
A-Level English Literature

NEA Independent Critical Study: Texts across Time
Report on the Examination

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Introduction

This summer saw the second Non Exam Assessment (NEA) submission for this specification, and it was clear that progress has been made across all areas of the component. Moderators commented on the number of folders that were ‘knowledgeable, imaginative and thoroughly engaged with the texts’. Administration was in general very sound; bibliographies and academic referencing were consistently provided, and there was frequent evidence of productive internal moderation. It was pleasing to see that a much wider range of texts had been studied this year.

However, there are some areas where further improvement is needed in some centres. These areas will be identified later in this report, and will necessitate some repetition of previous advice.

The title of this component is ‘Independent Critical Study’; students should submit work which is the product of a genuinely individual study of the two texts. The most impressive submissions emerged when the students were able to offer readings based on a productive connection between the two texts, and which delivered an understanding that texts can be interpreted in significantly different ways.

Assessment

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all students. Understandably, therefore, the marks of some centres required adjustment. The most usual reason for these adjustments was that students produced work which – in terms of the marks awarded by the centre – matched neither the assessment criteria nor the standards suggested by the autumn standardising materials. It was often the case that when centres made comparative reference to these materials their final marking was shown to be more accurate. There was some pleasing evidence of internal moderation, but also occasions when the process of moderation seemed to consistently but unjustifiably inflate marks.

Centres are reminded that Teacher Online Standardisation (T-OLS) can be accessed through the e-AQA section of the AQA website.

Historicism

AQA English Literature Specification A is interested in a historical approach, as signalled in this component by the title ‘texts across time’. The objective of a historicist reading is to show how the time when a text is written will have an impact on its ideas, and the time when it is read will influence how it is received. Students are therefore encouraged to consider the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they are written, received and understood.

It must be stressed that the purpose of this consideration is to open up ways of exploring different readings of literary texts. These texts should not be used as documents whose primary purpose is to illustrate the nature of life during a particular period of history. Such approaches also tend to deliver description rather than interpretation. It is also worth emphasising that – for instance – a feminist reading of literature does not in itself necessarily offer a historicist approach. This is especially so if the general argument is that nothing has changed over the years in terms of women’s subjugation.

In this NEA component, students can demonstrate their understanding of historicism in two ways: one, through a diachronic approach, is to study two texts – at least one of which must be pre-twentieth century – separated by a significant period of time; the second is to take a synchronic approach whereby both texts are from the same time period, which must be pre-twentieth century.

The Assessment Objectives and English Literature A

When choosing texts and setting tasks, it is important that centres and students consider whether their choices will allow them to address all the assessment objectives.

AO5

This specification sees the starting point for literary discussion as being a literary and critical debate based on an understanding of the significance of contexts. This sort of discussion is at the heart of AO5. Where tasks were not clearly framed around AO5, students often struggled to construct a coherent and well-shaped argument.

AO5 encourages an understanding that meanings in literary texts are not fixed, and that multiple readings are possible. As will be illustrated later in this report, not all tasks clearly enabled students to explore this idea. Interpretations of a text can be generated through discussion, through reference to a given critical view, or through reference to critical theory, although this last route needs to be used with discretion. Some wide definitions of feminism were encountered, to the extent that any writer who wrote about women was automatically represented as a feminist. Critical views need to be used with discretion: although many students had collected critical comments about their selected texts, relatively few challenged them or modified them by testing them against textual detail.

As was the case last year, moderators encountered bolted-on assertions about what a feminist or Marxist would say about a text, without any clear connection being made to the candidate's own line of argument. Cautious and reflective criticism works better than over-confident statements. 'It could be argued that . . . ' is a more promising opening to a debate around readings than 'all nineteenth century writers agree that . . . '.

An important distinction again needs to be made when considering different interpretations of texts. Comparing the different ways in which two different texts use similar material is not the same thing as considering the various ways in which an individual text can be read and interpreted. Some examples of the former approach delivered responses which were descriptive rather than discursive and were often dominated by a focus on the content of the text.

Several students made good use of the concept of 'significance', an important term in this specification. It derives from semiotics and involves weighing up all the potential contributions to how a text can be analysed. It can be used to provide access to all the AOs, including the opportunity to debate meanings. For instance, considering the significance of the city of London as presented in two novels by Dickens and Conrad, would allow exploration of the different ways in which the authors represented their fictional worlds and what different readings emerged. If students use the term 'significance' it is very important that they understand its purpose. Some responses this summer took 'significance of' to mean no more than 'importance of'.

AO4

Interpretations should be seen as naturally deriving from the connections established between the two selected texts. The most effective comparisons were carefully interwoven and prioritised significant distinctions between the texts rather than forced comparisons. In some cases, the search for similarities in terms of the content of the texts forced the response down a descriptive blind alley where sociological or psychological issues swamped any sense of a literary study.

There needs to be an awareness that the chosen connections are productive in the sense that readings of the texts are enabled in ways that would not otherwise be possible. The exploration of literary connections between texts often proved very productive. Many students established very effective links through treatment of elements of genre. Tasks which invited a focus on themes worked less well when they encouraged generalisation and a tendency to view characters as real people rather than as literary constructs.

There is no requirement to make references to texts other than the two main texts selected for comparison. At times such references to 'wider reading' seemed to have little purpose other than to display a sort of literary name-dropping, and proved a distraction from the main discussion.

AO3

Contextual material works best when it arises naturally from a consideration of the text and is clearly being used in service of the task. AO3 and AO5 should be thought of as working closely together.

Less effective work this summer contained bolted-on material that got in the way of the students' treatment of the texts and the central argument of the essay. Such material was often used to open the essay – not the ideal place to insert such material. When references are made to historical periods, it is expected that they will be precise. Some students seemed to have a very vague idea of what the term 'Victorian' means, often applying it without discrimination to the whole of the nineteenth century and not acknowledging that any significant changes occurred during that time. The same note of caution also applies to 'The American Dream' – a far more complex concept than most students acknowledged.

Biographical material was often poorly used, particularly when a form of 'biographical fallacy' emerged whereby authors' intentions were over-confidently asserted, and readings of a text became dominated by superficial connections with the author's life.

Discriminating exploration of features of genre can often be a very productive way of using contextual material to deliver literary readings. Focus on genre worked less well when students drifted into all-purpose surveys of literary movements such as the Gothic or Romantic, and treatment of the texts collapsed into feature-spotting.

The best students were selective in their use of contexts, paid due attention to the crucial context of time, and established meaningful connections between those contexts and interpretations of the texts studied.

AO2

The best responses to this assessment objective demonstrated understanding of voice, form and structure. Those which confined themselves to a listing of lexical features achieved relatively little.

Moderators reported that students often had comparatively little to say about the writers' methods. This was particularly the case when the task involved connecting two texts from different literary genres, but the response paid very little attention to poetic form, dramatic method or narrative technique.

In less effective work, fictional worlds were at times described as if real. Treatment of method amounted to little more than simplistic comments on reader response: 'this word makes the reader feel . . .', and straightforward definitions: 'this phrase means that . . .'. Plays were treated as if prose narratives, poems as nothing more than historical documents.

It is important for students to recognise that references to method need to be integrated into the argument. Features of literary technique do not operate in isolation; they need to be connected to aspects of the wider text and the general proposition being advanced.

AO1

Much work seen this summer was well organised, clearly argued and accurately expressed. At times, however, there was little evidence that centres had taken AO1 into account when arriving at their final assessments. Of all the assessment objectives, AO1 caused moderators most concern.

When students used literary terminology with confidence and accuracy, their work benefited. When they had at best limited grasp of the meaning of the selected terms, they tended to draw attention to the limitations of their understanding. There were many unreliable references to unreliable narrators; the term 'pathetic fallacy' was routinely extended to cover any reference to weather conditions within the text.

Many moderators commented that proof-reading had frequently been ineffective, at times to the degree where even names of authors and the base texts had been routinely misspelt. Titles of texts were frequently unmarked. Quotations were not always accurate; many had been arbitrarily inserted into essays which were rambling and lacked direction. Successful students incorporated the quotations into their analysis and where appropriate indicated exactly where the quotation occurred within the text – often central to its relevance.

The construction of a 2500 word argument requires skill and care, and students had not always paid attention to the necessary techniques involved.

Texts

The appropriateness of any textual choice is dependent on the other text to which it is connected and the accompanying task. Students had clearly selected their own pairs of texts, and this approach often delivered fresh and lively responses that suggested a high degree of personal engagement. It was very pleasing to see how many centres had clearly encouraged their students to explore the very wide opportunities for text choice in this component.

Some centres taught a core text and allowed their students to select a second text from a set of 'satellite' texts. This approach worked when the connections established did not seem forced and involved something more than similarities in content. The choice of the core text is clearly very important here. Some texts proved very limited in the opportunities they offered, and this had an adverse effect on treatment of the second texts.

It should also be emphasised that the list of texts offered in the specification as suggestions for NEA use are only 'recommended' as possible choices for centres new to this component. They are not in any way a set text list, and the choice of any individual text from the list must not be seen as a guarantee of success. Centres should have the confidence to select texts based on their assessment of what is in their students' best interests.

A careful judgement should also be made as to whether the selected texts provide clear opportunities for the students to address all the assessment objectives. Will they, for instance, encourage engagement with authorial method (AO2), or offer opportunities to explore different interpretations (AO5)? Texts which seem superficially attractive to students may prove to be lacking in the depth and complexity necessary for detailed literary analysis.

There were several examples of centres choosing inappropriate or ineligible texts, either those which operate as set texts elsewhere in the specification, or those which as single short poems or short stories did not fulfil the text requirement for this component.

Centres are reminded that set texts from 'Love through the ages' or 'Texts in shared contexts' cannot be used for non-exam assessment (see page 21 of the specification). None of the texts from set text lists are acceptable for use in non-exam assessment. This is a requirement regardless of whether students have studied the set text for examination purposes or not.

In this year's submission, novels dominated. Tennyson, Blake, Chaucer, Duffy and Rossetti made fleeting appearances. There was a fairly narrow range of plays selected. By far the most common choice was *A Doll's House*, often linked with *The Bell Jar*, and almost always explored in connection with some aspect of the subordination of women. When plays or poetry were selected, students did not always take the opportunity to explore relevant aspects of literary genre.

Less effective choices included young adult or children's books. Although literary analysis of such texts is obviously possible, the evidence suggested that students found it difficult to use these works to successfully deliver all the assessment objectives. While interesting contextual points can be made about texts such as *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Railway Children* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, they proved insubstantial when set against the more complex narratives in other examples of 'child's eye' literature such as *Great Expectations* and *The Kite Runner*. There was also some evidence of what were once GCSE texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* which tended to draw attention to their own limitations.

Moderators again reported widespread use of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Most centres continued to focus on the single short story rather than the similarly titled collection of which it forms a part. For the avoidance of doubt, and to reinforce the message of last year's report, the expectation is that the short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' will not be used on its own, but as part of the collection of short stories published under that general title (e.g. the Penguin edition).

Moderators' experiences in term of text choice were very varied. While some moderators are still experiencing a narrow range of texts, others commented on the range of texts being studied. It is to be hoped that centres will continue to broaden the choices available to their students.

Tasks

The three units in this specification emphasise particular approaches to the study of literature. If centres set tasks that offer meaningful opportunities to respond to all five assessment objectives, they will not only be increasing their students' chances of success, but also reinforcing good practices that will benefit responses to the two written units.

As with the possible text list, the list of themes identified in the specification as possible subjects for comparative study are only suggestions, offered as a starting point for centres during the early stages of this specification. Centres are not limited to these suggestions in any way. At times, students who chose one of these themes for study seemed uncomfortable with the selected topic and might have benefited from a wholly original choice, derived from wider discussions between the student and the centre.

Many centres again used the task format of a quotation followed by a 'compare and contrast' formula. This format is often helpful, but is in no way obligatory. When there was a productive relationship between the quotation and what followed it worked well, but this was not always the case. In these cases, the student was unable to use the quotation to deliver any meaningful interpretation of the texts. Less able students often made no reference to the quotations altogether.

The externally examined papers place considerable emphasis on the importance of students attending to the precise wording of the set questions. Those who shape their answers judiciously and consistently in response to the debates set up in the questions are likely to do well. Consistently relevant and coherent arguments are no less important in NEA submissions. These skills were inevitably less in evidence when the tasks themselves offered very little opportunity to debate. Both in the externally examined papers and in coursework submissions, it is important that students focus carefully on the precise requirements of the tasks. There were instances where students seemed to pay only cursory attention to what the task required.

Centres are reminded they can contact their NEA advisers if they would like assistance with wording of tasks. Please contact english-gce@aqg.org.uk if you require your centres NEA adviser contact details.

Word Counts

The specification clearly states that the word count for work in this unit is 2500 words. Quotations are not included in this figure. Some students seemed to believe that word counts operate within a 10% tolerance. No such tolerance operates. It is expected that every piece of work will be accompanied by an accurate word count. Some students provided two word counts: one including quotations, and another indicating the total once quotations had been deducted. This was particularly useful.

While there is no automatic penalty for exceeding the word count, we expect students to work within this figure. It must be stressed that students can gain no possible advantage from exceeding this total, and indeed such excess is often self-penalising. Centres must stress this fact to their students.

The majority had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits and the students' work benefited as a result.

Marking, Annotation and Administration

Marking and Annotation

Many moderators commented on the correlation between effective centre annotation and accurate application of the assessment criteria. The most valuable centre comments were again those which offered an honest assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

Summative comments are an important method of conveying centres' overall judgements. These judgements are best conveyed through the teacher's own words, but with appropriate and selective reference to the criteria. When the marking criteria were simply copied out and certain areas highlighted, relatively little was conveyed to the moderator.

Annotation which assists the moderation process will:

- occur throughout the work
- include detailed summative comments
- show awareness that the final audience for the work is the moderator and shape comments accordingly
- only use ticking within the scripts which has a clear purpose
- avoid underlining sections of the scripts
- indicate the degree to which and in what ways the assessment objectives have been addressed. To merely identify different assessment objectives is of very limited value. Simply putting 'AO2' in the margin, for instance, could justify a variety of marks.
- ensure that the summative comment makes sense in terms of the final mark awarded. There were some examples this summer when it was difficult to see the connection between the two.

Administration

The presentation of scripts matters, as does adherence to deadlines. There was much evidence this summer of excellent administrative practice.

Work can be moderated more efficiently if schools:

- secure scripts with treasury tags rather than paper clips or plastic wallets. Staples tend to unfasten.
- ensure that bibliographies (including the edition of the texts), an appropriately academic form of referencing, and accurate word counts are provided.
- present the folders in the sample in descending rank order.
- adhere to deadline dates. The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15th or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres to submit to AQA, not for students to submit to centres.

Conclusion

The evidence of this summer's submission is that much has been achieved during the last year. The best work seen offered a maturity, perception and independence that was deeply impressive and often remarkable at this stage of the students' academic careers.

While examination reports inevitably have to spend time identifying areas for possible improvement, centres should be congratulated on the very high quality of much of the work seen this summer.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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