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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath  
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 core set text questions

The clear mantra of this specification is ‘Answer the Question’ and those students who did so were able to perform well. All the questions establish a clear debate; those students who ‘answered the question’ in a focused way did not waste time unloading learnt contextual points or making irrelevant links with other texts. A student’s engagement with the ‘significance’ of a topic or view is crucial and encourages work that confidently explores and interprets meaning.

Students did well when they:

- knew their set texts and were able to fully engage with an ‘open book’ examination
- carefully read the question and planned their answer before writing
- were able to fully engage in the debate introduced by the question
- were aware of the genre characteristics of their set texts and were able to use subject terminology appropriately without resorting to ‘feature spotting’
- avoided ‘bolt on’, generalised contextual material that led the answer away from the text
- did not attempt to recycle previous exam work in an irrelevant way.
- did not feel obliged to offer mechanical balanced arguments, but responded to debate in a genuine, independent way.

### Option 1 Section A: Poetry Set Text

#### *Up the Line to Death* ed Brian Gardner

##### Question 1

This question allowed students who knew their set text well to make thoughtful selections from the anthology. Stronger answers showed purposeful choices and explored ‘mental suffering’ in detail through considering the varying stresses of combat. The first person voice of Tennant’s ‘The Mad Soldier’, for example, was often explored with confidence. More well-known poems such as Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum’ were inevitably discussed, but with varying degrees of relevance. The stronger answers fully grasped the mental suffering presented in the voice of the poem; whilst weaker responses only focused on the physical suffering of the dying soldier. Many students were knowledgeable on post-traumatic stress disorder and shell shock; inevitably some ‘unloaded’ these contexts, whilst the better were able to apply this understanding in a more thorough discussion of the significance of mental suffering within their selected poems.

##### Question 2

This was the more popular question of the two as the variety of approaches and attitudes towards death in the collection gave candidates a broader range of material to choose from. For weaker candidates, however, this encouraged a more straightforward approach in which a number of poems were discussed in a list-like manner without a sense of an overarching debate. The better answers were thoughtfully planned and set a clear agenda through dealing with the material thematically. The question successfully elicited a variety of responses that allowed candidates to explore the significance of death in battle in depth. Stronger answers, for example, were able to explore the effect of irony in the presentation of death in poems such as Sassoon’s ‘The General’;

others considered the significance of religious imagery in poems such as Palmer’s ‘How Long, O Lord?’

### ***Scars Upon My Heart* – ed Catherine Reilly**

#### **Question 3**

This was the more popular of the questions on this core set text and produced some thoughtful, informed discussion. “Perhaps” was easily the most referenced poem, but there was a wider variety of choices than in the answers for *Up the Line to Death* and some relatively obscure poems attracted sometimes perceptive analysis. Almost all candidates realised that suffering took various forms and were consequently able to consider the critical view in some depth. Weaker responses sometimes attempted to offer forced counter arguments – sometimes crudely, along the lines of “Of course they didn’t suffer; they weren’t on the front line!” Stronger responses developed the debate more thoroughly through discussing the liberating effect of new opportunities and roles offered to women in poems such as Bedford’s ‘Munition Wages’ and Pope’s ‘War Girls’.

#### **Question 4**

This question was attempted by fewer candidates, but elicited some of the best responses. Again “Perhaps” was the most popular choice but the range of text choices again impressed examiners. In particular students produced confident discussion of the presentation of grief through the use of natural imagery in poems such as Postgate-Cole’s ‘The Falling Leaves’.

### ***Oh! What a Lovely War* – Joan Littlewood**

#### **Question 7**

This was a minority core set text choice and examiners only saw responses for question 7. The better answers demonstrated a detailed contextual grasp and were able to discuss both the context of WW1 and the significance of the 1960s when the play was devised. There was good understanding of dramatic techniques and effects, though at times this was unloaded rather than fully integrated into the answer. Generally, however, this question elicited some confident answers which considered a range of dramatic devices such as the use of costume, slides and news panels. Those who carefully read the question succeeded in developing confident debates through considering the importance of key words such as ‘primarily’ which allowed discussion of other targets ‘attacked’ by the play.

### ***Journey’s End* – R. C. Sherriff**

#### **Question 9**

This was a minority choice for this highly popular core set text. The quality of debates offered impressed examiners who felt that the question attracted candidates who enjoyed offering conceptual responses. A key discriminator, however, was precise textual knowledge and students performed well if they developed the debate through exploring the varying roles of Stanhope, Raleigh and the Colonel. Some students tended to skirt over these characters or even ignore them and thus lost a sense of their importance to the debate. Significantly, only a minority considered the influence of the play on an audience today, an idea which, if included, added to the quality of discussion.

**Question 10**

This proved to be a popular question. For some students it offered the security of a character based task, for others it offered the chance to explore Raleigh's 'function' and his significance in the play as a whole. Successful answers engaged with all aspects of the critical view and were able to consider other roles or functions by focusing on 'only' and debating inexperience in a more nuanced way through discussing 'hopeless'. These answers moved beyond rehearsed character studies and fully explored Raleigh as a construct of the writer. The deeper and wider the discussion of the relevance of Raleigh's background, the class system and the role or exploitation of youth in the war, the more relevant and impressive the discussion.

**Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text*****Regeneration - Pat Barker*****Question 13**

This was a popular question choice and examiners were impressed by the quality of the responses. Students were able to engage in the debate in a variety of ways; contextual knowledge was applied successfully and allowed students to explore the significance of the home front settings as well as the perspectives on war offered by characters such as Sarah Lumb. More developed answers were well supported by discussion of textual detail particularly when there was focus on how Barker presents the continuing trauma of the front line through male characters such as Burns and Prior. At times context was clumsily considered when some students debated that the presentation of war was limited because of the age and gender of the writer. Better answers considered Barker's use of historical characters and source material; some of the best responses considered the extent to which Rivers represented the reader through his distanced, analytic experience of the war.

**Question 14**

Many examiners were impressed by the quality of responses to this question, feeling that the majority of students were able absorb the 'signification' of the character of Burns by developing responses that were explicit about his varying functions within the text. Relatively few students resorted to offering simple character studies, but saw Burns as a 'construct' and debated what he 'meant'. More straightforward responses largely focused on his war experience to argue that he represented the trauma of war; better work explored his connection with the theme of regeneration and the extent to which he acts as a catalyst to Rivers' changing attitudes to the war.

***Birdsong – Sebastian Faulks*****Question 15**

This was a less popular question choice. Some examiners felt that too many students offered a list-like approach to the examples of suffering in the novel rather than fully engaging with the 'significance' of human suffering. Many students, however, were able to explore human suffering through considering the effect of the parallel narrations of the text. Thoughtful candidates fully engaged with the key word 'endure' and developed the debate through exploring the extent to

which ‘human suffering’ can be alleviated through the rejuvenation suggested by the birth of Helen’s son.

### Question 16

This was an accessible question to many candidates. Some tended to just explain why Wraysford was seen to be a ‘cold bastard’ and constructed a straightforward debate considering the ways in which war can gradually strip a man of his humanity. Stronger responses were more explorative by considering the ways in which Faulks explores the male gender through his presentation of Wraysford. Others were able to counter the critical view through considering the intimacy of Wraysford’s relationships with others.

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

The extract proved to be accessible to the majority of candidates. Again the simple requirement to ‘answer the question’ allowed many to produce successful responses by exploring the nature of duty ‘in this extract’ rather than diverting attention to other texts and making digressive comments on generalised context. The majority of candidates were able to develop ‘relevant detailed analysis’ of Rathbone’s methods, but could not always show how this ‘shapes meaning’. Although specialist terminology is welcomed it should always be appropriate; labelling features such as ‘asyndetic listing’ or ‘lexical fields’ is limited if it does not allow a discussion of how meaning is created. Labelling the text as modernist was also misguided and suggested that too many students understood such terms as a measure of time rather than a stylistic choice. Many examiners also noted that weaker students often focused on word level analysis without having a secure enough grasp of the text as a whole. This type of response could have been improved through more thoughtful planning before writing rather than just ‘going through’ the extract in a commentary type approach.

Stronger students, however, fully engaged with the writer’s methods in relation to the task. These students were able to explore duty through considering the ways the extract contrasts the active work of the nurses with the passive suffering of the soldiers. Many students were also alert to the fact that duty was significant because it highlighted changing gender roles and relevantly used context to discuss the ways the nurses ‘were in the same position as their brothers now’. The strongest work was able to develop sophisticated debates on ‘duty’ through exploring the language of the extract with the ‘detailed analysis’ requested by the task. There was some confident work on the language of war used to present the nurse’s duty in more masculine terms suggesting growing equality. Confident candidates were also able to explore the metaphor of ‘the ‘safety curtain’ through considering the mental ‘distancing’ necessary because of ‘duty’. The very best responses, however, noted that the extract also reinforced the more traditional ‘duty’ women feel towards men through exploring the ‘weeping admiration’ Joan feels towards the wounded and exploring the full significance of ‘mentally she was on her knees to them.’

More successful prose unseen answers

- read the extract carefully and made good use of planning before writing
- thoughtfully explored prose methods in relation to the significance of ‘duty’
- selected and discussed textual material as a way of developing the debate on ‘duty’
- thoughtfully integrated contextual discussion into their answer

- always kept the extract in focus and only used context and connected texts as ‘tools’ for analysis and debate.

#### Less successful prose unseen answers

- were not well prepared and reflected superficial, rushed reading
- tended to ‘feature spot’
- largely ‘went through’ the extract, creating a commentary rather than an argument
- used context as a way of moving away from the focus of the extract
- often digressed to other texts as a way of using rehearsed material.

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

This comparative task required candidates to discuss the significance of duty by comparing two texts from different genres. Secure textual knowledge was essential here as a thoughtful selection of textual references was a key element of the task. Weaker responses tended to ignore the genre of their texts and merely focused on thematic discussions that were largely concerned with similarities rather than differences. Such answers resulted in forced assertive readings of texts to fit the theme; popular poem choices such as Owen’s *‘Dulce et Decorum Est’* were often martialled into forced readings that suggested that ‘men walked asleep’ presents the ‘blind devotion to duty’. To succeed in this question, students need to be ready to explore the differences between genres through discussing how the given theme is presented rather than just simple considering similarity through cross-referencing content.

Some clear preferences have emerged in the course of marking this paper. Option 1 is clearly less popular and the majority of students used their poetry set text in the comparative question. Good, relevant selection is key here. ‘My Boy Jack’ was by far the most popular post 2000 text choice and allowed the majority of students to develop thoughtful discussions on the significance of duty. Again, awareness of genre is crucial in this comparative task and the stronger responses clearly explored the dramatic representation of Kipling as a construct of the writer rather than just an historical figure. Students were also advantaged if they had clearly considered the critical view in their discussion of the significance of duty. Through considering the extent to which duty allows war to be ‘endured’ students could offer more nuanced work through assessing the significance of ‘duty’ by considering other qualities such as loyalty and camaraderie. Examiners were impressed by the very best work that built perceptive comparisons that were genuinely illuminating. Such work often set an ‘individual agenda’ on duty through considering, for example, the relationship between duty and father figures in *My Boy Jack* and *Regeneration*.

#### More successful comparative answers:

- had thoughtfully selected textual material and did not resort to narrative paraphrase
- moved fluently between the texts
- kept focus on the task, making good use of the critical view
- explicitly considered the genre of their selected texts
- wrote succinctly
- shaped coherent arguments through thoughtful planning

Less successful comparative answers:

- wrote about the texts separately with little explicit comparison
- only focused on similarities of content
- created forced readings and tenuous comparisons because of poor selection of textual reference
- resorted to narrative paraphrase
- wrote overlong answers that tended to ‘unload’ irrelevant material

**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.