reported that this year there were fewer over-long answers that ranged beyond a twelve page answer booklet
- Examiners also reported that responses receiving higher marks tended to have a brief but meaningful plan
- 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. Linking methods clearly to meaning remains a key discriminator.
- Remember that clear, accurate expression and well organised ideas are hallmarks of successful essay writing.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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