

AS

English Literature A

7711/1 Love Through the Ages: Shakespeare and Poetry

Report on the Examination

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Part 1

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, read and interpreted over 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 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 interrelatedness 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 2 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 give a full and detailed answer to the question. It is surprisingly still quite common to underuse the extract. The extract will have been 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 particular 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 see 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. These answers often had 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. Reference to specific productions is often used to good effect and this is also to be encouraged.

There are two bullets to the extract question, and it is worth noting that there are different acceptable approaches here. Some are taught to 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.

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 there is no such requirement so, aside from references perhaps to poetic typicality, explicit reference to other poems is not required and not recommended as it can prove a distraction and 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 of plot 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. Some students responding to this first bullet in isolation are tempted to go through the extract/wider play identifying different types of love: romantic, sexual, platonic, eros, agape, etc. This can lead to an unhelpful descriptive approach of labelling, rather than synthesising this knowledge, where relevant, into a single coherent response. 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 and explore. Engaging with both these injunctions is crucial to progressing up the mark scheme. The given critical view is there to prompt engagement with interpretation. Students might wish to debate both sides, or just take one side as corresponding with their own view. It does not matter as long as there is attention to the given view and its key words.

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 enables access to 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.

In 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 mislabel 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 3

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. Most saw this as interesting from the point of view of the narrative arc of the *Othello* Desdemona relationship and Iago's attempts to corrupt the harmony between married partners. Many also saw the extract as a study in platonic love, and there were some interesting discussions about the closeness of these two characters with their shared military background and function, and how these influence their responses to one another. Some extended this approach into an exploration of homoerotic readings of the relationship between Iago and *Othello*.

All such approaches were credited, as long as they were made relevant through scrutiny of the extract and engagement with the given view. The key words of the given view – ‘easily turns’, loving husband’ and ‘suspicious fool’ – were all central to the most successful answers. Many pursued a counter-argument based on how resistant Othello appears to be in this extract to Iago’s insidious suggestions about Desdemona and Cassio. Those who argued as such referred to the extract as Iago sowing the seeds of a transformation that really takes place later in the play. This involved references to the swearing of oaths between Iago and Othello, the significance of the handkerchief, Othello’s breakdown and the violence ensuing at the end of the play. Others agreed with given view, looking at the subtle ways in which Iago appears to be unsettling Othello despite the latter’s protestations about Desdemona’s innocence. Looking closely at the extract involved scrutinising shorter exchanges between the two but also Iago’s jealousy speech and longest of Othello’s speeches. Structure is always a useful way into meaning and those who engaged with the opening and closing of the extract tended to do well in terms of getting to the heart of the extract’s significance.

Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew*

Examiners did not report any responses to this play. The Indicative Content section of the Mark Scheme is the best description of expectations here.

Question 3 *Measure for Measure*

Most saw this question as an opportunity to explore the subject of illicit sexuality in the play and how it is presented as way of seeing different strata of Viennese society, and particularly those who lead them. However, some considered the extract as evidence of platonic love, however comedically presented, between the Duke and his citizens, as represented by Lucio. Again, all approaches were valid as long as rooted in the extract and the given view. The idea of love ‘simply as a matter of sex, scandal and sin’ was central to the most successful answers. Some used the ‘sex, scandal and sin’ triplet as a way of separating out the different strands of the extract and wider play: ‘sex’ relating the idea of the corruption of morals amongst the Viennese; ‘scandal’ equating to the gossip in the extract about the Duke’s love-life and Angelo’s hypocrisy in the wider play; and ‘sin’ corresponding to Isabella’s dilemma as a nun but also as a sister to Claudio. Others took the whole triplet as a summary of the moral state of Vienna. Whatever the approach to the given view, the best answers could decode Lucio’s *double entendre* and could tie in his own story across the play. Such responses could also compare and contrast the Duke’s humanity with Angelo’s lack thereof, as presented through the eyes of Lucio. There were those who simply agreed with the given view, but there were also those who counterargued that the genuine love between lovers and siblings (Claudio and Juliet; Isabella and Claudio: and even Mariana and Angelo) served to disprove it. Those who incorporated references to the end of the play considered the extent to which the various marriages equated to genuine love and ‘restored’ the reputation of love in the play.

Question 4 *The Winter’s Tale*

Most looked at the various kinds of love as described by the Third Gentleman: romantic/sexual, filial and platonic. The key words of the given view, again, were central to the best answers: ‘unbelievable events’, ‘distract’, ‘the audience’s experience’, ‘the pains and joys of love’. Most argued against the given view citing the Third Gentleman’s account as an opportunity to look back on some events already witnessed by the audience, but also stimulating the audience’s imagination and preparing for the impact of events to come at the play’s climax and denouement. These responses tended to also cite the power of the Third Gentleman’s language to add poignancy to the events and the human reactions described. Some confident answers reflected on the different kinds of dramatic presentation in the play, from the visually

extraordinary to this verbal and relatively passive scene of contemplation, almost akin to some Chorus scenes from Greek tragedy.

More successful Shakespeare answers:

- Considered carefully the whole given view and its key words
- Established a coherent argument about the given view at the outset
- Looked at the extract in sufficient relevant detail, reading carefully
- Selected specific and relevant points of reference from the wider play, particularly in terms of how the extract links to the final outcomes of the play
- Looked carefully at dramatic methods such as aspects of staging and specific productions

Less successful Shakespeare answers:

- Underused the extract
- Made sweeping and often inaccurate generalisations about historical context
- Did not take account of how characters and situations may change over the course of the play
- Made assertions about how methods link to meaning, eg claims about verse vs prose
- Discussed the text without reference to what makes drama distinctive and impactful

Section B

Question 5

This was by far the most popular poetry option and students readily engaged with the given view. The key words were ‘only’ and ‘pain and sadness’. Some disagreed with the given view and looked at the narrator’s apparent relish for recalling a time when love held some promise, even if it was mostly in the imaginations of the inn staff and their assumptions. However, most agreed and concentrated on the awkwardness of the scene described in stanzas two and three when the pair are left alone, and then on the final stanza when the narrator is looking back from ‘afar’ to feel the full irony and poignancy of that earlier time. Those who took this approach explored the methods used in those two scenes. Hardy’s use of imagery proved a rich source for exploration and for getting to the heart of the poem: the fly image in stanza three; the cosmic/religious imagery of the spheres and God in stanzas two and four; and the ‘severing’ created by ‘sea and land’ and ‘laws of men’ in the final stanza. Some were well informed about the contexts of the poem. Such students made good use of autobiographical background to make sense of the anecdote as a missed opportunity that blights the narrator’s life, rather than just offloading what they had learnt about Hardy and his relationships. Similarly, some had learnt about Hardy’s fatalistic views and could apply their knowledge relevantly to illuminate his distinctive presentation of human beings at the mercy of forces that appears to ‘sport’ with them to confound their ambitions and aspirations. Some could read closely to unpick the irony and ambiguity of phrases such as ‘love lingered numb’ and ‘we aching are’, as well as word choices such as ‘strangers’, ‘veiled’ and debates around the use of ‘we’. Those who looked carefully at Hardy’s use of questions and exclamations were able to get close to the tone of the poem. Similarly, there was much to learn from studying the ways in which Hardy fits his ideas into the lyric verse form and the five-stanza structure, without resorting to simple descriptions of rhyme and metre. On the other hand, some misread references to the inn staff as references to the narrator and his addressee.

Question 6

This proved an accessible yet challenging question to those who opted for it. MacNeice's poem is distinctively eccentric in terms of both subject matter and style, and the key words of the given view – 'meaningless fantasy' – went straight to the heart of the text. Students were divided on their verdict. Some agreed and went on to argue that the surreal nature of this encounter – with its juxtaposition of a familiar coffee shop with a contemplation about escaping time and travelling to deserts and tropical jungles – captures the superficial pleasures of love. Others disagreed and argued that the repeated, incantatory refrains lead up to something profoundly meaningful at the end: an encounter with 'God and whatever means the good' in the form of the all-important 'she'. Most engaged readily with the idea of 'fantasy' in the poem, but some struggled a little with 'meaningless'. As always, the best answers keep a clear grasp of the complete given view. There was much to explore in terms of poetic methods in this poem. The imagery is rich, varied and detailed and the patterns created within the verse form helped to unlock a relevant response.

More successful poetry answers:

- Considered the whole given view
- Had a clear overview of the poem and its messages, particularly as reinforced by the ending of the poem
- Carefully unpicked the elliptical nature of poetic expression
- Linked relevant methods to meaning in a tentative fashion
- Read methods in terms of their typicality in the literature of love

Less successful poetry answers:

- Discussed poetry without clear reference to what makes the genre distinctive
- Describe methods without linking them to meaning
- Made inaccurate or assertive claims about how methods convey meaning
- Looked at words and details without relating them to the poem and question as a whole
- Assumed that the narrator/speaker is the poet.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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