



A-level
English Literature A

7712/1 Love through the ages

Report on the Examination

7712
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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
- analyse dramatic methods (irony, soliloquy, verse/prose etc.) in a relevant way
- make relevant use of precise reference to specific productions
- 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.

In all cases, it is useful for students to begin with an introduction that sets out a clear thesis on the question. If there is a such a rationale then students are already on their way to a coherent argument, one of the distinguishing features of Band 4.

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 is 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 and different metrics 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

Teachers should consult the Indicative Content part of the Mark Scheme to see some of the expectations identified before students took the examination. What follows is a summary of markers' observations when reflecting on the marking process.

Section A

Question 1 *Othello*

'In *Othello*, Iago's skills make him a likeable anti-hero rather than a hateful villain.'

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents Iago's attitudes to love in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

More successful answers:

- engaged readily with the constituent parts of the question: the extract; Iago's skills and intellect; his attitude to love; the 'hateful villain' vs 'likeable anti-hero' debate
- unpicked Iago's view that love is a weakness and a way of manipulating others
- understood the concept of anti-hero and the dramatic methods involved in making a character 'likeable' to an audience
- could see that there is humour and much irony in the presentation of Iago, if one is to pursue the 'likeable anti-hero' view
- looked closely at the extract and its structure
- commented on the prose vs blank verse sections without resorting to simplistic generalisations about different poetic methods
- explored the extent of Iago's villainy, apparent in the extract and wider play
- integrated critical views about Iago in an accurate and relevant way
- considered contemporaneous and modern audience responses to Iago's racist and misogynistic attitudes
- evaluated Iago's response to the relationship between Othello and Desdemona in the light of Jacobean attitudes and the contemporaneous Venetian context
- understood ideas about masculine insecurity around female sexuality
- were aware of the debate about Iago's motives
- examined Iago as dramatic construct, as a plot device and catalyst with elements of the stock character villain.

Less successful answers:

- did not pay attention to the details of the extract
- described Iago, often with no sustained reference to the question
- took Iago's words to Cassio literally and at face value
- were confused about why Iago wants Cassio to approach Desdemona, some thought it was with love in mind
- did not look at the narrative arc of the wider play and Iago's role in it
- struggled with 'likeable anti-hero'
- did not consider the worst of Iago, defining him as a 'hateful villain' simply because he lied and manipulated

- sometimes became too distracted by psychoanalytic theories and homoerotic readings that led away from the question and the given view
- tried to cover too many character relationships.

Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew*

‘Grumio and other servants are crucial to the development of the love stories in *The Taming of the Shrew*.’

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents Grumio and other servants in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

More successful answers:

- looked at the extract in detail and how it fit into that point in the play
- considered servants as a whole, as well as individuals and how they were typical/atypical of stock character servants
- explored the different functions of the servant scenes, providing parallels to characters and events in the main plot; choric commentary on the main characters and events; direct intervention in the love stories as supports or substitutes
- looked at how Grumio, Curtis, Biondello, Tranio, etc. are different kinds of servants with different roles
- included reference to Tranio’s atypical servant role in the Bianca love story
- could see the comedy of the servants as a counterpoint to the seriousness of Petruchio’s cruelty
- linked in the servant roles within the Induction scenes, Sly and the-play-within-a-play seeing the importance of servants in maintaining a facade
- considered the treatment of servants alongside the treatment of Katherina as a matter of social injustice.

Less successful answers:

- avoided looking at the extract in detail, in favour of alternative scenes, characters and subjects
- wrote only generally about servants.

Question 3 *Measure for Measure*

‘An audience can only be appalled by Angelo’s abuses of power in leadership and love.’

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents Angelo in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

More successful answers:

- investigated the ways in which Angelo begins to manipulate Isabella whilst appearing to stand simply for the rule of law
- debated whether or not the extract included examples of abuses or if it merely prepared the way for later scenes with Angelo
- debated the issue of sexual promiscuity, how far it applied to behaviour in the play and how appropriate laws and strong leadership might be as tools to tackle it
- tended to critique Angelo in terms of his sexual morality in manipulating Isabella and abandoning Mariana

- recognises his hypocrisy as a leader and his apparent enjoyment of maliciously wielding power without mercy, explanation or respect for others and other institution
- sometimes found some sympathy/humanity in Angelo’s presentation and predicament.

Less successful answers:

- did not consider Angelo’s abuses of power in love
- did not consider his relationship with Mariana
- overstated the extent to which standing for the rule of law constitutes an abuse of power in the extract.

Question 4 *The Winter’s Tale*

‘The relationships between women are the strongest bonds of love in the play.’

In the light of this view, discuss how Shakespeare presents relationships between women in this extract and elsewhere in the play.

More successful answers:

- considered the extract and commented on Paulina’s verbal skill and emotional sensitivity
- contrasted strong female bonds with weak male bonds
- explored the presentation of the mother-daughter bond

Less successful answers:

- were distracted by ‘bolted on’ context about the role of women in Renaissance society.

Section B Unseen Poetry

Question 5

Compare and contrast the significance of ending a relationship in the following love poems:

‘Since there’s no help, come let us kiss and part’ by Michael Drayton (1563–1631) and ‘The Terrible Door’ by Harold Monro (1879–1932)

More successful answers:

- acknowledged and examined the general and specific similarities between the two poems as the basis for then exploring how these similarities revealed differences (eg the apparently shifting attitude of the speakers, the (mock?) celebration of break-up, the apparent desire to repair, etc)
- read and considered both texts carefully before planning and answer
- explored the texts as whole poems each with its particular structure/argument/narrative
- considered connotative meanings and imagery as a means of conveying emotions and establishing a particular tone of narrative voice
- were tentative in exploring interpretations
- were tentative in drawing conclusions about context
- used the different forms of the poems as a way into investigating meaning
- accepted that the poems have complexities that defy simplistic labelling

- recognised wit in Drayton’s sonnet
- considered the cyclical structure of Monro’s poem and the way the poet evokes a ‘conversation’ between speaker and addressee
- unpicked the significance of Monro’s title

Less successful answers:

- distorted the poems to create binary opposites (eg positive vs negative, happy vs sad, carefree vs angst-ridden, over vs not over)
- assertively pursued the conviction that the addressee on Drayton’s poem must be dead and/or that the pair must be married because of the use of ‘vows’
- missed the significance of the endings of the poems, particularly the volta in Drayton’s final couplet
- missed the poet’s use of structure to convey shifts in tone and focus (eg the octave/sestet/couplet in Drayton’s poem and the distinctness of the three stanzas in Monro’s poem)
- described features of verse form such as metre and rhyme scheme (often inaccurately) before asserting that these were choices intimately linked to specific effects
- pursued far-fetched theories about the abuses of patriarchy in Monro, apparently based on its relatively modern context.

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

Question 6

‘In the literature of love, opposites attract.’

In the light of this view, compare how lovers and their attraction to one another is presented in **two** texts you have studied.

You must write about **at least two** poems in your answer **as well as** the prose text you have studied.

More successful answers:

- made good choices of material from the novel and two poems that were relevant to ‘opposites attract’ in love relationships and could be readily compared
- sustained focus on ‘opposites’ as well as ‘attract’
- took time to explain ‘opposite’ for each of the examples cited and could evidence attraction, rather than simply assert it
- recognised the possible different ways in which couples might be presented as opposite and attracted to one another
- acknowledged that relationships change, particularly as the novels progress
- avoided the pitfalls of redundant examples where a relationship from the novel or a poem (often ‘Sonnet 116’) is chosen to show that opposites don’t attract.

Less successful answers:

- drifted away from ‘opposites’ and/or ‘attract’ to write simply about love between couples
- did not demonstrate attraction adequately, eg many argued that Gatsby was attracted to Daisy simply because she was rich/old money

- struggled to use ‘The Garden of Love’ in a relevant way
- made choices of poems that were difficult to justify as relevant and had to rely on exaggeration and unconvincing arguments about why they might fit the brief.

Question 7

Compare how the authors of two texts you have studied present deception in love relationships.

You must write about **at least two** poems in your answer **as well as** the prose text you have studied.

More successful answers:

- made good choices of material from the novel and two poems that were relevant to deception in love relationships and could be readily compared
- sustained focus on ‘deception in love relationship’
- acknowledged different kinds of deception in love relationships presented in different ways
- considered the role of self-deception when analysing the presentation of relationships
- looked carefully at the characters involved and what might be their motivations for deception in love relationships.

Less successful answers:

- drifted away from love relationships into discussions about deception in general
- did not take time to explain the deception involved the examples cited
- missed some more obvious deceptions in their chosen texts, eg that Maxim is a murderer in *Rebecca*)
- made redundant use of ‘Sonnet 116’ to show an idealised relationship with no deception.

Final points

- Once again, examiners reported that the best answers tended not to range beyond a twelve-page answer booklet
- Examiners reported that responses receiving higher marks tended to have a brief but meaningful plan
- Considered choices (which points, which details, which scenes, which poems, etc.) remain crucial to successful planning
- 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 (please note that ‘post-modern’ should not be used as a date stamp to mean ‘very modern’ or ‘contemporary’)
- Authentic answers are always preferable to a mechanical rehearsal of different critical perspectives
- 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.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)