

A-level

English Literature A

7712/2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern Times: Literature from 1945

Report on the Examination

7712
June 2024

Version: 1.0

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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 Modern Times paper proved highly accessible to students, but in some cases, these problems were noted by senior examiners:

- Students labelling any/every text within this shared context – including the unseen prose extract - ‘postmodern’ or ‘modernist’ when this is not true. ‘Postmodernism’ is not a date stamp to be applied to every text published after 1945, but a specific literary concept/genre/text type. Moreover ‘Modernism’ is a genre strongly identified with the literature of the 1920s, so well outside the historical scope of this unit in any case.
- A 12-page answer book is to be used for this paper. Exceptionally long scripts that went well beyond this almost always showcased work consistently at the same level, thus doing nothing to move up the mark bands. Notably prolix and diffuse responses call into question the students’ ability to write clearly and coherently: two key Band 4 descriptors.
- Very few rubric infringements were seen, but a tiny minority of students made irrelevant comparisons to pre-1945 literature studied for Paper 1 such as *The Great Gatsby*. Such texts

cannot possibly shed any light on this unit’s **post-1945 shared synchronic context** and in fact call into question the students’ fundamental understanding of this examination.

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 unseen prose extract has been chosen with a clear beginning and end to enable more thorough analysis. The key words of the given view are intended as a lens through which to view the extract. Therefore, there is every reason to spend a substantial amount of time analysing the extract given in the light of the stated theme: in this series **loneliness and social isolation**.

As the extract is always from a novel published after 1945, it is particularly important to write about prose narrative. Precise relevant references to aspects of narrative methods are encouraged. Essential to success in this question is for students to have undertaken sufficient practice in unseen critical analysis, and to avoid irrelevant references to other texts when instructed to write about the significance of the given theme of loneliness and social isolation ‘in this extract’.

Whereas less effective responses to Kitty Aldridge’s *A Trick I Learned From Dead Men* (2012) tended to paraphrase the extract via a ‘narrative-with-text’ approach plus attendant feature-spotting, better responses engaged enthusiastically and skilfully with this text and found plenty of illuminating things to say about her narrative methods. Some writing of exceptionally high quality was seen here. Better answers, while acknowledging that the extract is only a tiny part of a much longer text, wrote well about its internal structure and cohesion, eg the beginning, development and denouement of the scene. Weaker answers made assertions that showed a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the task, such as claiming that Aldridge began writing ‘in media res’ when AQA selected the extract, or stating that her purpose was, for example, ‘to explore male mental health’ through her writing. Clearly the theme of loneliness and social isolation was selected by AQA for the purposes of this examination and *not* by Aldridge herself just over a decade ago.

The best answers noticed Aldridge’s creation of a distinctive first-person narrator in Lee Hart. Students incapable of recognising Aldridge’s narrative viewpoint were disadvantaged from the outset, since correctly ascertaining this opened up the overall tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track when this core aspect of the text was misunderstood.

Less able students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert that when Aldridge wrote the novel in 2012, she must have been thinking about the #MeToo movement (unlikely, since that

emerged five years after the novel was published) or the aftermath of 9/11, or indeed any major world event they could think of that happened after around 2000. This sort of hazy and superficial comment shows a very limited grasp of the contexts of production and reception. Urging protagonist Lee to declare his love for the florist Lorelle, or to take his grieving stepfather Lester to a psychologist, or to get his brother Ned a job at the funeral home, suggested that Aldridge’s characters were being seen as real people rather than fictional constructs. Digressive speculation about extra-textual aspects wasted time and added nothing; wondering if Aldridge ‘saw herself in Lorelle’ as an objectified woman, for example, was pointless, irrelevant and impossible to substantiate. Students who put context before text did themselves no favours by claiming that Aldridge must have predicted the 2017 #MeToo movement or the 2020 global pandemic.

More successful **extract-based** answers:

- look at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of the set topic and its significance – and understand that in this specification, ‘significance’ does not mean ‘relative importance’, but is an invitation to create a sharply focused argument about the possible meanings encoded in the set topic (see also below for more about this key term)
- sustain focus on the extract and the writer’s narrative methods
- make considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text
- show awareness and understanding of the typicality of the set topic within this shared context.

Less successful **extract-based** answers:

- make sparse use of the extract, or neglect parts of it, or impose one narrow view upon it and attempt to prove its ‘correctness’
- fail to pay attention to the writer’s narrative methods
- write about the characters as though they are real people
- describe or paraphrase the extract
- make inaccurate, unsubstantiated, irrelevant or sweeping assertions about context.

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.

To connect texts successfully within the framework of this question, students must remember that they have been instructed to **compare** the presentation of the given theme – **loneliness and social isolation** – across **two texts from different genres**. Sometimes even relatively strong students did not take full advantage of exploring these differences, and the weakest responses almost always insisted, often very unconvincingly, that their comparative set texts dealt with the given theme in ‘very similar’ ways. Many students defaulted to using the connective ‘similarly’ before going on to make a point that actually pointed to a major *difference* between the texts.

When comparing any two of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, it is crucial to analyse how they differ. There is no point in asserting that two texts are similar simply because they both deal with the same given theme – all the comparative set texts must do so, or the question could not have been set. The focus of the response must be on *presentation*, not merely *content*; the *how* as much as the *what*.

Previous reports have stressed the importance of being able to explore specific poetic, dramatic and prose methods so that an understanding of how writers operate can be established by the student. Successful responses tend to be marked by an awareness and understanding of the genre under discussion, and that poets, dramatists and novelists have different ways of working. Examiners understand that like is not being compared with like here, so a novelist's or dramatist's methods may need more exposition and reference than those of a poet. The challenge for students is to demonstrate that different terminology and different metrics will be needed to measure the effects of different genre methods.

Many students connected texts by putting texts side by side and going from one to the other in a linear fashion. However, the best responses were fully comparative where detailed similarities and differences were closely explored. The latter is a higher order skill that opens up the higher reaches of the mark scheme.

Better students worked through thoughtfully developed links between their texts that focused on how the writers' poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked to illuminate the theme of loneliness and social isolation. Crucially, they also clearly identified the nature of the barriers to be found within their texts, eg in relation to the role of women, sexuality, class, race etc. Less able students tended to off-load preconceived ideas about context and typicality without successfully relating them to the given theme – and/or failed to clarify exactly how and what loneliness and social isolation were present in their chosen texts.

At times a bolted-on contextual overlay swamped the chosen texts, with some students seeming to have lost sight of the fact that this examination is in English Literature, not history, politics, psychology or sociology. Potted histories of various waves of feminism or the struggle for civil rights, for example, are not asked for. When exploring their comparative set texts in an Open Book examination, accurate textual detail is crucial; well-chosen aspects of authorial method must form the bedrock of any successful comparison.

Students who adopt a lexical approach to AO2 often self-penalise. Writing two or three paragraphs about, for example, the impact on the audience of Tennessee Williams's use of alliteration in a single stage direction from *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not a productive approach. Moreover, it is notable how many of the students who do adopt this unhelpful 'dissection' approach so often fail get the basics right; there were numerous over-confident identifications of a specific part of speech in which 'the adjective' was in fact almost inevitably a noun, pronoun or adverb. The resultant display is not of knowledge and understanding but the exact opposite. AQA's **Teaching Guide to AO2** offers a much more 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>

More successful **comparative set text** answers:

- look at both texts with the question focus in mind
- sustain a comparative approach
- support relevant readings with specific textual details
- analyse poetic, dramatic and/or prose methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary
- apply context in a considered way, again being suitably tentative rather than assertively definitive
- show awareness of typicality in the literature of modern times.

Less successful **comparative set text** answers:

- work through the texts a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific task focus
- leave ideas undeveloped and unsupported
- assert interpretations
- describe poetic, dramatic and/or prose methods in isolation, with no reference to meaning, or simply assert an unconvincing link to an alleged meaning
- label methods and word classes inaccurately
- make sweeping, simplistic or inaccurate statements about context and/or typicality in the literature of modern times.

Some students used an ornate style of writing which was presumably felt to be ‘academic’, but which, in its convoluted syntax and pretentious (and often inaccurate) word choices, actually impeded the clear communication of meaning. With two 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 that relate back to the central theme
- discourse markers to signal similarity and difference.

On the whole, however, many excellent comparative essays were seen that analysed how each text represented the theme of changing social attitudes in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, norms and ethics. Truly original and fascinating connections were traced across the chosen texts in relation to a wide variety of possible issues and areas that might give rise to changing social attitudes, including gender, class, race, sexuality, religion and mental health. Some students compared how specific characters within their texts respond to changing social attitudes in various ways, and acknowledged how these may be viewed very differently over time. As with this type of very open question in previous

examination series, the best answers here were simply outstanding and illuminated the chosen comparative texts in innovative, complex and fascinating ways.

Part Three: Feedback on selected single set text questions

More detailed information as to the standard content of student answers – ie. the aspects of the texts they wrote about – is to be found in the indicative content of the mark scheme for this unit.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

Both poetry set texts are **collections**, not **anthologies**. Some students used these terms interchangeably, showing a failure to understand that poets plan, design and structure their texts just as carefully as novelists and dramatists do. These collections are coherent bodies of work put together by the poets themselves; anthologies are much broader representative selections put together by editors. The implications here are profound in terms of what students can say about the overall design and purpose of *Feminine Gospels* and *Skirrid Hill*.

Feminine Gospels by Carol Ann Duffy

Question 1

Better answers:

- looked at the idea of conflict between women and men within the framework of the collection as a whole
- chose poems wisely, that actually featured interactions between women and men
- made appropriate relevant reference to critical ideas such as Cixous’s ‘écriture féminine’ and Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’
- examined broad issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- inserted a redundant ‘e’ at the end of the poet’s middle name in an Open Book examination
- spelled the collection’s title wrongly in an Open Book examination
- chose to write about poems they presumably liked and knew well that in fact did not feature the question focus very prominently
- tended to ‘go through’ poems that didn’t seem to be very well understood
- made simplistic and generalised assertions
- claimed that another theme was in fact dominant and twisted the question to write about that instead
- ‘went through’ the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming ‘so this shows ...’ in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- wrote about poems without linking them to the ideas network of the collection as a whole.

Question 2**Better answers:**

- looked at a range of ideas about women showing great personal courage across the whole collection
- found examples of women showing courage as a collective, eg in *The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High*
- found examples of women appearing to act in a timid or disempowered manner in order to create a counterargument
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- inserted a redundant 'e' at the end of the poet's middle name in an Open Book examination
- spelled the collection's title wrongly in an Open Book examination
- tended to 'go through' poems that didn't seem to be very well understood
- made simplistic and generalised assertions
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that were unconvincingly linked to the actual question set
- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming 'so this shows ...' in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- wrote about poems without linking them to the ideas network of the collection as a whole.

Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers*Question 3****Better answers:**

- examined a variety of ideas about masculinity, toxic or otherwise, within the collection
- analysed Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods in writing about masculinity
- examined broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant apostrophe before the 's' in the poet's surname in an Open Book examination
- failed to distinguish between the poems and the poet, often making dubious accusations about Sheers' own 'sexism' or 'toxic masculinity'
- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming 'so this shows ...' in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- 'went through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points without linking the discussion to the task
- wrote about poems without linking them to the themes of the collection as a whole.

Question 4**Better answers:**

- examined a variety of poems about pain, be that physical or emotional, subtly and tentatively
- linked Sheers' ideas network and poetic methods effectively
- analysed broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant apostrophe before the 's' in the poet's surname in an Open Book examination
- 'went through' poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally, and often at great length, before claiming 'so this shows ...' in an abrupt and unconvincing final sentence
- used a generalised 'checklist' approach which isolated minor lexical and even grammatical points that were then stated to 'prove' the given view correct or incorrect
- failed to distinguish between the poems and the poet, often making dubious accusations about Sheers' own 'sexism' or 'toxic masculinity' causing pain
- wrote about poems without linking them to the themes of the collection as a whole.

Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams****Question 7****Better answers:**

- analysed Williams' possible concerns and dramatic methods with regard to the relationship of Blanche and Stella
- examined broader issues of genre and structure, noting how Stella's pragmatic survival instinct contrasts with Blanche's inability to thrive in New Orleans
- showed a conceptualised understanding of their experiences in illustrating the role of women in post-war America, the decline and ruin of the Old South and the idea of the American Dream.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant apostrophe before the 's' in the playwright's surname and misspelled 'Tennessee' in an Open Book examination
- wrote more about Blanche's relationship with Stanley than with Stella
- wrote about characters as if they were real and criticised their behaviour in ways that suggested a weak grasp of the contexts of production and reception

- persistently asserted that Williams' homosexuality automatically meant that he was oppressed and lived in fear, when the most cursory knowledge of the dramatist's life would strongly suggest otherwise
- wrote about other elements of Williams' biography, eg the tragic history of his sister Rose, and made unsubstantiated and simplistic assertions about their relevance to the text and task
- wrote inaccurately about the contexts of the play
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that did not focus on Williams as a dramatist.

Question 8

Better answers:

- showed an extremely impressive understanding of Williams' use of music and songs within the play
- analysed the very different dramatic functions of, for example, the Varsouviana polka, the blue piano and the songs 'From the Land of Sky Blue Water' and 'Paper Moon'
- examined broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the play as a whole, often looking relevantly at specific performances.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant apostrophe before the 's' in the playwright's surname and misspelled 'Tennessee' in an Open Book examination
- were hazy about the key concepts in the given view
- persistently asserted that Williams' homosexuality automatically meant that he was oppressed and lived in fear, when the most cursory knowledge of the dramatist's life would strongly suggest otherwise
- wrote about other elements of Williams' biography, eg the tragic history of his sister Rose, and made unsubstantiated and simplistic assertions about their relevance to the text and task
- wrote inaccurately about the contexts of the play
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that did not focus on Williams as a dramatist.

Top Girls by Caryl Churchill

Question 9

Better answers:

- showed clear understanding of power and powerlessness within the play
- wrote sharply and effectively about Churchill's implicit criticisms of Thatcher and Thatcherism
- wrote well about the play in performance, eg the doubling of parts, the transhistorical elements and the non-linear structure.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about the key concepts in the given view
- wrote very generally about context, but failed to consider Churchill’s dramaturgy closely enough
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance.

Question 10**Better answers:**

- showed clear understanding of the significance of motherhood in terms of how it helps to symbolise the either/or nature of the issue within the 1980s context, the transhistorical context, and today
- examined how various characters discuss the issue of motherhood and their own experiences as mothers to illuminate a strong debate
- analysed the play’s implicit socio-political criticisms around gender and power
- wrote well about the play in performance, eg the doubling of parts, the transhistorical elements and the non-linear structure.

Less effective answers:

- were hazy about the significance of motherhood and struggled to write about it in depth
- wrote in a descriptive way about what happens to various female characters as if they were real people rather than fictional constructs
- failed to write about elements of genre and performance.

Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts***Waterland* by Graham Swift****Questions 13 & 14**

These questions were answered by a very small minority of students, so detailed feedback cannot be given.

The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood*Question 15****Better answers:**

- analysed the various functions, purposes and meanings of the Aunts and some of the key events and characters associated with their role within the regime and in particular as the Red Centre
- linked the representation of the Aunts’ regime at the Red Centre to Atwood’s representation of Gilead’s attempts to control its citizens

- saw the Aunts as typical of the political corruption of the dystopian genre
- wrote well about Atwood’s narrative methods.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant extra ‘t’ into the novelist’s surname and misspelled ‘Margaret’ in an Open Book examination
- were hazy about the various functions, purposes and meanings of the Aunts
- adopted a listy and generically descriptive approach which outlined what Aunt Lydia, in particular, was like within the novel but did not address the key word ‘significance’
- asserted that the Red Centre run by the Aunts had once been a high school gymnasium, when in fact it was situated within what was once the gymnasium of Harvard University
- did not look in detail at Atwood’s narrative methods.

Question 16

Better answers:

- showed clear understanding of the significance of motherhood
- examined how various characters experience motherhood to illuminate a strong debate
- analysed the various functions, purposes and meanings of mothers and motherhood in Gilead
- wrote well about Atwood’s narrative methods and the dystopian genre.

Less effective answers:

- persistently inserted a redundant extra ‘t’ into the novelist’s surname and misspelled ‘Margaret’ in an Open Book examination
- were hazy about the significance of motherhood and struggled to write about it in depth
- wrote in a descriptive way about what happens to various female characters as if they were real people rather than fictional constructs
- drifted into a generalised discussion of Gilead’s oppressive nature
- did not address the key word ‘significance’
- did not look in detail at Atwood’s narrative methods or the dystopian genre.

Final points

- Examiners reported that this year there were fewer over-long answers that ranged beyond a twelve-page answer booklet.
- Examiners also reported that responses receiving higher marks tended to have a brief but meaningful plan.
- Historical and critical context should be used carefully and judiciously to ensure that it is explicitly relevant to the question so that it informs the argument, rather than appearing extraneous or even irrelevant.
- The most successful kind of analysis involves explaining **why** and **how** literary methods might create various effects on the reader or audience, rather than simply asserting that they do so. Linking methods clearly to meaning remains a key discriminator.
- 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.