



A-level

English Literature A

7712/2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath

Report on the Examination

7712
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Part One: General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on Paper 1 and NEA, along with the mark schemes for those components.

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.

This summer’s WW1 and its aftermath paper proved highly accessible to students who were largely well prepared for the demands of the paper. In some cases, however, the following problems should be noted:

- students should only attempt questions within their chosen option and ensure that the question numbers are clearly labelled on their work
- overlong work that often required extra paper beyond the 12 page answer booklet was often rushed and lacking in coherence. Such work is often self-penalising, and students should be reminded that to move into Band 4 and above, works should be planned, focused and well-shaped
- although there were very few rubric infringements, it is worth pointing out that *My Boy Jack* can only be used in Option 1 if it is paired with a post 2000 text. As it is no longer classed as a post 2000 it is an unacceptable text choice for option 3. This requirement is clearly highlighted in question 18.

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.

Extract: unseen prose (Section B: Questions 5, 11, 17)

The extract taken from Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* focused on the return of a soldier who lost his leg in action. The extract taken from the end of the novel was chosen to allow students to construct readings that were supported by a close consideration of prose methods and the varying contexts that give meaning to the extract. Engagement with the keywords of the given view is crucial here; for this series students were invited to explore the significance of **conflicting views towards war** in the extract. Students who were able to debate the meaning of the extract through the lens of this given view were more able to develop focused readings built on relevant understanding of prose methods and contexts rather than just 'going through' the extract in a chronological way, pointing out features but never fully considering the construction of meaning.

As ever the brief preamble to the extract is important and allows the student to consider the context of time of setting and publication. Examiners noted that many students were able to confidently explore the significance of the 1930s publication date through considering 'the war books boom' and the 'period of reflection' that characterised this time. Many students also purposefully deduced from the dates of Williamson's life that he probably had direct experience of combat. Students who had a secure contextual grasp of WW1 and its aftermath were quick to understand the time setting of Armistice day at the close of the extract and were able to thoroughly debate the conflicting views towards war shown by a celebrating country and a disabled young veteran.

A close consideration of prose narrative is a given in this task; students are guided to give 'relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Williamson shapes meaning'. The majority of students were able to purposefully consider the use of dialogue as a way of showing 'conflicting views towards war' and were able to consider the importance of word choice and syntax in the construction of meaning. Many students were able to consider the form of the extract through considering the significance of John Bullock's journey and the significance of his closing declaration. Examiners noted that many students were less secure when considering narrative perspective; many were able to identify the third person narrative, but rarely considered the free indirect discourse that sometimes privileged John Bullock's position. Only a few were able to comment on the significance of the novel's title, and consider that John Bullock is an everyman, John Bull figure who is literally dressed in the red, white and blue of the British flag when he is in hospital.

Students who failed to focus enough on the keywords of the given view tended to feature spot and were unable to develop more coherent interpretations. These less successful responses tended to move away from the text too quickly to consider set literary perspectives. Often the consideration of a Marxist perspective, for example, only led towards a generalised interpretation which was not supported by close analysis. Students who also just 'go through' the text attempted to demonstrate close reading skills through erratic consideration of possible symbolism without considering the meaning of the text as a whole. Such students sometimes laboured over the description of John Bullock's journey from France at the start and were diverted from the keywords of the given view.

Students of all abilities who clearly focused on ‘conflicting attitudes to war’ were far more successful. Many students were able to explore the conflicting attitudes shown John Bullock’s meeting with his family; the prose methods of dialogue and narrative perspective were discussed purposefully; contextual understanding of patriotism and propaganda was effectively used as a literary tool to develop the analysis of John Bullock’s father. Focus on the given view also allowed for a consideration of the differing responses of the mother and father. Contextual awareness of home front attitudes and ‘armchair generals’ also allowed for some interesting analysis of the ‘old toff’. Many were able to see him as part of the establishment or ruling class and purposefully explored his uneasy perception of John Bullock. Close reading of textual detail was important here; successful responses fully considered the meanings of John Bullock ‘shifting on his leg’, his ‘slow smile’ and his declaration of ‘We are England’ as a way of presenting conflict with established attitudes that only marginalise war veterans. Confident students were able to explore the significance of ‘the very little boy’ and how his attitudes to war conflict with his father’s. Such students considered how Williamson is deliberately presenting the perspective of the young who can see the true effects of war without being constrained by taboo. Very confident work extended the analysis through considering the context of the inter war years and seeing the boy as possibly a soldier in the war to come.

Better extract-based answers:

- clearly debated the extract’s meanings through the lens of the given view
- did not just offer a commentary on prose methods as they appear chronologically in the extract, but purposefully selected and analysed textual detail as a way of considering the given view
- had a clear grasp of the extract as a whole and could consider form and structure rather than disparate detail
- used contextual understanding as a critical tool to focus on the text’s meanings rather than leading away from a literary focus
- showed awareness of the typicality of the set topic because the student had read widely, but did not digress from the focus of the extract by considering other texts at length.

Less successful extract-based answers:

- made poor use of textual references and sometimes twisted meaning to fit a rigidly imposed interpretation
- often resorted to inaccurate word level analysis with no real overarching grasp of narrative methods
- did not consider the writer’s intentions through constructing characters and only saw them as real people
- tended to ‘go through’ the text often relying on narrative paraphrase
- used contextual understanding as a way of moving away from the text rather than as a literary tool for exploring meaning.

Comparison: chosen set texts (Section B: Questions 6, 12, 18)

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. 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, of course, such as explicit or implicit comparison within the shared contexts to establish typicality or atypicality.

Successful work always compared texts through close consideration of ‘the significance of conflicting attitudes’. Close attention to all the keywords is crucial for success here; for example, more successful work didn’t just discuss different attitudes, but had full focus on ‘conflicting’ and discussed how the conflict was presented. Less effective responses glossed over this keyword and often seemed to just consider contrasting attitudes. The best responses fully engaged with ‘significance’ through focusing on the differing ways in which ‘conflicting attitudes to war’ can be presented through close consideration of varying contexts, literary methods and genre.

Importantly, successful comparisons were focused on exploring difference rather than similarity. Successful responses did not over rely on content and narrative paraphrase, but focused primarily on *how* ‘conflicting attitudes to war’ are presented. The task is focused on paired texts from differing genres; successful work wholeheartedly explored this, and formed thorough comparative links that focused on the varying literary methods of differing genres. Weaker responses focused more on similarities of content and often treated plays as another form of narrative fiction. Students who fully grasp the notion of ‘significance’ clearly grasp the differing ways in which writers can shape meaning through the differing possibilities of poetry, drama and prose and have a precise literary register that allows them to discuss these differing methods. Too often less successful work resorted to world level analysis and misapplied poetic terminology to drama and prose texts.

Less successful students focused more on demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of their chosen texts rather than more thoughtful selection of material relevant to the chosen theme. This approach involved lengthy consideration of individual texts prefaced by token discourse markers such as ‘on the other hand’, rather than fluently moving between texts through effective selection of textual detail. To move up the mark scheme, students must demonstrate that their comparison has a momentum that allows them to choose comparative links and textual detail with thoughtful precision rather than attempting to prove that they ‘know’ their texts through lengthy, sometimes digressive responses.

The focus of ‘conflicting attitudes towards war’ was genuinely enabling for the majority of students. Those who focused on all aspects of the theme were able to explore how plays such as *Journey’s End* and *The Wipers Times* dramatized the conflict between differing attitudes through considering character, relationships and attitudes to military authority and hierarchy. Careful selection of textual detail also allowed for focused analysis of the naïve attitudes of young soldiers and how they might conflict with those who are more experienced. Examiners noted, for example, thoughtful work that compared *A Long Long Way* with *Journey’s End* through considering the presentation of Willie Dunne and Raleigh and how the naivety of their attitudes often set in focus the more disturbing truths of war. Students also explored how ‘conflicting attitudes towards war’ differ because of time and considered early and later war poetry through a comparison with characters such as Raleigh or Stanhope from *Journey’s End*, and Burns and Sassoon from *Regeneration*. Students also focused on the differing attitudes of the home front and the frontline and how the conflict of these attitudes are presented. Again, students who focused on differing genre methods were most successful; one exceptional response considered the dialogue between Sassoon and Rivers in *Regeneration* as an over-arching part of the novel’s structure and compared this with the framing device of Roberts’ dialogue with the deputy editor in *The Wipers Times*.

Successful work always demonstrates close literary study. Knowledge of varying contexts should be used as a literary tool to explore meaning in a precise, subtle way. There is still a tendency for many students to

impose context in a way that leads them away from their chosen texts. When considering home front attitudes, for example, discussion of propaganda and jingoism is often ‘bolted on’ rather than exploring how these tropes might be presented in the paired texts.

Unfortunately, less successful students attempt to demonstrate ‘close literary study’ through a reductive word level approach which might, for example, attempt to apply poetic analysis on a drama text. Such work often attempts to unpack meaning without considering the wider aspects of form and structure. Misguided and often inaccurate linguistic analysis is employed without a clear understanding of how this might shape meaning. AQA’s Teaching Guide to AO2 offers a much more productive way into thinking about the different ways in which meaning is constructed through the three different genres.

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

It goes without saying that secure AO1 is crucial in a task that involves a comparison of two texts through a central, overarching argument. Students who were able to use the following AO1 tools often produced more successful responses:

- clear introductions and conclusions that focus on the keywords and frame the response
- clear paragraphing to build structured comparison
- purposeful discourse markers to highlight comparative thinking
- clear succinct expression that avoids imprecise, overlong sentences
- clear use of topic sentences to guide a purposeful argument.

In Option 1 a range of texts were compared successfully. Many centres still took the opportunity to use *My Boy Jack* as they were able to compare the text with the post 2000 novels *A Long Long Way* or *Life Class*. Students were able to explore ‘conflicting attitudes towards war’ through comparing the prose and drama methods employed. Successful responses were able to consider characterisation, dialogue and the dramatic presentation of conflict.

In Option 2 there were many fruitful ways in which ‘conflicting attitudes to war could be compared. Students studying *Regeneration*, for example, could explore the given theme through considering the relationship between Sassoon and Rivers or just focusing on the changing attitudes of Rivers towards war. Apt links were made with relevant poems. Again ‘Dulce et Decorum est’ was a popular choice, but often led to over generalised discussion of the horror of war. More successful responses focused on how the poem embodies conflict with pro war attitudes, through considering the second person address and the effect of the Latin line from Horace.

In Option 3 *The Wipers Times* is now the only post 2000 drama text. There was strong evidence that students are now approaching the text with greater confidence and a greater understanding of the dramatic methods employed. Many students focused on the ‘conflicting attitudes to war’ through considering the interplay between Roberts and Kate and were able to consider the framing device of Roberts’ post war interview with the deputy editor. The conflicting attitudes toward war was often explored in terms of the clash between Roberts and his military superior Lt Colonel Howfield. More confident responses also explored the notion of humour and satire within war and compared the play with satiric poems such as Sassoon’s ‘The General’.

Better comparative set text answers

- were fully focused on all keywords of the given theme and used them as a framework for comparison and debate
- constructed sustained comparisons that moved fluently between the paired texts
- were able to compare through considering differences rather than just similarities
- could compare the varying literary methods of different genres rather than just focusing on content
- used literary analysis appropriately as a way of exploring meaning rather than just labelling features
- confidently understood the varying literary methods of poetry, drama and prose
- used context as a literary tool to explore meaning rather than a digression from the text
- demonstrated a confident grasp of typicality grounded in thorough reading of texts from WW1 and its aftermath.

Less successful comparative set text answers:

- ignored or lost sight of the given theme
- tended to describe and paraphrase rather than compare and analyse
- unloaded textual knowledge in an irrelevant way
- tended to work through each text in isolation rather than building a more focused comparison that moves fluently between the texts
- developed responses that only considered the similarities between texts
- did not recognise the differences between genres
- used analysis only to label features rather than to consider how meaning is shaped
- imposed contextual knowledge in a sweeping, generalised way.

Part Three: Feedback on selected single set text questions

To prepare well for this paper students should have a confident grasp of the varying ways in which questions are constructed. If a question uses a given view, students should fully engage with all the keywords, use these as a prompt for their thinking and ensure that they keep them in focus throughout their response. Students should also have a secure understanding of ‘significance’ if they are asked to examine the significance of a particular idea or theme. Considering ‘significance’ is an invitation to consider the varying ways in which an idea or theme can be ‘encoded with meaning’. To do this, students might have to consider varying contexts as well as exploring appropriate, relevant literary methods. Students who think that significance is another word for importance will struggle; those who recognise that they should explore the varying ways in which a topic can be given meaning through a writer’s methods or a reader’s reception will succeed.

In this single set text section, secure textual knowledge and recall will enable students to use precise, integrated references to support and develop strong, independent thought. Deft use of well selected textual detail is far preferable to ‘unloaded’ detail and paraphrase that attempts to demonstrate textual knowledge, but often strays from the focus of the task. Unsuccessful responses tend to ‘go through’

poems or resorted to broad narrative approaches to novels and plays in an attempt to demonstrate subject knowledge rather than to answer the question. Students who clearly engage with all the key words of the question are able to produce more focused work and are not tempted to unload unassimilated ideas or reworked rehearsed material from earlier questions.

More detailed information on individual questions can be found in the indicative content of the mark scheme for this unit.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

Up the Line to Death – ed. Brian Gardner

Question 1

Better answers:

- engaged purposefully with the keywords ‘combat’ and ‘despair rather than anger’
- purposefully considered the context of time when considering ‘despair rather than anger’
- recognised that poems about combat could express both despair and anger
- purposefully analysed poems as a way of considering the keywords rather than imposing the given view and creating distorted readings
- showed a clear understanding of Gardner’s text selections and construction of the anthology.

Less effective answers:

- only had a superficial grasp of the keywords of the given view and offered limited comparisons of poems of ‘despair’ and ‘anger’
- did not select appropriate poems and created distorted interpretations to suit the focus of the question
- often ‘went through’ individual poems commenting on poetic methods rather than focusing on the question
- relied on pre-prepared contextual approaches that moved away from more precise literary analysis.

Question 2

Better answers:

- fully engaged with all keywords of the given view
- could consider ‘values and beliefs’ in a precise way that allowed for thorough discussion of both patriotism and spirituality
- made appropriate selections from the anthology showing a confident grasp of relevant sections such as *Tipperary Days*
- confidently considered patriotic and religious tropes through close literary analysis

- used context of early war values as a literary tool to explore the presentation of strong values and beliefs
- offered independent responses that could consider the extent to which strong values and beliefs might survive the experience of war.

Less effective answers:

- considered ‘strong values and beliefs’ in a generalised way
- over relied on pre-prepared responses that only focused on early war poems and attitudes
- made generalised comments about patriotic attitudes which marginalised more sustained literary analysis.

Scars Upon My Heart – ed. Catherine Reilly

Question 3

Better answers:

- considered the collection as a whole and used the title as springboard for exploring ‘the significance of memory’
- confidently explored memory through considering bereavement, trauma and memorialisation
- explored significance through focused discussion of poetic forms such as sonnets and elegies
- developed an over-arching debate about the presentation of memory from the start.

Less effective answers:

- lacked planning and adopted a list-like structure that ‘went through’ poems that were loosely linked to memory
- mistook ‘significance’ for importance
- resorted to prepared commentaries on poems in a sometimes irrelevant way
- labelled poetic methods without considering how meaning is shaped.

Question 4

Better answers:

- engaged with all keywords in the question and considered ‘more than’ in a precise, nuanced way
- clearly set up an agenda about ‘strength’ and ‘suffering’ and could develop this through thoughtful introductions and purposeful topic sentences
- made good use of the anthology’s title and recognised that the varying forms of suffering is presented as strength
- demonstrated confident knowledge of the collection as a whole and could make wide-ranging, thoughtful selections.

Less effective answers:

- responded to the question by over-relying on prepared thinking that was not always completely relevant to the question
- could only consider ‘strength’ in terms of the presentation of women’s war work
- used context in a digressive way that led away from the poetry.

Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts

Oh! What a Lovely War – Joan Littlewood

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

Journey’s End – R C Sherriff

Question 9

Better answers:

- considered ‘anticipation of combat’ in a varied way through considering stress, coping mechanisms and the everyday realities of trench warfare
- fully debated the given view through considering the presentation of the trench raid as well as the final German attack
- demonstrated a detailed grasp of dramatic methods and structure through considering sound and lighting effects, the dugout setting and the creation of dramatic suspense
- confidently considered the significance of the offstage presentation of combat and the presentation of characters finally leaving the stage
- thoughtfully considered the context of trench warfare and frontline conditions.

Less effective answers:

- failed to consider all of the keywords in the question
- did not consider dramatic methods and considered prose narrative effects
- wrote more about the presentation of stress and trauma rather than a more precise focus on ‘the anticipation of combat’
- resorted to paraphrase rather than more precise analysis.

Question 10

Better answers:

- fully engaged with all keywords in the question and considered ‘more important than’ as a way of debating Sherriff’s presentation of combat
- were clearly able to define and discuss aspects of ‘military discipline’ presented in the play
- thoughtfully explored the interplay between ‘military discipline’ and ‘individual feelings’ through considering the presentation of male relationships, camaraderie and loyalty
- explored the full significance of Stanhope and Raleigh’s relationship in terms of ‘military discipline’ and ‘individual feeling’

Less effective answers:

- had a limited understanding of ‘military discipline’ as punishment or following orders
- resorted to using prewritten material on past questions
- offered contextual responses about military hierarchy which largely led away from the play itself.

Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text

Regeneration – Pat Barker

Question 13

Better answers:

- confidently considered the relationship between Rivers and Sassoon as an important part of the novel’s structure
- explored ‘significance’ through considering doctor/patient and father/son relationships as well as considering class and sexuality
- fully understood ‘significance’ through considering how the relationship presents the wider themes of change and regeneration
- always considered the characters and their relationship as constructs of the writer
- integrated contextual knowledge of the historical characters into a thoughtful discussion of their presentation as fictional constructs within the novel
- fully considered prose methods such a dialogue and narrative perspective.

Less effective answers:

- could only offer a narrative paraphrase of the relationship between Rivers and Sassoon supported by some textual evidence
- blurred the historical source material with Barker’s fictional characters and treated Rivers and Sassoon as ‘real people’
- tended to focus on the presentation of the individual characters rather than the significance of their relationship
- imposed contextual knowledge of historical source material and moved away from the novel itself

- failed to comment on prose methods.

Question 14

Better answers:

- were supported by expert textual knowledge that allowed for wide ranging responses that both considered the setting of Craiglockhart and the wider home front experience of the war
- confidently considered the presentation of war trauma through considering characters such as Burns who are locked into their experience of war
- considered Barker's prose methods through analysing the ways in which she imposed the experience of war onto home front settings
- produced more conceptual thinking that argued that Rivers' duty to rehabilitate his patients so they would be fit for duty was an aspect of the inescapability of war.

Less effective answers:

- produced list-like responses that picked out relevant textual detail without building a more coherent argument framed by introductions and conclusions and guided by clear topic sentences
- tended to develop less relevant responses that were echoes of past questions
- relied on narrative paraphrase.

Birdsong – Sebastian Faulks

Question 15

Better answers:

- demonstrated expert textual knowledge and considered material from all of the novel's time frames
- confidently considered the Somme setting in the pre-war, war and post-war sections
- considered the significance of the novel's title as well considering the motif of birds throughout the novel
- explored the ways in which the natural world is juxtaposed with the experience of war
- sometimes produced conceptual approaches that considered the pastoral aspects of the natural world presented in the prewar section as a contrast to the 'fall from grace' of the world of war.

Less effective answers:

- produced generalised work which lacked well-chosen textual detail
- lacked focus on the keywords of the question and largely just discussed the unnatural qualities of modern warfare
- failed to consider prose methods
- produced work that sometimes echoed past questions.

Question 16

Better answers:

- ranged widely through the novel and supported ideas by well-chosen integrated quotation
- considered the isolation and claustrophobia of the tunnelling war as a presentation of the nature of trauma
- confidently considered the intergenerational nature of trauma through exploring the function of the twin time frames of the novel
- explored the presentation of Brennan as an isolated war veteran who can never be healed
- could discuss Stephen Wraysford's trauma within the contextual overview of the post war 'silent generation'
- considered the all-enveloping trauma of war through discussing the home leave experiences of Michael Weir and Stephen Wraysford
- fully debated the given view through considering the extent to which the past trauma of war is healed through the birth and naming of Elizabeth's child.

Less effective answers:

- could only focus on trauma by picking out narrative descriptions of front line combat and attempting to analyse Faulks' 'graphic language'
- considered relevant context such as shell shock and the repression of war experience in separate sections that moved too quickly away from the text
- often used narrative paraphrase and failed to consider prose methods
- largely ignored the contemporary sections of the novel.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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