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AS

# ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 1 Shakespeare and poetry  
Report on the Examination

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7711/1  
2018

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## General

This report should be read in conjunction with the report on 7711/2 and the mark schemes for these components. It was evident from the marking of Component 1 that the historicist philosophy of the specification, using the shared context of love through the ages, continues to be positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. 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 to produce work with a clear, authentic voice. The holistic use of assessment objectives allows for a flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage independent work which is 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 then the assessment objectives will be delivered.

More successful answers on these components:

- answer the question directly and explicitly
- make detailed use of the reprinted extract/poem, where there is one, taking into account the whole
- engage with the given interpretative view
- make appropriate detailed reference to methods and make use of relevant contexts
- demonstrate an understanding of how the extract/poem fits into the shared context of the literature of love through the ages

Less successful answers:

- ‘bolt on’ contextual knowledge rather than finding relevant contextual references within the text and task
- balance the given view with a counter-argument out of a sense of obligation rather than authentic conviction
- make explicit connections to other texts out of a sense of obligation rather than to illuminate meaning

- assert erroneous sweeping statements about historical context
- identify grammatical features such as punctuation and/or literary features such as aspects of verse form like enjambement, and either treat these descriptions as ends in themselves unrelated to meaning or make unconvincing claims for the effects of these features, without explanation.

Overall, students were well prepared for the academic and practical demands of the papers and the papers made reasonable expectations of students.

### **7711/1 Shakespeare and poetry**

Examiners again reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of this closed book examination. In both sections an extract that is reproduced on the examination paper is considered closely in the light of a critical interpretation. Close reading is an obvious discriminator when assessing the Shakespeare extract in Section A, likewise the poem in Section B. At the same time, the questions enable students to set the texts in the context of the literature of love through the ages. There were many engaged responses reflecting thorough study of the chosen Shakespeare play and the chosen poetry anthology. Although some schools appear to have spent considerably more time teaching Shakespeare than the chosen poetry anthology, over the past two years since the inception of the Specification, the gap in attainment has narrowed. However, schools still need to ensure that students are equally well prepared for the two sections that are, of course, worth the same marks.

Examiners noted that there were fewer examples of artificial and obligatory links to other texts. This helped to improve the authenticity of responses and avoided the risk of drifting away from the question and into irrelevance. There was evidence that discussing typicality is becoming recognised as a more effective way of demonstrating relevant literary connections. However, rather than focusing on literary typicality within the shared context of love through the ages, some students tried to make observations about social and political typicality. It is more in keeping with historicist approaches to the study of English Literature to address literary typicality.

### **Section A Shakespeare**

Students have a choice here in terms of negotiating the two bullets that make up the question: looking at them separately or in an integrated fashion. The advantage of the former is that it lessens the danger of neglecting the generic first bullet about the presentation of love in favour of

the critical interpretation that forms the basis of the second bullet. Integrated approaches were often seen working successfully, however, paying roughly equal attention to both bullets. On the second bullet it is important that students focus on its key words in order to shape the selection of material and the structure of the argument or arguments put forward. Whatever their approach students should make sure that both bullets are adequately addressed.

Examiners are encouraged to accept different approaches to the two bullets and to reference the wider play, so long as the key command words of 'how' and 'examine' are given due attention. 'How' encourages students to engage above all with dramatic methods; 'examine' directs students to look closely at the re-printed extract as their main priority. Students were often well-prepared to reference 'elsewhere in the play' and such cross-references were often to relevant and well-chosen sections. At best this was done with precision, with a view to the structure of the play and with support from detailed reference and/or quotation, despite the closed book conditions. There was a minority of responses that either ignored the extract or ignored 'elsewhere in the play'. In some answers, the extract was not explored fully and analysis of Shakespeare's methods remained underdeveloped, when it could have helped answer the question.

Genre awareness is always a discriminator, but it is often most noticeable when students can consider play texts as drama. Relevant references to specific productions and the history of a play's staging can be illuminating. However, when looking closely at dramatic/poetic methods, some students ascribed more significance than was justified to punctuation and/or aspects of verse form such as enjambement. Punctuation or enjambment, for example, might be starting points or part of a larger discussion about methods as a means of conveying meaning, but they should not be a primary focus in themselves.

When referring to historical context, more accurate students realised that 'Elizabethan' is appropriate for *The Taming of the Shrew* but 'Jacobean' is a more appropriate and useful context for the other three plays. However, examiners recognise that Elizabethan values and social structures prevailed into the Jacobean period. Knowledge about historical context is best applied to make precise and specific observations that might be relevant and that might illuminate the question, rather than being applied in unhelpful, sweeping statements. There is still a tendency for some students to make sweeping comments about the role of women in Elizabethan or Jacobean society. For example, when discussing patriarchal attitudes, it is not true to say that all women of the time would be treated in the same way and have a comparable quality of life.

When it comes to the critical context it seems that there were two clear approaches. Firstly, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism could sharpen a response if applied very specifically to one aspect of the play or question. However, when each of the stances was rehearsed by mechanical rote then the discussion became generalised and was at the expense of looking closely at the extract and the wider play. Secondly, as was the case last year, named critics were used which often proved to be helpful in shaping a response to the given view.

**More successful Shakespeare answers:**

- looked at the whole extract in detail with relevant reference to the presentation of aspects of love and the key words of the given view
- gave due weight to both bullets
- sustained focus on Shakespeare as a dramatist and his dramatic and poetic methods
- explored interpretation, i.e. agreed with, disagreed with or debated the given view
- considered 'elsewhere in the play' by selecting relevant detailed references
- made considered and accurate use of contexts
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of Love

**Less successful Shakespeare answers:**

- made sparse or only partial use of the extract
- neglected either the presentation of love or the critical interpretation
- wrote about the characters as though they were real people
- made little or no reference to Shakespeare or his dramatic/poetic methods
- neglected 'elsewhere' or referred to it in general or in sweeping terms
- made inaccurate or sweeping assertions about context.

**Question 1 *Othello***

*Othello* continues to be by far the most popular text and there was ready engagement with the idea of Othello as a victim, arguing both for and against the label. The extract was from a crucial climactic moment in the play, and most students had no difficulty in recognising its significance. The dramatic intensity of the scene owes much to the physical setting and what has just taken place, so there was much to discuss in terms of dramatic methods. There was discussion of how and to what extent Shakespeare creates pathos for Othello through the presentation of other key figures in the play being present on stage to witness and contribute to an exposition of Iago's machinations. Gratiano, Lodovico and Cassio have important functions to perform to ensure the

continuity of Venetian rule in Cyprus, but arguably there is also a partial restitution of Othello's reputation in their expressions of shock, outrage and implied sympathy for Othello that accompany the exposé of Iago.

Students noted the ironies surrounding Othello's initial instruction to Lodovico and Iago's resulting vow of silence. One popular interpretation in support of the given view was that the audience realise the extent of Othello's loss and feel enormous sympathy for him as a victim. It was common at this point to quote Bradley's view that Othello is a tragic romantic. Alternative views made reference to Leavis's opinion that Othello is a narcissist whose final speech is self-serving and self-dramatising. The speech, beginning 'Soft you...', was examined closely. Students were keen to discuss the re-emergence of Othello's lyrical and elaborate style of speech. Features such as talking about himself in the third person and the use of exotic and military imagery were often carefully considered.

While opinions on Othello as a victim remained divided, some took the view that Desdemona is the true victim. The wider play tended to be covered by references to earlier scenes from the courtship of Othello and Desdemona, and key points in Othello's decline. As far as the two bullets are concerned, this question proved a case in point. It was possible to respond to the second bullet without reference to the presentation of love, so some students who only engaged with the second bullet missed out on half the question. On the other hand, many focused on the second bullet and integrated attention to the first by looking at Othello's love for Desdemona as the background to and premise for his deception by Iago. There was a tendency to read 'Iago hurt him/Iago set him on' as a reference to Othello when it is, in fact, a reference to Roderigo. Care with close reading is important.

## **Question 2 *The Taming of the Shrew***

*The Taming of the Shrew* is also a popular text and this question was often answered well. The extract is from a scene that has much dramatic appeal and one that is key to the taming process. At this point in the text, Petruchio and Grumio have been elaborately described and now they appear with farcical results. Perhaps because this is the prelude to the wedding of Petruchio and Katherina, the two bullets were often handled together and those that concentrated on the second still had plenty of opportunity to discuss the first. Many students enjoyed unpicking the ironies of Petruchio's pretence that nothing about him is out of the ordinary when he is in conversation with Baptista, Biondello and Tranio. There were some who agreed with the given view and made the case for a ridiculous fool being part of his persona that he takes great delight in fostering. It was more typical to take up a counter-argument and point out that rather than being a ridiculous fool,

Petruchio is a cunning, clever character intent on the pursuit of his plot to 'wive it wealthily'. The wider play was referenced by allusions to Petruchio's confessional speeches throughout the play, to taming scenes after the wedding and to his final apparent victory.

### **Question 3 *Measure for Measure***

This was the least popular text but when it was handled well students progressed beyond simply wanting to explain the complexities of the deception plots. The extract was from a turning point scene where the bed-trick begins to be revealed, along with its impact on the different narrative strands of the play. Students were able to focus on the presentation of Mariana and her shift from passive, isolated victim to proactive agent of justice and her own destiny by balancing her role as Isabella's accomplice and Angelo's 'wife'. The dramatic intensity of the scene owes much to the lifting of Mariana's veil and to her prostrate kneeling position. Most agreed with the given view but some argued that her ultimate role as wife automatically relegates her to a submissive role within the patriarchy. There was discussion of dramatic irony with Mariana's veil disguise echoing the disguise of the Duke.

Successful responses looked at the ways in which Mariana's language changes from riddle-like conversation before the veil is lifted to the confident truth-telling afterwards. Once unveiled she wants to expose Angelo but also to reason with him so as to resume their relationship. When referring to elsewhere in the play, students tended to cite Mariana's role in the final denouement later in Act 5.

### **Question 4 *The Winter's Tale***

Although this is another less popular text it was often handled very well indeed. The extract features one of several intense confrontations between Leontes and Paulina. The conflict is heightened by the presence of both Perdita as a baby and Antigonus. More successful responses noted the roles of both these characters in the extract and also considered how the scene as a whole might be presented on stage. As well as Leontes' use of insults against Paulina, students focused in particular on Paulina's speeches beginning 'Nor I, nor any...' and 'It is yours...'. These speeches summarise, in a highly rhetorical fashion, her case against him and make powerful use of Perdita's physical likeness to Leontes as a tool of persuasion. Many students readily agreed with the given view but there were also some well-argued responses that stressed Paulina's role as an



agent of positive change, bringing about Leontes' redemption. Arguments were supported by reference to similar confrontations between these two characters and by reference to the statue scene at the end of Act 5.

This was a question where care was needed to ensure appropriate reference to the first bullet. Some discussed the decline of the relationship between Leontes and Hermione underpinning the extract. Others looked at Leontes' lack of paternal love. Another approach was to see Paulina's method as one of platonic love for Leontes, setting him on the road to redemption.

## **Section B Poetry**

Students have a single poem to consider in this section and a single question stem. Again, in each question, the writer is named and 'presents' is used, and both should prompt candidates to look at texts as constructs. The methods prompted by 'examine' are, of course, poetic methods and it is important that named texts are treated as poems. More thoughtful responses looked closely at the narrative voice and did not simply accept the speaker as the poet writing autobiographically. However, in Question 5 there was a strong tendency to assume that Marvell was the speaker.

Students are free to explore what methods they think are relevant so there is no obligation to analyse features such as metre and rhyme. However, if students choose to explore these methods, they are obliged to be accurate as well as to explain how these methods support meaning and are relevant to the question. In a number of cases, there were inaccuracies such as incorrectly identified metrical patterns, voltas, rhyme schemes and so on.

More successful poetry answers:

- looked at the whole poem with the interpretation in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details
- analysed the poet's methods by linking them to meaning, often in a tentative fashion
- analysed the presentation of the speaker as a construct
- applied context in a considered way
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love, and as far as poetic methods are concerned.

Less successful poetry answers:

- worked through the poem in a narrative/descriptive manner, often losing sight of the specific question and its key words
- left ideas undeveloped and unsupported
- asserted interpretations
- confused the speaker with the poet
- described methods with no reference to meaning or simply asserted a link to meaning
- labelled methods inaccurately
- made sweeping, simplistic and inaccurate statements about context
- gave undue weight to the significance of punctuation and/or features of verse form such as enjambement (sometimes asserting that an effect is entirely attributable to the use of these features, without explanation).

### **Question 5 AQA anthology of pre-1900 poetry ‘To His Coy Mistress’**

This anthology was the more popular of the two and examiners reported that this question proved engaging, as well as being a good discriminator. The question focused on the idea that the speaker is more interested in demonstrating intellect than declaring love. Sometimes ‘intellect’ was assumed simply to be knowledge of any kind. This rather unfocused definition led to a wide range of assertions being made about what the speaker knew about – geography, history, religion, seduction, Hull, India, death – and so on. Better responses understood that intellect might involve manipulation, rhetoric, syllogistic argument and poetic sophistication.

The majority were in support of the given view but some tried to argue that the speaker’s enthusiasm did profess love, however superficial and lustful it might be, and some insisted that the speaker does both. More successful approaches engaged with the structure of the poem and looked closely at the three phases of the speaker’s argument. It was very common to identify the reference to ‘My vegetable Love’ as a phallic image about sexual boasting, and this is common whenever this poem is discussed as part of the Specification. This is certainly a reading but it is not necessarily convincing when looked at in the context of the speaker’s overall argument and perhaps misses the speaker’s intention to make the kind of idealised love described as ultimately less appealing than his proposal in the third and final phase of the argument.

Exploration of the grave imagery was well handled on the whole and some began to detect the dark humour that underpins Marvell’s poem. Those who understood Marvell’s associations with the

Metaphysical school and with Cavalier poetry came closest to understanding the poem as a witty tour-de-force rather than an account of a particular love affair. It was common for students to identify the metre and the use of couplets. These observations were sometimes used as part of an exploration of meaning and Marvell's rhetorical and epigrammatical style, but they did not achieve much if just described as ends in themselves.

### **Question 6 AQA anthology of post-1900 love poetry 'Vergissmeinnicht'**

This anthology was less popular but still attempted by a significant number of students. The question proved particularly engaging for students and the ensuing discussions about futility clearly established students' abilities. Examiners read some thoughtful answers that carefully scrutinised the attitudes inherent in the poem and the poetic methods used. The question, like the poem, focused students' attention on what evidence there is of love signified by the photograph and its inscription.

Exploring the presentation of the setting was a fruitful line of enquiry. Students who looked closely at the desert, the tanks and guns, the time setting three weeks after the first encounter and the German soldier's body found important clues to read relevant meanings in the poem. Successful responses tended to see the speaker's point of view as crucial. Some argued in favour of the given view by exploring the idea that the speaker is cynically caught up in a soldier's mentality: the German soldier has got his just deserts for the earlier attack and is now mocked in death and that includes mocking Steffi's photograph and the futile hope of 'forget-me-not'. Others argued that the last two stanzas move beyond such cynicism to reveal a more humane pathos for how Steffi might feel to know the soldier's fate and a more philosophical consideration of how feelings of love and hate can be contained within the same self.

Alternatively, some read the soldier as 'the killer' and Steffi as 'the lover', become 'one' in the tableau of corpse and photo. As always, examiners were encouraged to allow different readings as long as such ideas were reasoned and supported. It was interesting to see what some students did with details such as the 'copybook gothic script'. Some saw the care taken with calligraphy to be an indication of Steffi's love; others saw this as evidence that she is just going through the clichéd motions of love rather than expressing genuine feeling.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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