
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern Times: literature post-1945
Report on the Examination

7712
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General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7711/1 and 7712/C, along with the mark schemes for those components.

It was evident from the marking of all three components that the historicist philosophy of the specification is positively embraced. 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 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.

The levels-of-response mark scheme has been designed so that the genuine inter-relatedness of assessment objectives can be respected and rewarded. Holistic marking enables responses to be considered as organic whole texts in themselves. Our mark scheme aims to encourage independent responses which are relevant, well-argued and supported by appropriate textual evidence, not limited by formulaic constraints.

All questions are framed to address all the assessment objectives. The advice to students is to concentrate on answering the question set and let the assessment objectives look after themselves. Because the quality of written expression is crucial in enabling literary skills, students should however continue to be mindful of how they answer the question too, of course.

Section A Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

This summer’s examination paper proved highly accessible to students. Only a very few rubric infringements were seen when compared with the 2017 series, and it was noted by many examiners that responses to the Section B unseen extract were particularly impressive and enthusiastic. A tiny minority of students made irrelevant comparative references to Shakespeare plays and other literature presumably studied for the Love through the Ages unit that could not shed any light on the post-1945 shared context examined here. In the vast majority of cases it was evident that schools and colleges had prepared their students very well for the demands of the paper.

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. A mantra for the examination is ‘answer the question’, it was a shame to see excellent knowledge and understanding misused where students answered an alternative question they *wished* 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. The vast majority remembered to use at least two poems – although a minority used so many that their answers disintegrated into a list.

Finally, it must be remembered that both the poetry set texts for this unit are collections, not anthologies. Some students used these terms interchangeably, signalling 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 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

The central premise of this question elicited some high quality responses that challenged the terms of the debate with gusto. The best answers looked at poems that seem to suggest that Duffy indeed presents women who can be seen as dangerous and destructive either to society or to themselves, while also acknowledging the extent to which Duffy presents women as loving nurturers, confident and humorous makers of their own destinies and/or brave adventurers. In terms of methods, the best answers looked at broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole. Less effective answers tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that were unconvincingly linked to the actual question set. Generically assertive and bland claims about commas, lists and/or enjambment 'speeding up' or 'slowing down' the pace of a poem should be discouraged. Locating the nub of the given view and assessing the extent to which it can be helpfully applied to the whole collection is a far more productive approach.

Question 2

This question produced some very good answers that acknowledged the fact that while many ostensibly lonely and isolated women may be seen within the collection, given that the title *Feminine Gospels* seems to imply empowerment and change, this view is worthy of interrogation. Less able students tended to 'go through' poems such as 'History', 'Tall' and 'Loud' in an apparent attempt to list and prove just how far the female protagonists were indeed lonely and isolated. Those answers which failed to acknowledge the existence of poems that serve to show women as united, powerful and acting together tended to show a limited awareness of the whole collection. Better answers considered the extent to which an apparently isolated character need not be marginalised, noting that while 'The Long Queen' may be alone in her tower, she still delights in and is very much connected to her women subjects; that 'Anon' triumphs in the end, passes on the 'baton' and gets her poetry out into the world; and that 'Sub' not only wins the World Cup, but is carried shoulder-high in triumph by 'the lads'.

***Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers**

Question 3

The best responses to this, the less popular Sheers question, evaluated the poet's presentation of continuity and change very shrewdly. Some chose to focus upon poems that appear to be primarily concerned with continuity such as 'Y Gaer', 'Skirrid Hill', 'Farther' and 'The Farrier' and contrasted these with others seemingly primarily concerned with change such as 'The Steelworks' and 'Border Country'. Some very good responses discussed poems that may suggest aspects of continuity *and* change, such as 'Liable to Floods', 'Winter Swans', 'Mametz Wood', 'Flag' and 'Skirrid Fawr'. All approaches were welcomed when linked to an analysis of Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods.

Question 4

This was by far the more popular Sheers question and resulted in some particularly interesting, perceptive and well-structured answers. The methods by which Sheers explores poems that present primarily painful aspects of the relationships between men and women such as 'Drinking with Hitler' and 'Marking Time' – an especially apposite poem, given its mention of a physically painful scarring process – were analysed intelligently and with enthusiasm. Most students also chose to write about a poem that seems to offer an insight into contrastingly pleasurable aspects of the relationships between men and women, or analysed Sheers' presentation of the subtle and complex mixture of pain and pleasure found in, for example, in 'Valentine', 'Night Windows', 'Show', 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two' and 'Winter Swans'.

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, although question 7 was by far the less popular, it tended to produce higher-quality responses than Question 8. Many students showed an extremely impressive understanding of the significance of Belle Reve. Better answers saw the DuBois ancestral home both as emblematic of a faded 'Old South' plantation culture built on racism and exploitation, and as a symbolic signifier for Blanche herself. The contrast between the 'lost' Belle Reve and the vibrant immediacy of working class New Orleans was addressed with insight. Some excellent answers framed Belle Reve and Elysian Fields as settings symbolic of the fundamental disconnect between the genteel Old South in decline and the thrusting post-war new America. The best answers were able to contextualise Williams' presentation of Belle Reve within the Southern Gothic genre, and to explore the significance of its loss as a reflection of the annihilation of not just the DuBois family but also an entirely moribund way of life.

Question 8

Some very successful answers were seen here that acknowledged Blanche's irritating airs and graces while setting her arch mannerisms within the context of her role of the fading Southern belle and acknowledging how responses to her in 1947 and now may differ greatly. The best answers were able to draw on a knowledge and understanding of the tragic genre, looking at how Blanche's eventual inevitable downfall at the hands of her antagonist, Stanley, may be seen to evoke 'pity and terror'. Less effective answers that did not respond to the notion of the 'tragic heroine' and read as if this key technical term could be applied to an unlucky character to whom bad, sad things happen did not address the significant technical and generic aspects implied by the given view.

Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill*Question 9**

Very few students who wrote about *Top Girls* chose this question. Those who did tended to write well about the play's implicit criticisms of Thatcher, Thatcherism and the capitalist model of powerful women and saw Churchill's presentation of the difficulties women faced when the play was first performed as still very relevant today, given the apparent enduring robustness of the proverbial glass ceiling. The best answers, of course, never lost sight of the text as drama, not mere polemic.

Question 10

This was the more popular *Top Girls* question, and the answers seen tended to be very effective. Better responses often discussed how Marlene and Joyce are used to symbolise the great

political and cultural debate of the 1980s, with Marlene espousing classically Thatcherite views about the primacy of the individual and Joyce taking a socialist perspective, defending the traditional working class. Some particularly strong writing was seen about the ways in which the sisters' personal story connects with those of the office-based women and the dinner party guests.

Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts

***Waterland* by Graham Swift**

Question 13

Once again *Waterland* lost out to *The Handmaid's Tale*, appearing far more frequently within the Section B comparative question than as a stand-alone text. Of the small number of answers seen in response to this question, the general level was impressive. Better students wrote effectively about how Tom's and Mary's youthful relationship became sexual, and how their behaviour can be interpreted. Some mentioned Tom Crick's student, Price, so cynical about the future that he has formed a 'Holocaust Club', and noted how he seems to have grown up far more quickly than Crick did forty years before. As so often with this text, Swift's development of Crick's narrative voice, and the text's subtle interleaving of past and present, were analysed with real skill and verve.

Question 14

This question invited students to write about the presentation of suffering and horror within a text that contains many lyrical and beautiful descriptions and a range of rich and unusual narrative effects that may be seen to contrast with much of the gothic nightmares that feature elsewhere in the text. Again, most students who chose to write about this text tended to analyse Swift's narrative methods very effectively.

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

Question 15

A lot of good answers were seen in response to this popular Atwood question, which focused on the writer's complex presentation of the Commander. Less able students tended to dismiss the Commander's suffering as negligible before digressing away from the central premise of the question to explain why the female characters were in fact the only ones with any legitimate claim to the reader's sympathy. Better answers explored Atwood's presentation of the Commander as a rather mild-mannered and thoughtful man who struggles to abide by the rules of the regime. Good writing was seen on the Commander's debates with Offred about the situation in Gilead and the apparent revelation in the Historical Notes of his eventual arrest 'for harbouring liberal tendencies'. The best students saw the significance of the Commander's role in setting up the Gileadean system as a member of the 'Sons of Jacob Think-Tank', his sexual exploitation of the Jezebels, his betrayal of Serena Joy and his willingness to put Offred in danger through their illicit affair.

Question 16

The students who chose this question tended to write well about rebellion through exploring Atwood's presentation of characters such as Moira, Ofglen and Nick as well as through examining Offred's own acts of rebellion, both internal and external. Better answers also considered the significance of rebellion as shown in the subversive behaviour of Serena Joy, who goes behind the Commander's back to set up Offred and Nick, or the Commander himself, who disobeys the rules of the regime he helped to establish. The small minority of students who asserted that rebellion was 'insignificant' in so far as it is apparently ineffective for much of the novel demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what 'significance' means in the context of an examination question such as this. The term is not merely a synonym for 'importance' or 'success', but an

invitation for the student to set up their own agenda for debating how, where and why the given topic sheds light on the overarching concerns of the text.

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

Essential to success in this question is for students 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 less effective responses to Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* tended to paraphrase the extract via a ‘narrative-with-text’ approach plus attendant feature-spotting, better responses engaged enthusiastically and skilfully with this modern text and found plenty of illuminating things to say about Smith’s narrative methods. Better answers distinguished between her third person narrative stance and the manner in which the events were focalised through the character of Samad most of the time, but also through Magid and Archie.

The minority of students who were unable to identify Smith’s narrative viewpoint were at a disadvantage from the outset, since correctly identifying this opened up the overall balanced and sympathetic tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track if this core aspect of the text was misunderstood. Less able students with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert moral messages with regard to the Iqbals’ dilemma, giving this fictional family advice about how to avoid future conflict. Lecturing Samad on child-rearing in modern Britain, chastising Magid for ingratitude and exhorting Alsana to stand up for herself were approaches that signalled a limited awareness of the parameters and practices of unseen literary criticism. Better answers analysed Smith’s methods well and traced aspects of the extract’s internal cohesion and narrative arc with flair and insight. Many students wrote well about aspects of the text such as Magid’s adoption of the name ‘Mark Smith’, the use of comedy, irony, hyperbole and typography to depict conflict, as well as the importance of the flashback section that reveals the deep-seated nature of Magid’s alienation from his own cultural context and the English middle-class alternatives he yearns for.

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 conflict - 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 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* – all the comparative set texts must do so, or the question could never 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 conflict which focused on how the writers’ poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked. Less able students tended to off-load preconceived ideas without successfully relating them to the given extract. A few defaulted to recycling essays they had presumably written in class about ‘isolation’ – the theme to be found in the SAMs materials for this unit – or ‘insecurity’ – which featured in the 2017 paper. Retooling second-hand ideas under examination conditions is never likely to produce a strong answer that successfully addresses the new topic.

At times a bolted-on contextual overlay swamped the chosen texts, with a tiny minority of 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 not helpful.

When exploring their comparative set texts in an open book examination, textual detail is crucial. 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. On the whole, however, many excellent comparative essays were seen that analysed, for example, how each text presented direct and indirect feelings of conflict; the effects of conflict due to contexts, settings and places; the psychological causes and effects of conflict; conflict due to a clash of culture, religion, belief, attitude, class or age and/or the significance of conflict within the text as a whole. The best answers here were outstanding.

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.