

A-LEVEL **ENGLISH LITERATURE A**

7712/2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern Times: Literature from 1945
to Present day
Report on the Examination

7712/2B
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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, the following 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 absolutely 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 the Love through the Ages unit 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 to 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 **barriers between people**.

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 barriers between people **'in this extract'**.

Whereas less effective responses to Marghanita Laski's *The Village* (1952) ended 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 Laski began writing 'in media res' when obviously AQA selected the extract, or stating that her purpose was 'to challenge oppressive social attitudes' through her writing. Clearly this theme was selected by AQA for the purposes of this examination and not by Laski herself seventy years ago.

The best answers distinguished effectively between Laski's third person narrative stance and the manner in which the events were at times focalised through the character of Wendy Trevor. Students incapable of recognising Laski'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. Claiming that this straightforward third person past tense narrative comprising dialogue and description was 'postmodern' or 'modernist' showed a fundamental lack of knowledge and understanding, and was inevitably self-penalising.

Less able students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert moral messages about 'backward', 'sexist', 'homophobic' and/or 'racist' social attitudes they detected within the extract without showing much awareness of the contexts of production and reception.

Urging Wendy and Edith to defy convention and admit their hidden love for each other suggested that some students were treating Laski's characters as real people rather than fictional constructs, and asserting a reading meaning that is at best unlikely given any close reading of the extract. Assertions about Wendy suffering racist oppression were unhelpful, since the extract said only that she had had a baby in Kenya: better answers looked at this information as suggesting her likely involvement with the British colonial administration. Digressive speculation about extra-textual aspects wasted time and added nothing; wondering if Laski 'saw herself in Wendy' were irrelevant and impossible to substantiate. Students who wanted to put context before text did not help themselves by writing that Laski 'was clearly waiting for the socially liberal 1960s to start' as if she had a crystal ball enabling her to foresee the future.

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 – **barriers between people** - 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 barriers between people. 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 barriers between people 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 a noun, pronoun or adverb. 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.

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 positioning of *The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High* within the framework of the collection as a whole
- forged clear links with other poems from the preceding tall tales section and the succeeding personal lyrics
- showed an awareness of the essentially different form of this extended mock-epic allegory and the rest of the collection
- examined broad issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- tended to 'go through' poems that didn't seem to be very well understood
- made simplistic and generalised assertions
- 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 violence across the text
- made appropriate relevant reference to critical ideas such as Cixous's 'écriture féminine' and Mulvey's 'male gaze'
- examined broader issues of genre and structure
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole.

Less effective answers:

- wrote about violence as 'insignificant' and/or barely visible in the collection, and then digressed into writing about another topic entirely
- tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that were unconvincingly linked to the actual question set
- 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 place within the collection, including attitudes to Wales, its culture and landscape, and/or more specific locations mentioned
- analysed Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods in writing about place
- 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
- 'went through' the chosen poems very generally 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 romantic loves 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:

- 'went through' poems in a simplistic, assertive or descriptive manner without linking the discussion to the task
- 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' 'sexism' or 'toxic masculinity'
- 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 Stella's pregnancy
- examined broader issues of genre and structure, noting that the visible signs of Stella's pregnancy effectively 'time stamp' the dramatic action
- showed a conceptualised understanding of the pregnancy in illustrating the role of women in post-war America and the idea of the American Dream.

Less effective answers:

- wrote more about Blanche and Stanley than about Stella herself

- 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
- 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 setting
- analysed Blanche's function as an emblem of the declining South and contrasted this with Stanley's evocation of modern post-war America and the idea of the American Dream
- 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:

- were hazy about the key concepts in the given view
- imported elements of Williams' biography and made unsubstituted 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.

Top Girls by Caryl Churchill

Question 9

Better answers:

- showed clear understanding of Marlene's contemptuous view of the working class, and wrote well about the play'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 tiny 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 Red Centre and some of the key events and characters associated with it, eg the Aunts, Moira's escape, and the denunciation of Janine
- linked the representation of the Red Centre to Atwood's representation of Gilead's attempts to control its citizens
- saw the institution as typical of the 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 Red Centre
- adopted a listy and generically descriptive approach which 'went through' various elements of the description of the Red Centre in Chapter 1, but did not address the key word 'significance'
- asserted that the Red Centre 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:

- analysed the various functions, purposes and meanings of Gilead's uniforms and costumes
- analysed the symbolism and possible meanings of clothing as a marker of individuality and/or conformity
- 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
- listed and described various uniforms and costumes with only a hazy idea of what they might signify
- 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.