



A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

7712/C
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Introduction

The overall quality of NEA submissions this summer continued to be impressive, following the serious disruption to education over recent years.

Moderators report that they saw some excellent examples of thorough and productive internal centre moderation, and teacher annotation was often full and informative in both formative and summative contexts. Some centres, however, are still encountering difficulties mostly concerning accuracy of marking and text and task selection.

The range of texts studied seemed to have increased slightly since the last submission with more centres offering texts from classical antiquity and the Renaissance as well as very modern texts, usually novels.

Moderation and adjustments

Moderation is a procedure which ensures the application of agreed standards to all sampled work so that centres and students maintain trust in the integrity of the process. The aim of moderation is to produce fairness and equal treatment for all students. Clearly, therefore, the moderation process means that the marks of some centres require adjustment.

This year, around a quarter of centres had their marks adjusted. The reason for these adjustments, as has been the case since coursework began, is that centres misjudge the quality of work which their students produce, either because marks awarded by the centre do not match the assessment criteria or are not compliant with the standards outlined in the NEA standardising materials.

When centres go “out of tolerance” with their marks, they usually over-estimate the worth of students’ essays and so the moderation process will adjust the marks. This year, as in the past, there were cases where the comments made by the centre on the students’ work bore little relation to the final mark awarded.

This year, it was notable that when centres made comparative references to the folders in Teacher Online Standardisation (T-OLS) which can be accessed through the e-AQA section of the AQA website (english-gce@aqa.org.uk) the marks awarded were almost invariably accurate or within agreed tolerance.

There was much evidence of excellent internal moderation where teams of teachers had clearly debated the merits of students’ work before deciding on the marks to be submitted. The best and most confident centres were as comfortable reducing an original mark as they were with increasing a mark. Sometimes, however, moderation appeared to have been used as a process to talk essays up.

Centres are advised to pay close attention to the detail outlined in the individualised centre feedback forms sent out to centres by AQA close to the beginning of the new academic year in September. The information contained in the centre feedback forms will not only offer a rationale for why any adjustments were made but will also provide useful centre-specific advice the centre will need to consider for future examination sequences.

Historicism

AQA English Literature Specification A is interested in a historicist approach, as signalled in this component by the title 'texts across time'. The objective of a historicist reading is to show not only how the time when a text is *written* will have an impact on its ideas, but also the time(s) 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.

Students' bibliographies can provide as much interesting evidence as the essays themselves about whether or not a serious historicist approach has been attempted. For example if a student has selected *King Lear* as the pre-1900 text and has made use of a range of views from i.e. Nahum Tate's rewrite of 1681, Dr. Johnson's judgements from 1765, Coleridge's opinions from 1819, A.C Bradley's 1905 critique, Rosalie Cole's arguments of 1974, Coppélia Khan's 1986 essay, Germaine Greer's thoughts from 2008 and theatre director Helena Kaut-Howson's 2022's Globe production, the moderator will be convinced that the student has indeed considered *King Lear* as a text across time.

The Assessment Objectives and English Literature A

The process of coursework must start with the selection of two texts which can be compared and contrasted with rigour and academic depth. Ideally, something about the texts will have excited, intrigued, or motivated the student to select those texts for study. The sources of this initial excitement and interest need to form the basis of a task.

When setting tasks, it is important that all five assessment objectives can be liberated. The 7712 specification takes a holistic view of the assessment of coursework, reflecting the belief that the assessment objectives work best together. However, it must be reported that this year there was a clear tendency in some centres to ignore the importance of AO1 which is not only a matter of constructing an argument but also a matter of exercising good control over the conventions of formal, written English.

Centres are reminded that when the English is unclear, a student will struggle to show adequate understanding of any of the remaining four assessment objectives and, therefore, achieving a mark from a higher band is highly unlikely.

Centres are reminded that they have a duty to draw moderator attention to egregious errors and infelicities of AO1. Students are reminded of the importance of carefully proof-reading their work before final hand-in.

Exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations (AO5)

As ever, when tasks were designed with a very careful eye on AO5, students found it much easier to write compelling arguments and moderators found it much easier to uphold the high marks awarded in centres for such work.

Meanings in literary texts are not fixed, and multiple readings are possible. This idea lies at the heart of AO5. Interpretations of a text can be generated through discussion, through reference to a given critical view, or through reference to critical theory. Such considerations show the close relationship between AO5 and AO3.

However, references to critical theories can cause problems for those students who think there are short cuts to writing convincingly about critical theory. Reference to critical opinion is most effective when it is woven into the student's own argument, not randomly inserted.

This year, there were many examples of sweeping generalisations of, for example, "what a feminist critic would say" about a text or "what a Marxist analysis" would reveal. If students want to write about feminist or Marxist critique – a good idea if the critical theory contributes to the debate - they are advised to find real examples from named critics rather than relying on assertions and generalisations which all too often swamp any evidence of the student's own interpretation of what and who they had read.

It needs to be reiterated from previous reports 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 both within the same time frame (synchronic analysis) or across time (diachronic analysis). Reference to critical opinion is most effective when it is woven into the student's own argument, not randomly inserted or bolted on.

As in previous years, many of the more successful students made good use of the concept of 'significance', an important term in this specification and used in the framing of questions for paper 1 and papers 2a and 2b. "Significance" in this sense derives from semiotics and involves weighing up all the potential contributions concerning 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 art as presented by Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Tarrt in *The Goldfinch* enables both exploration of the different ways in which the authors represent attitudes to and ideas about art in their fictional worlds and what different possible interpretive readings emerge.

Exploring connections across literary texts (AO4)

The exploration of literary connections between texts often proved very successful in generating higher band rewards. However, some centres are seemingly still in the habit of instructing their students to refer to other "wider reading" texts beyond the central pair. This technique seldom proved to be effective as it actually gave students less space to focus on their two selected texts.

The length of an NEA essay is 2,500 words and under such a regimen, students need to be selective in choosing what to write about and what may be successfully left out.

Interpretations should be seen as naturally deriving from the connections established between the two selected texts. The most effective connections derived organically from both texts and were carefully integrated into the argument. As ever, the more successful students prioritised significant distinctions between the texts rather than forced comparisons, and both texts were mentioned in the majority or all of the paragraphs, making it clear that the essay was genuinely connective.

For less successful students, 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 (occasionally dubious) common ground. The least successful essays often made no concerted attempt to be connective and such students would write two or three pages on one text (sometimes broken down into paragraphs, sometimes – alarmingly for AO1 - not), followed by two or three pages on the other text. Such essays often concluded with a paragraph of “comparison” which was only tangentially connective in terms of the essay as a whole.

Demonstrating understanding of the significance of contexts (AO3)

A problem reported frequently by this year’s moderation team was students imposing contexts onto their texts without evidence or serious thought.

In particular, nineteenth century texts like Alcott’s novel *Little Women* and Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* were often contextualised in unconvincing ways. For example, a popular argument for students was that Jo March in *Little Women*, wants to break free of the confines of her gender. Most students could even find good supporting textual evidence for this argument (Jo’s disappointment that she “can’t fight with Papa and has to stay at home and knit” was often cited) and some students even demonstrated that Alcott shows Jo as having broken free of her gender entrapment by the end of the novel; so far, so good: a coherent argument supported by textual evidence.

Yet, often in the same essay, the student would argue that it was “impossible” for women to break free of gender entrapment due to the existence of the “patriarchy”. Often an obvious and rewarding “middle line” was ignored: i.e. some women manage to find a sort of freedom in patriarchies whereas others, plausibly the majority, do not. The best students understood that if they were going to construct an argument about what happens in a patriarchy, they needed to prove that the world of the text in which Jo March lives is indeed patriarchal. Merely asserting that a society in a work of literature is a patriarchy does not make it so and is unlikely to convince a moderator.

The same can be said of such terms as “toxic masculinity”. If a student wants to write about how and why toxic masculinity is significant in a text, a good starting point would be to analyse the male behaviours within the text and show with evidence which male behaviours are toxic.

It is always a good idea, therefore, for the student to begin with the text and move outwards into the contexts (and critical opinion, to get a foothold in AO5) rather than to start with a context learned or believed to be true outside of the text and then attempt to impose it on the text.

A Doll's House in particular suffered with this “outside-in” approach. A great many of the less successful students merely asserted that Nora lived in a patriarchy (she might) and that Torvald and usually Krogstad were “toxic” (they may be), though Doctor Rank, bizarrely, often got a free pass.

Some consideration of the structure of a text (AO2) will help cement AO3: say Krogstad does display qualities of toxic masculinity in Act 1 due to his threatening behaviour towards Nora, is he still toxic by Act 2 and what are we to make of his “second letter” which lets Nora off the hook at the end of the play? Does Ibsen portray Krogstad as exhibiting traits of toxic masculinity across all three acts of the play?

Super-imposed or invalid contextualisation can seriously reduce an argument’s credibility. Is *A Doll's House* in any meaningful way “Victorian”? Do we have any evidence, for example, that Ibsen had been influenced by Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* or that Patmore’s values are applicable to 1879 Norway? Why would the U.K. Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 have any relevance to a Norwegian drama?

Some candidates went so far down contextual cul-de-sacs that their arguments were stranded and unmoored, leading to such claims, for example, that women in “nineteenth century society” were “not allowed to work”. This is no simple error or something which can be lightly brushed off or overlooked because it communicates to a moderator a set of basic misunderstandings.

The best band 5 essays began with the text and worked their way out to those contexts suggested by close reading. Also, the most successful and persuasive students understood that AO3 and AO5 work best in unison where a consideration of relevant, useful, and well-considered contexts adds to the success of the debate. To be excellent in AO3, a student needs to be prepared to put in the serious hard work required to understand the contexts of literary works. Contexts cannot be just assumed or grafted on to texts; they emerge from within the texts as areas to be researched and considered.

Analysing ways that meanings are shaped (AO2)

Tasks which foregrounded AO2 by encouraging a focus on ‘presentation’ helped students to focus on and succeed in this assessment objective. References to authorial methods integrated into the wider argument and which supported interpretations of the texts were more successful than approaches which prioritised simple feature-spotting.

The most successful responses to AO2 demonstrated assured and perceptive understanding of authorial methods, in particular form and structure, as well as authorial voice, character voice, symbolism, imagery, setting. Less successful responses operated largely or wholly at word-level analysis limited to a series of statements connecting single words or phrases.

Some candidates thought it would be productive in AO2 to try to analyse at micro-level such features as the use of personal pronouns in an individual sentence, the type of narrow focus highly unlikely to identify the most significant authorial methods employed in a play or novel, or even a short story or a longer narrative poem.

Drama continues to be overlooked as a genre by the less successful candidates. Those responses which compared a play and a novel (a popular choice) often gave little or no indication that these texts had been understood as different forms of literature. Though not an exhaustive list, moderators reasonably expect students to understand that some of the features that separate drama from prose include the division of the play into acts and scenes rather than chapters and volumes.

Students offering drama do best when they consider the text as in some ways “incomplete” in written form, a blueprint for performance that needs the directors' and actors' input and interpretation, and should note how little or how much direction and specific detail playwrights give about aspects of stagecraft such as: stage directions; lighting; music / sound / sound effects; set; costume; disguise; the comparative status of characters; contrast; act opening / ending; scene opening / ending; entrance / exit with opening and closing lines; dramatic irony; intensity of action; tension / suspense / surprise; twist; comic relief; soliloquy, the use of prose and verse.

Poetry texts were a little more in evidence this year with Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and Poe's *The Raven*, *A Dream Within a Dream* and *Annabel Lee*, among others, being prominent. As in past exam sequences, those responses which treated the poems as poems and could write about such things as line length and stanza structure (couplet, tercet, quatrain, sestet, octet etc.), shape, regularity, end-stopped lines, caesura, enjambment, concrete and abstract images, personification, pathetic fallacy, motif, diction and so on proved most successful.

Articulating responses to literary texts (AO1)

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

A significant problem continues to be paragraphing, or the lack of it. Some responses used no paragraphs at all, many adopted 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.

As ever, since the inception of this specification, when students used literary terminology with confidence and accuracy, their work was sharp and impressive. When they had limited grasp of the meaning of the selected terms i.e. not knowing the difference between a verb and a noun or an adjective and an adverb, they tended to draw attention to the limitations of their understanding. Yet again, there were many references to critical terminology that suggested that the terms had been

misunderstood. ‘Post-modernist’, for example, was routinely used to describe anything that was loosely situated in modern times.

Post-modernism is not a date stamp and though we are discussing AO1, any candidate who misunderstood or misapplied “post-modernism” also compromised their chances of a high mark within AO3 and AO5.

Moderators reported that proof-reading was sometimes ineffective; at times, even names of authors and the base texts were consistently mis-spelt. The titles of texts were routinely left unmarked by quotation marks or italics. With texts such as *Doctor Faustus*, *King Lear*, *Frankenstein* and *Lolita*, this can lead to some serious confusion for the reader.

There were occasional problems with the use of quotations. Some were inaccurate; some only had a very tangential connection to the task. Successful students incorporated sharply selected quotations into their arguments and, to moor the point being made, indicated exactly where the quotation occurred within the text (signposting again: AO1 meets AO2). The best quotations are central to the relevance of the argument under debate (AO1 meets AO5) and are short and integrated. Excessively lengthy quotations bulked out the essays, and responses which went egregiously over the 2,500-word limit demonstrated that candidates who could not write with discipline to a precise set of instructions frequently self-penalised.

Proof-reading to spot and eradicate errors and the application of précis skills to trim word length, as ever, worked wonders for the more organised and successful students.

Texts

The appropriateness of any textual choice is dependent on the second text to which it is connected. The task selected will hopefully highlight some of the things about why the student is interested in the texts as a pairing. Therefore, it was heartening to see that there was considerable evidence this year that students had selected their own pairs of texts, and this approach often resulted in interesting, individual essays which demonstrated genuine personal engagement alongside robust academic analysis.

From the beginning of specification A, we have been consistent in reporting that very careful judgements should be made about 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)? Do the texts as a pair enable the comparisons and contrasts to be valid (AO4)?

Texts which seem superficially attractive to students may prove to be lacking in the depth and complexity necessary for detailed literary analysis, especially when contrasted to the other text selected. This year individual volumes from G.R.R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* series, Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy and Meyer’s *Twilight* saga all created difficulties for those candidates unable to write coherently about form, structure and language.

A very common approach to NEA is for centres to teach a common text, usually the pre-1900 text, and to encourage students to select a second text, sometimes as a free choice and sometimes from a set of ‘satellite’ texts. There is nothing inherently wrong or invalid with this practice. Moderators accept that teachers need to teach students things of value and some outstanding work is written as a result of this methodology. However, problems for students can occur when the connections established between the texts are artificial, asserted or assumed and when centres ‘over-scaffold’. For example, if all students in a centre offer *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and make use of the same points and quotations and even include the same highlights from Wilde’s biography often in the same order, it is difficult for a moderator to detect how the work has been written as “independent critical study”.

In 2023 some students offered texts recently or traditionally used for GCSE, for example this year’s moderators reported seeing folders making use of *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Lord of the Flies*, *War of the Worlds*, *Blood Brothers* and *Animal Farm*.

Whilst it is acceptable for such texts to be offered at A-level (unless the student has already read them for GCSE or they are set texts on papers 1 and 2 of 7712), some students experience difficulty in analysing “GCSE” texts at the deeper, more sophisticated level required for higher band A-level work. Centres are advised to proceed with caution when allowing students to use familiar GCSE type texts. The same advice is applicable to “children’s literature”. *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *Coraline* all much-loved and admired, created difficulties this year for students who struggled to find in the texts much of genuine substance.

The more complex narratives of childhood such as Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, McEwan’s *The Child in Time*, Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* all enabled the more engaged students to write impressive essays.

Increasingly popular are texts from classical antiquity and moderators reported that they saw some excellent work, always based on the robust foundations of reading and research. Successful pairings of texts included Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* with Pat Barker’s *The Women of Troy* or Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*. Euripides’ *Medea* was used in conjunction with Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, and Atwood’s *Alias Grace*.

Not all attempts at pairing an ancient Greek text with a more modern one were successful, however. Some candidates encountered difficulties in AO2 with language and genre and more struggled in AO3 to write convincingly about the contexts and reception of Greek theatre.

The most popular texts for NEA continue to be Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Stoker’s *Dracula*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Alcott’s *Little Women*, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Collins’ *The Moonstone*, Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, and Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Intriguing texts not mentioned elsewhere in this report which stuck in moderators’ minds because students usually performed well with them included: Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*, Gaskell’s *Ruth*, Butterworth’s *Jerusalem*, Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, Gupta’s *The Empress*, Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando*, Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *The Collector*,

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Tasks

As in previous examination series, tasks that offered meaningful opportunities to respond to all five assessment objectives, increased students' chances of success. Less successful tasks seemed to encourage description of content or fictional worlds rather than exploration of different interpretations. This year, some tasks which led to lower marks did not offer a genuine debate.

For example, a task asking students to consider whether women "in patriarchal environments suffer due to male control" seemed destined to have only one direction of travel. However, tasks which asked if male characters in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Krogstad) and in Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (Francie and Finn) might not be patriarchs or to what extent their behaviours were *laissez-faire* or even helpful to women did generate a much more robust debate, especially for those students who understood structure and realised that characters change or are presented differently as a plays and novels progress from the beginning all the way through to the end.

Some centres allowed their students to opt for a sociological, philosophical, or psychological approach to task-setting which by avoiding a literary focus frequently led students down blind alleys from which they could not extricate themselves: "To what extent are Torvald in *A Doll's House* and Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop* examples of Levinas' theory of The Other?" does not appear to be designed to generate a literary debate. Sometimes students went as far as to psychoanalyse characters as though they were real people instead of constructs in a fictional world invented by a writer.

Some centres still cling – with mixed success - to the list of themes prepared several years ago at the beginning of the specification. Centres are reminded that literature provides a bountiful harvest of interesting networks of ideas not mentioned at all in the specification document. This year, lively essays were written around such themes as the representation of rural life, urban deprivation, superstition, childhood trauma, abandonment, the significance of art, the preparation of a crime, the aftermath of a murder and the English Country House as a setting.

Some tasks focused on themes which proved to be too wide for effective treatment in 2,500 words as well as exhibiting weaknesses of expression e.g. "How do *A Doll's House* and *A Raisin in the Sun* present stereotypes, oppression, men sustaining dominance via gender abuse via utilisation of characters and setting?"

Many centres used the task formula of a quotation followed by a 'compare and contrast' question. This format is often helpful. When there was a productive relationship between the quotation and the essay, this model of task-setting worked well. When the quotation did not fit the question, candidates were less successful.

When task setting, centres should ensure that students give the publication dates for their chosen texts within the task itself as this confirms to the moderator that the student is aware of the rule that at least one of the texts must be pre-1900.

Word Counts

Though there is no automatic penalty for exceeding the word count, we expect responses to be within the 2,500 upper word limit, excluding quotations. Responses do not gain an advantage from exceeding this total, and such excess is often self-penalising as overlong work often loses coherence, can be repetitious and often strays into irrelevance. It is expected that every piece of work will be accompanied by an accurate word count shown both on the CRF and at the end of the student's work. A useful practice has emerged over the last few years: one word count including quotations, and another indicating the total once quotations had been deducted. Moderators do check word counts and centres should stress this fact to their students.

Annotation and Marking

Annotation is not for the benefit of the student but for the benefit of the moderator. The most useful sort of annotation aids the moderator in providing an evidence trail showing how a particular mark was reached within a centre and will:

- utilise a clear and intelligible system of formative commentary (i.e. not coloured highlights or similar) occurring at regular intervals throughout the work.
- include a detailed summative commentary.
- acknowledge both the strengths and the weaknesses of the essays.
- tick those elements within a folder which deserve to be rewarded / acknowledged
- avoid excessive underlining.
- indicate the degree to which and in what ways the assessment objectives have been addressed through precise reference to what is happening in the essay. Merely to identify different assessment objectives is of no value to a moderator. Simply putting 'AO5' in the margin, for instance, could justify a variety of marks whereas writing "clear band 4 coherence and thoroughness here in the analysis of Mina's attitude to Harker in *Dracula* and Miranda's attitude to Clegg in *The Collector*" is obviously more helpful in explaining the centre's thinking about student performance.
- 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 (see Moderation above).

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.

Those centres which made use of past T-OLS materials when arriving at their final marks were adjusted far less frequently than centres which did not make use of T-OLS. Teachers can find good examples of centre annotation in past T-OLS materials.

To maintain the holistic nature of NEA, it is neither appropriate nor helpful for centres to assign separate marks to the different AOs and then add them together to produce a total.

Administration

There was much evidence this summer of excellent administrative practice.

Centres are reminded to:

- adhere to deadline dates. The deadline date for NEA 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 hand in their work in centres
- secure essays with treasury tags and only treasury tags
- complete a Centre Declaration Form (one per centre) and a Candidate Record Form for each candidate in the cohort, making sure that centre name and number and candidate numbers are accurate
- ensure that candidates use a sensible 12-point font with double spacing
- 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 student number or descending rank order.

Conclusion

Though there are still some problems with NEA, the best work seen this year demonstrated a refreshing independence of thought, presenting sophisticated literary insights that were genuinely educational. NEA provides a valuable, complementary alternative to the traditional timed examination essay, its long form giving students the opportunity to refine ideas and revisit interesting themes. NEA allows students to learn a very valuable set of skills and when it works, the essays are thought-provoking and a pleasure to moderate.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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