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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2B Texts in Shared Contexts: Modern Times: Literature from  
1945 to the present day  
Report on the Examination

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7712  
2017

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## General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/1 and NEA.

It was evident from the marking of all three components that the historicist philosophy of the specification has been positively embraced because it has provided clarity and coherence. 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 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 new 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 to produce work with a clear, authentic voice. Teachers, students and examiners have welcomed 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 more flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage more independent work not limited by some of the formulaic constraints that had evolved within the legacy specification. In particular:

- AO2 had been defined by 'form, structure and language' (a collocation which had become mechanistic and exclusive) but is **now more generically defined as 'methods' or 'ways' in which writers create meaning**
- AO5 had been characterised by the ability to balance the debate identified in the question but **now there is no such obligation to engage with the interpretation presented in the given view in that binary way**
- the requirement for wider reading had led to some forced links between texts but **now there is no need to make explicit links to other texts when single texts are the subject of questions (i.e. in Paper 1 Section A and the first part of Paper 2 Section B)**

The move away from formulaic constraints should liberate both students and teachers to pursue authentic arguments with conviction, rather than out of a sense of obligation. Likewise it is important not to inadvertently adopt new formulaic constraints in an attempt to negotiate the new specification. A historicist approach does **not** require students to 'offload' lots of historical facts nor does it require the rote rehearsal of Marxist, feminist or psychoanalytical approaches in order to demonstrate contextualised interpretation. As far as AO4 is concerned, typicality is not necessarily best addressed by explicit links to other texts in sections where there is one text in focus.

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.

## Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

The poetry set text questions gave rise to some vigorous and enjoyable writing with most students showing confidence in locating a productive debate. Where there was less good practice was in the crucial consideration of the key words of the question. Since the mantra of this specification is ‘Answer the Question’, it was unfortunate to see excellent knowledge and understanding underused where students answered an alternative question they *wish* had been asked rather than the one that was actually set. Some commented mechanically and at length on learned elements of poetic method rather than analysing how these methods might aid the presentation of the task’s central premise. Students must address the question head-on rather than quickly side-stepping the given theme or view in order to embark upon a pre-planned model answer about an entirely different topic.

The vast majority of candidates used at least two poems – although a minority used so many that their answers disintegrated into a list. Finally, it must be borne in mind that both poetry set texts for this unit are collections, not anthologies. Some students used these terms interchangeably, thus signalling their failure to understand that poets plan, design and structure their books 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 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

This question was by far the more popular and usually elicited relevant debate – although some weaker students seemed to assume that the two possible aims stated were identical. The best answers saw the significance of Duffy’s replacing the four evangelists with her brothers as implied ‘listeners’ and engaged well with the idea of women’s stories needing to be shared among both genders. A range of relevant ideas were covered, such as the absence/powerlessness of women across time, explicit and implicit didactic and empowering references, poems that may be seen to unite and celebrate male-female relationships, references to men real or imagined, and to methods, themes and ideas that might be seen to appeal to them, such as the use of humour or sporting, cultural and musical references. Expressions of affection, good will and respect towards men were also noted. Other students argued strongly that as Duffy’s work foregrounds the female experience and can be critical of men, it may alienate them from women as opposed to uniting them. Both approaches were equally valid.

#### Question 2

While a small minority of students seemed very unsure of the sequencing of Duffy’s poems and, signalled by the superficial level of their comments, had possibly never given it prior consideration, overall this question produced some very good answers. The best responses came from those who could appreciate the different tones of the three major divisions, demonstrate some sense of Duffy’s overarching structure and use this knowledge and understanding to write about interpretations of the collection’s design. Several good responses noted that even though the early poems in the collection are mainly ‘tall tales’ about women’s roles written from a woman’s point of view, ‘The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High’ is unique in its length and status as a mock-heroic

allegory for the rise of feminism and the last poems are mainly autobiographical and personal meditations, overall Duffy's key themes - love, gender, history and the changing roles and responsibilities of women – hold the collection together.

### **Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers**

#### **Question 3**

The best responses to this question evaluated Sheers' presentation of men shrewdly. Some chose to focus upon Sheers' portrayals of apparently aggressive and unpleasant men who may well be viewed negatively, or men in decline who may be seen as weak. Others analysed poems that present men positively, optimistically and/or sympathetically, or that show love and harmony between men and women, or that suggest men are more complex than the key words imply – perhaps as flawed individuals who nonetheless want to forge positive relationships. Others wrote about representations of men who may be seen as sensitive, brave, stoic and/or heroic. All approaches were welcomed when linked to an analysis of Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods.

#### **Question 4**

The two Sheers questions attracted virtually equal numbers of students and much strong writing was seen in response to this task. The methods by which Sheers explores separation in the collection, and the ways in which this theme may be seen to be linked to wisdom, understanding or acceptance as well as suffering, loneliness and even death, were often analysed with insight and interest. Responses were quite evenly divided on the statement and it was interesting to read the diversity of reasons given in support of views across the debate. Whatever the stance it was important to choose appropriate poems and to keep the question firmly in mind.

### **Section A Option 2: Drama Set Texts**

#### ***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams**

#### **Question 7**

*A Streetcar Named Desire* attracted far more students than *Top Girls* within the drama set text option. Interestingly, however, although this question was by far the more popular of the two, a surprising number of students showed little clear understanding of the nature and scope of the central concept of the American Dream. Weaker students struggled with this idea from the outset, tending to skirt round it in their opening paragraphs before moving into a recount of Blanche's downfall. Others simplified the notion to state that evidently the American Dream was something that everybody had – as ubiquitous and certain as death and taxes – before digressing to compare the play with the work of Fitzgerald and Steinbeck. Weaker students struggled with the idea of the play functioning as a 'hymn of praise' to the American Dream and were very divided about whether it could apply to Blanche. On the other hand, some outstandingly mature work was seen which looked at aspects of the text such as the traditional idea of the American Dream as a positive force of change and an aspirational goal, Stanley's role as a confident second-generation American determined to make his way in the world and the conflict between the genteel Old South in decline

and the thrusting post-war new America. Others argued persuasively that far from offering a 'hymn of praise', Williams finds much to question about the notion of the American Dream, and presents it as potentially negative and demeaning. Some very impressive answers contrasted the positive cultural connotations of the American Dream and the complete annihilation of Blanche's apparently moribund way of life.

### Question 8

Some very successful answers were seen here that looked at Eunice and Steve as typical inhabitants of the Quarter who add to Williams' portrayal of its turbulent vivacity. Most students noted the significance of Eunice's being the first person to greet Blanche upon her arrival and the irony of her first words, 'What's the matter, honey? Are you lost?' and saw how Eunice and Steve's volatile relationship may foreshadow the future of Stella and Stanley. Their behaviour on the Poker Night was often reviewed effectively - Eunice's outrage on Stella's behalf after Stanley's violence on the poker night and her offer of shelter and Steve's trying to sober Stanley up. Some very good work was also seen on Williams' presentation of Eunice's role in the final scene and the significance of Steve's having the play's crucial last line, 'This game is seven-card stud.'

### *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill

### Question 9

This was the more popular question on *Top Girls* and produced some very successful answers. Students seemed to relish debating the difficulties women faced when the play was first performed (and are still facing today) in breaking through the glass ceiling and often argued that since both then and now a man would not have faced the tough choices Marlene does, it seems unfair to blame her for the choices she makes within a biased system. Others worked well with readings of the presentation of powerful women like the fictional Marlene and the real-life Margaret Thatcher as positive role models – or, conversely, as deeply selfish and flawed individualists. Much effective writing was seen relating to Joyce and Angie, the 'victims' left in the wake of Marlene's rise, sometimes allied to an argument about the extent to which powerful women can be criticised as selfish careerists who do little to help other women. Some impressive answers dealt cogently with Churchill's socialist critique of Margaret Thatcher, Thatcherism and the capitalist model while never losing sight of the text as drama, not mere polemic.

### Question 10

Very few answers came in response to this question, but those seen tended to be very effective. Students looked at the fact that while the guests appear in Act One only and exist outside the play's contemporary 1980s setting, the presence of Marlene connects the dinner party scene closely with the rest of the action. Some very interesting responses reviewed the significance of the guests' stories as evidence of the ongoing struggle for women's rights in a variety of social, cultural and historical contexts and saw their struggles as central to Churchill's socialist and feminist dramatic concerns as expressed elsewhere in the play.

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**Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts*****Waterland* by Graham Swift****Question 13**

*Waterland* lost out hugely in the prose popularity stakes to *The Handmaid's Tale*, but the general level of the responses seen was very impressive. In looking at this text as about 'telling stories', very few students failed to engage with Swift's fascinating narrative methods – some in astonishing depth and detail. Tom Crick's job as a history teacher – one whose job is to 'tell stories' and make narrative sense of the past in order to understand the present and contemplate the future – was seen as of central importance by the vast majority of students and Swift's development of Tom's voice, and the text's subtle interleaving of past and present, were usually analysed with real skill and verve.

**Question 14**

This question, on the strange and unique figure of Martha Clay, was the least popular across the whole paper. Students might have chosen to focus upon Swift's presentation of Martha as an isolated, witch-like 'wise woman' who can be seen in some ways to represent a fairy-tale archetype, and hence one who is a suitably rich and unusual character to include in a postmodern text and her involvement with one of the novel's darkest secrets, or her possible function as a symbolic archetype, especially when set against other (more realistically drawn) characters.

***The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood****Question 15**

A lot of good answers were seen in response to this, by far the more popular Atwood question. While weaker candidates found it difficult to explain why the women were divided and tended to resort to a general description of the social structures within the Gileadean theocracy, others found many and varied aspects of the text to discuss. In support of the given view, profitable avenues explored included the presentation of women as hostile, jealous and antagonistic towards each other both personally and as members of different groups, and the ways in which the regime encourages women's division and separation. To contest the given view, students worked well when analysing the strong and supportive bond that develops between Offred and Ofglen, the longstanding friendship of Offred and Moira, the unity found among the members of Mayday, instances of unlikely alliances being forged between rivals like Offred and Serena Joy, and the trainee Handmaids whispering together in the dark at the Red Center, in defiance of the patrolling Aunts.

**Question 16**

The relatively few students who chose this question tended to write well about Janine, seeing how her weakness and conformity is significant within the world of the novel. Her satisfaction in fulfilling her core mission as a Handmaid and becoming pregnant was contrasted effectively with Moira's daring escape from the Red Center and the significance of her brainwashing was usually examined in some detail. Other key parts of Janine's story considered included the birth of baby Angela and



her ultimate descent into madness. The best answers made reference to the fact that Janine can be seen as exemplifying the horrors of totalitarian rule.

### Section B: Unseen Prose: Questions 5, 11, 17

Essential to success in this question is to have undertaken sufficient practice in unseen critical analysis and then to avoid extraneous references to other texts when instructed to write about the significance of the given theme ‘**in this extract**’. Whereas weaker responses to Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* tended to paraphrase the extract via a ‘narrative-with-text’ approach plus attendant feature-spotting, better responses engaged well with this modern text and found plenty to say about Wolfe’s subtle narrative methods. Most students seemed to identify with the protagonist’s feelings during her arrival at university and better answers were able to distinguish between Wolfe’s third person narrative stance and the manner in which the events were focalised through Charlotte herself. The minority of students who could not identify Wolfe’s narrative viewpoint were at a disadvantage from the outset, since correctly identifying this opened up the overall tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track if this core aspect of the text was misunderstood. There were a number of candidates who claimed *I Am Charlotte Simmons* had to be a post-modern text simply because it was published in 2004. Post-modernism is a style rather than a consequence of the march of time. Weaker students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to find and assert moral messages in Charlotte’s dilemma, give her advice on making friends, or make unsupported assumptions about her upbringing, the family’s financial situation or what might happen next. Better answers analysed Wolfe’s methods well, tracing aspects of the internal coherence and narrative arc of the extract such as the ways in which Charlotte’s initial pride turns to embarrassment; the use of ellipses to suggest her growing doubts; the shame she feels when overhearing the boys mock Daddy’s tattoo; Wolfe’s use of setting and location; the description of the clothing worn by Charlotte (who may fit in) and Momma and Daddy (who certainly won’t); the initial presentation of Dupont as a dream or fantasy being steadily undermined by a dawning mundane but worrying reality; Wolfe’s use of direct speech and representation of Daddy’s regional dialect set against the Standard American English used by Charlotte and the male students and the symbolism of the tattoo of the ‘mermaid blushing’ representing Charlotte.

### Section B: Questions 6, 12, 18

To connect texts successfully within the framework of this question, students need to remember that they have been instructed to compare and contrast the presentation of the given theme – in this case insecurity - across **two texts from different genres**. Sometimes even relatively strong candidates did not take full advantage of exploring these differences and the weakest responses almost always insisted, highly unconvincingly, that their comparative set texts dealt with the given theme of insecurity in ‘very similar’ ways. Yet when comparing any two of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, it is almost certainly more productive to acknowledge how **different** they are before going on to unpick and exploit those differences. There is little point in asserting that two texts are similar simply because they both deal with the same given theme – of course 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 content; the how rather than the what. Better candidates worked through thoughtfully developed links in terms of insecurity which focused on how the writers’ poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked. Weaker students tended to off-load preconceived ideas without successfully relating them to the given extract, with a few determinedly writing about ‘isolation’ – the theme to be found in the SAMs materials for this unit – rather than insecurity.



At worst, a vague contextual overlay was imposed onto the texts and not derived from them, with some students seeming to have lost sight of the fact that this examination is in English literature, not history, politics or the social sciences. Approaches which are purely thematic or stray into potted histories of various waves of feminism for example, are firmly discouraged. When exploring the comparative set texts in an open book examination, textual detail is crucial; in an English literature examination, what other than well-chosen aspects of authorial method can or should form the bedrock of any successful comparison? Moreover, students who wish to use linguistic terminology should ensure that they get the basics right; there were numerous confident identifications of a specific part of speech in which 'the adjective' was in fact a noun or adverb. The resultant display is not of knowledge and understanding but the exact opposite.

Yet overall, most students not only found other ways of focusing on insecurity without writing the word on every line but also maintained an eagle-eyed concentration on their chosen comparative texts. Hugely impressive comparative essays were seen that analysed, for example, how each text presented direct and indirect feelings of insecurity, fear or anger; the effects of insecurity due to contexts, settings and places; the psychological causes and effects of insecurity; insecurity as a result of gender, language, culture, religion, belief, attitude, class or age and/or the significance of insecurity within the text as a whole. The best answers here were an illuminating pleasure to read.

**Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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